



TEACHER GUIDE

ROBERT SMALLS SAILS TO FREEDOM

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BEFORE READING

Look at the front cover of the book.

- ❖ Who is the author of this story?
- ❖ What do you think the title means?
- ❖ Why do you think a book has been written about this man, Robert Smalls?
- ❖ What kind of job do you think Robert Smalls had?
- ❖ On the back cover it says “Quickly and quietly, Robert Smalls headed the ship out of Charleston Harbor. Now was his chance to escape.” Why do you think Robert Smalls needs to escape from someone? Who might he be escaping from?
- ❖ The back cover also asks the question “Could he pass by in disguise?”
- ❖ What is a “disguise” used for?

ADDITIONAL PRE-READING QUESTIONS FOR OLDER STUDENTS:

- ❖ Who are the people Susan Taylor Brown thanks for helping her learn the facts about Robert Smalls’ life?
- ❖ If you wanted permission to use some of this book’s words in a report, what web site might you use to get that permission?
- ❖ To whom does Susan Taylor Brown dedicate this book?
- ❖ On page 48 you will see a Select Bibliography. Name one newspaper the author used as a resource.
- ❖ If you wanted to read more details about Robert Smalls’ life, you might go to the web site for the Robert Smalls Legacy Foundation. What is their official web site address?
- ❖ An article titled “News of the Day: The Rebellion” appeared in what newspaper on May 18, 1862?

VOCABULARY WORDS:

Union Army - relating to, or being the side favoring the federal union in the American Civil War

Confederate Army - a soldier, citizen, or supporter of the Confederate States of America

Disguise - clothing put on to hide one's true identity or imitate another's

Slave - a person who is owned by another person and can be sold at the owner's will

master - an owner especially of a slave or animal

carriage - a horse-drawn wheeled vehicle designed for carrying persons

hardships - something that causes pain or loss

freedom - ability to move or act freely

waterway - a body of water through which ships can travel

civil war - a war between opposing groups of citizens of the same country or nation

steamboat - a boat driven by steam

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR DURING READING

Pages 4-5

The story starts out in Beaufort, South Carolina.

- ❖ Find South Carolina on the United States map.
- ❖ How would you describe Mr. McKee's house shown on page 4?
- ❖ Robert hooked a worm on a fishing pole then handed it to Mr. McKee. Why didn't Mr. McKee put the worm on the fishing line himself?

Pages 6-7

- ❖ What part of the United States allowed people to own slaves in the 1840's?
- ❖ Name three things Robert helped Mr. McKee to do?
- ❖ Would you say Mr. McKee was kind to Robert or mean?
- ❖ What did Robert know Mr. McKee might do with him?
- ❖ How would you feel if someone owned you and could sell you to someone else?

Pages 8-9

- ❖ Robert's mother was also owned by Mr. McKee. What was her name?
- ❖ What did she want for her son?
- ❖ Why did Lydia Smalls want Robert to always remember the hardships of slavery?
- ❖ What do you think Robert thought as he watched slaves being whipped and sold in town?
- ❖ Why did slave owners put heavy iron circles on slaves' ankles?
- ❖ Why would slaves want to escape and go to the North?
- ❖ Put yourself in Robert's place. When he was dreaming about being free, what do you think he was thinking would be different for him in the North?

❖

Pages 10-11

- ❖ In what year had Robert turned 12 years old?
- ❖ Robert's master wanted Robert to get a job that paid money. Why?
- ❖ When Robert left his mother and went to Charleston, what job did he get?
- ❖ How much money was Robert paid for doing his new job?
- ❖ How much of his money did he give to Mr. McKee?
- ❖ Robert got a second job as a lamplighter. Why did Susan Taylor Brown say that Robert was a long way from being free even after he got the second job?

Pages 12-13

- ❖ Where did Robert go in his spare time?
- ❖ What did he do there?
- ❖ What made Robert long for freedom even more?

Pages 14-15

- ❖ Robert got permission from Mr. McKee to get a new job. What was the job?
- ❖ Do you think Mr. McKee was happy Robert wanted this new job? Why?
- ❖ What skills did Robert need to learn to become an excellent sailor?
- ❖ How much money did Robert get to keep from this job?

Pages 16-17

- ❖ How old was Robert when he got married and got to keep a little money for himself?
- ❖ What was his wife's name?
- ❖ Why was Robert still not happy?
- ❖ Robert and his wife had a baby. Why was Robert afraid they could lose each other forever?

Pages 18-19

- ❖ Did Robert and Hannah belong to the same master? How do you know this?
- ❖ Robert wanted to buy Hannah, his wife, and their baby, Elizabeth, from Mr. Kingman. How much money did Mr. Kingman want Robert to pay him to buy their freedom?
- ❖ What made Robert ask the question of whether they would ever be free?

Pages 20-21

- ❖ A war broke out in 1861. How many years ago was that?
- ❖ Why were the South and North parts of our country having a war?
- ❖ Which side called itself the Union?
- ❖ Which side called itself the Confederacy?
- ❖ Which side would Robert want to win this war?
- ❖ Why did Robert want to escape with his family?
- ❖ How much would it cost him to get his freedom if he escaped to the Union side?

Pages 22-23

- ❖ During the war, Robert Smalls worked on a powerful steamboat called the Planter. What were the Confederates using the Planter to do?
- ❖ How did the guards know whether ships going by their fort were friend or foe?

