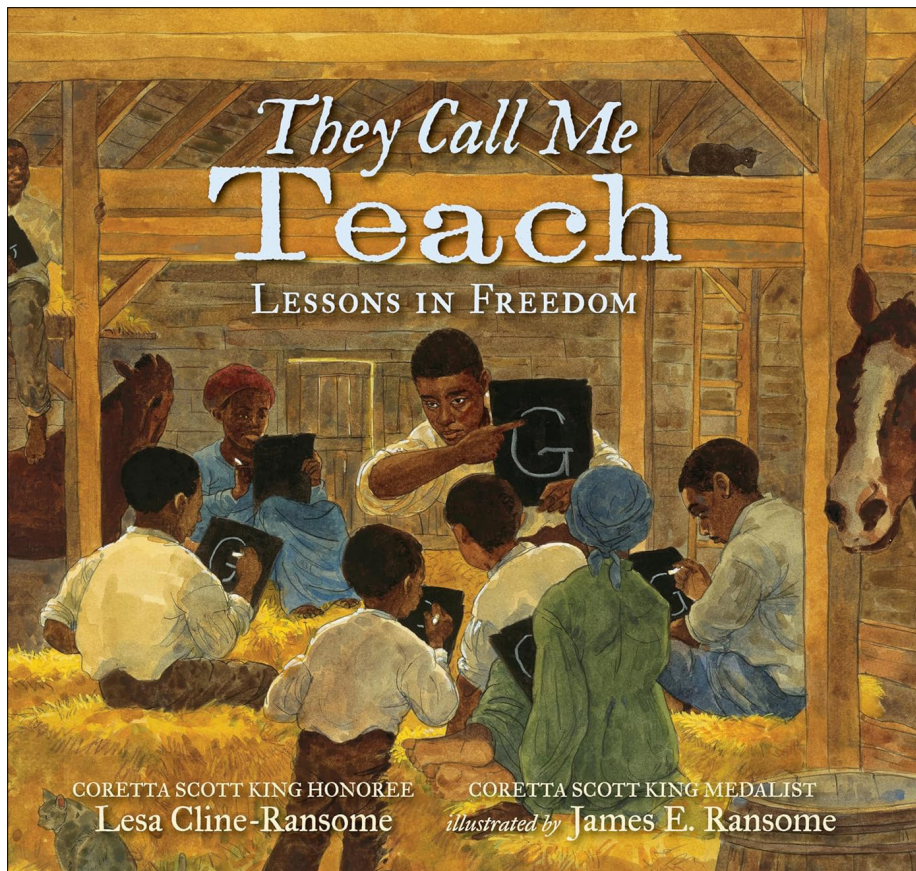


They Call Me Teach

Lesa Cline-Ransome

illustrated by
James E. Ransome



HC: 9780763681555

About the Book

The young enslaved man known as Teach secretly learned to read, write, and use numbers growing up alongside the master's son. And although on this Southern plantation these are skills he can never flaunt, Teach doesn't keep them to himself: In the course of a week, he'll teach little ones the alphabet in the corner stall of a stable and hold a moonlit session where men scratch letters in the dirt. He'll decipher a discarded letter bearing news of Yankee soldiers and forge a pass for a woman hoping to buy precious time on a perilous journey north. And come Sunday, Teach will cross the swamp to a hidden cabin, reading aloud to the congregation God's immortal words to the pharaoh: *Let my people go*. With a spare, moving first-person narration told in an era-appropriate dialect, complemented by stunning watercolor illustrations, the celebrated duo of Lesa Cline-Ransome and James E. Ransome honor the bravery and generosity of spirit behind countless untold acts of resistance during the time of slavery. An author's note highlights the vital role of literacy and education toward the securing of freedom, both historically and to the present day.

Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). As you engage with participants, encourage them to provide text-dependent answers by referencing specific examples from the book. Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you know about slavery in the United States during the 1800s? If you live in the US, what do you know about the history of slavery in your state? How were enslaved people treated in the United States? What type of work were they given?
2. In your own words, what does *resistance* mean? Can you think of historical stories of resistance during slavery and/or afterward? If yes, what was their outcome or impact?
3. Enslaved people were not allowed to read. Why would governments pass laws to prevent them from receiving an education? On the first page, the author writes, “They call me *Teach*. . . . It’s a secret name /just ’tween us.” Who knows the secret name? Who does not? Why would it be dangerous for everyone to know? What actions does Teach take throughout the book to keep his secret?
4. Based on the information provided in the book, what is a speller? How is Teach using the speller in his lessons? Define a speller in your own words.
5. On Monday, what does Teach do in his lesson to help the children learn to read? Why is knowing how to read important? What do you like most about reading?
6. On Tuesday, Teach reads a letter with the words *North*, *Tankees*, and *soldiers*. What historical events might the letter be referencing? How does the additional information from the Thursday section (“to leave them with newspaper words / of the war / of President Lincoln / of freedom heading south / led by soldiers in blue”) connect to the letter? What news can Teach spread?
7. Why would men wait “bone weary” at night to meet with Teach? Think about the life of an enslaved person. Why might they feel bone weary? Why would someone bone weary go to such a late reading lesson?
8. On Thursday, how do the white people act when Teach enters the post office? What does Teach decide to do when he leaves the post office? Why does this action put him in danger?



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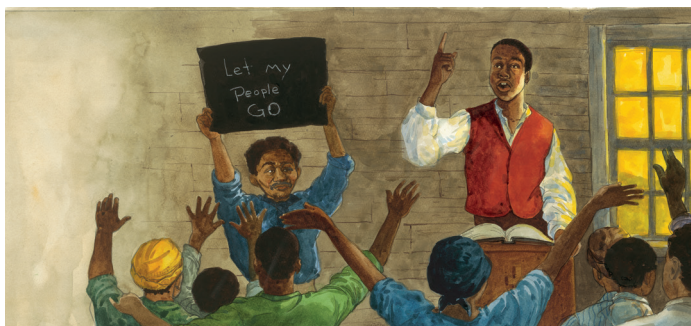
9. On Friday, what threats does Teach receive? How does he respond to the anger he faces? In your opinion, is there anything he could or should do differently to prevent being caught?
10. Why is Saturday a busy day for Teach? Based on his responsibilities, what type of business does his master own? How does Teach use his work responsibilities to secretly create a pass? What does the pass say? How can a pass help someone who is enslaved?
11. “Mama told me / *Use that learnin’ and make somethin’ of yourself* / Every day’s a chance to do just that.” Think about the events in the story. How is Teach following his mother’s wishes?
12. Carefully examine the illustrations that show African Americans and whites in shared spaces. What is happening in each illustration? How are the two groups portrayed? How does the illustration of Teach and Thomas differ from the others? Why is this important to help readers understand the story?
13. On Sunday, what is the Bible story told at church? What is the response to the phrase *Let my people go*? Why would this story be moving to the congregation?
14. “When Sunday school’s over / songs rise out of whispers / *Tell all pharaohs / to let my people go.*” Traditional hymns and music are historically an important part of church service in African American communities. Do you know any traditional African American hymns or songs about freedom? If yes, what is the important message in the song? Why were these types of songs important in African American culture?
15. In your own words, summarize the events of the story using the different days of the week. What important events or character interactions happened on each day?
16. How are the people that Teach helps in the story unique? How are they similar? Discuss their various ages and requests and why reading is important in their lives.

Discussion Questions

17. Based on the events in the text, how does the title of the book, *They Call Me Teach: Lessons in Freedom*, reflect the theme of the story? What are other important messages or themes from the book?
18. Read the author's note. Why does the author think it is important to tell this story? How is reading an act of resistance for someone who is enslaved? Can you think of other historical acts of resistance related to education?
19. If you could write a book about an act of resistance in history, what would you choose and why?
20. Have you read any of the books in the For Further Reading section? If you have, what themes are similar between the texts? What new information can a reader learn from one of the other books?

Lesa Cline-Ransome is the author of many books for children, including the novel *Finding Langston*, which was a Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book and winner of a Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction, and the picture book *Before She Was Harriet*, illustrated by James E. Ransome, which was a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book, a Christopher Award winner, and a Jane Addams Honor Book. Lesa Cline-Ransome lives with her husband, illustrator James E. Ransome, in the Hudson Valley region of New York.

James E. Ransome, the 2023 winner of the Children's Literature Legacy Award, is the illustrator of numerous books for children, including *Granddaddy's Turn* and *Northbound*, both by Michael S. Bandy and Eric Stein, as well as *The Creation*, written by James Weldon Johnson, for which he won the Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award. James E. Ransome lives with his wife, Lesa Cline-Ransome, in the Hudson Valley region of New York.



These questions were prepared by Dawn Jacobs Martin, PhD, associate clinical professor of special education at University of Maryland, College Park.