Pages 24-25

- ❖ Robert watched Captain Relyea do something every day. What did he learn?

Pages 26-27

- ❖ When the slave crew was left alone, somebody made a joke about stealing the ship. What did Robert think of that joke?

Pages 28-29

- ❖ Robert told his wife Hannah about stealing the Planter to escape. What did she think about the plan?
- ❖ Who else agreed to be part of the escape?

Pages 30-31

- ❖ On what date did Robert and the others start their escape?
- ❖ In addition to the ship, the Planter, what did Robert want to take with him to give to the Confederates?

Pages 32-33

- ❖ Where did Robert pick up his family during the escape?

Pages 34-35

- ❖ Robert knew he needed a good disguise to escape. What did he wear to make himself look like the captain?

Pages 36-37

- ❖ Robert Smalls knew they might all be killed if they were caught stealing the ship. He took a deep breath and thought about three things before giving the signal to escape. What were the three things he thought about?

Pages 38-39

- ❖ Each time Robert passed a fort he had to give a signal to the guards. What was the signal?
- ❖ What problem did Robert have with his disguise when the sun began to rise?

Pages 40-41

- ❖ Why do you think Robert moved back into the shadows when he gave the signal at the last fort?

Pages 42-43

- ❖ What was the name of the first Union ship Robert saw?
- ❖ What does raising a white flag mean?
- ❖ Who tried to shoot the Planter?

Pages 44-45

- ❖ Even though the Planter was not hit by the cannons from the Confederate guards, why were they still not safe?
- ❖ How did the sailors on the UNION ship, the Onward, know Robert was not trying to attack them?

Pages 46-47

- ❖ Why was Robert considered a hero?
- ❖ How did he help the Union after he turned the Planter over to them?
- ❖ When did the North win the war?
- ❖ What did Robert Smalls do after the North won the war?
- ❖ Robert became a Senator and helped fight for the rights for African Americans. When he died many years later, he was honored with a special quote on a marker near his grave. What do the words on that marker mean?

AFTER READING:

- ❖ A slave's life is different from other people's lives, how? Compare a slave's life to your own life.
- ❖ This is a true story. Why do the facts matter in telling this story?
- ❖ What does it mean to be brave? Give examples of a time you were brave. What other people do you know who were brave?
- ❖ What does it mean to take a risk? Give examples.
- ❖ Compare this character/story/event to another book.
- ❖ Explain what you would do differently than Robert Smalls? Would your actions have kept Robert and his family safe if he had done what you are thinking you would do?
- ❖ What emotions did you feel as you read this? Why do you think the author thought Robert Smalls was important enough to write about?
- ❖ What lessons did you learn from Robert Smalls' life?
- ❖ Read the story again, this time with some sticky notes. Whenever something in the story connects, or reminds you of something, write it down on your sticky note. Connections might be to events that happened in your own life, or something you have seen in

another book, movie, or on television. (*Teacher note: After rereading and discussing the story, have the students pair up and share their connections. Students can be challenged to write about their connections in their writing notebooks.*)

- ❖ Quotes: Important people say things other people like to repeat. What might Robert Smalls have said that people could quote him about?
- ❖ What are your favorite lines or quotes? Copy them into your writing notebook and tell why you like them.
- ❖ What do you know after reading the Robert Smalls story that you didn't know before?
- ❖ Would you like to read more books by this author? Why?
- ❖ What confuses you in this book? Why?
- ❖ What is the most important part of the book? Why?
- ❖ What advice would you give a particular character? Why?
- ❖ If you could introduce a character from this book to your family, who would it be? Why?
- ❖ Which character would you be ashamed to introduce to your family? Why?

ACTIVITIES

- ❖ Create a timeline showing all the significant events in Robert Smalls' life. Put the POSITIVE events above the timeline. Put the NEGATIVE events below the timeline. Share your timeline with the class. Explain why you chose the events you picked as the most important events of his life.
- ❖ Write possible HEADLINES that could have appeared in the newspapers throughout Robert Smalls' life. Write one headline that is about something Robert himself did. Write another headline that tells about a BIG EVENT going on during the Civil War. Share your headlines with the class.
- ❖ This activity is called I THINK THEY SAID. Pair up students, each with a sheet of paper. One student will play the role of Robert Smalls. The other student will play the role of any other character from the story. Tell the students they will not be talking out loud, then have the students trade papers back and forth writing down a conversation they imagine might have happened about an important event from the story. The event can be selected by the teacher or by the students. The students will generate dialogue they believe might have occurred between these two characters using actual information from the story to keep the discussion realistic. So both partners stay actively engaged, and by using two sheets of paper, they can actually be carrying on two different discussions about two different topics as they trade. Share the dialogue with the class.
- ❖ Alphabet Book: Assign the letters of the alphabet to members of your class. For each of the letters, choose people, places, or things from the book that start with that letter. Write a brief explanation as to why this person, place, or thing was important to the story. Put only one letter to a page, but make them two-sided so they read like a book. Add illustrations and artwork on each page or type passages from the book to quote and attach. Make a cover for this class Alphabet Book and bind it.
- ❖ CD Cover Project: Using a real plastic CD cover, design a cover for a CD that would represent the life of Robert Smalls. Inside the cover, develop a list of songs with make-believe song titles that describe the major events of his life.