



# Classroom Guide

Title: **Follow the Drinking Gourd**

Author: **Jeanette Winter**

Illustrator: **Jeanette Winter**

**Theme:** Songs lifted spirits, boosted hopes, and sometimes had hidden messages that helped slaves find their way to freedom.

**Program Summary:** Runaway slaves journey north along the Underground Railroad by following directions in a song, “Follow the Drinking Gourd.” LeVar celebrates the road to freedom paved by the Underground Railroad, introducing viewers to the history, heroes, stories, and music of the African American culture that emerged from slavery. An a cappella group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, performs and shares their historical knowledge of slavery.

## **Topics for Discussion:**

Before viewing the program, discuss with students their ideas about “freedom.” What is it? Who has it? Why is it important? Under what circumstances might people lose their freedom?

Before viewing the program, discuss the students’ concept of slavery — what they know about the lives of enslaved people, what they did, and what they were not allowed to do.

In the program, LeVar explains the Underground Railroad, not as a conventional railroad with a train on a track, but as a way for runaway slaves to travel from one “safe house” to another on their way to Canada or to states where slavery was illegal. Discuss with students why the railroad metaphor was an appropriate description.

Much of the program is devoted to music. Discuss with students why music had an important role in the lives of slaves. Why is music important in all our lives?

## **Curriculum Extension Activities:**

The book, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*, has the musical score at the end. With the assistance of the music teacher, have the class learn the song. Students might also enjoy learning “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the song that is referred to as the “African American National Anthem,” with words by James Weldon Johnson and lyrics by his brother J. Rosamond Johnson.

On a map of the United States, locate the southern states from which enslaved people escaped, the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, and the states where the vast network of the



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Underground Railroad was located. (Several books recommended in the “Supplementary Booklist” contain maps.)

Harriet Tubman was an African American woman who was a “conductor” on the Underground Railroad. She made repeated trips to guide slaves to freedom. Other African Americans, born into slavery, made significant contributions on behalf of enslaved people and to American history in general (e.g., Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass, Crispus Attucks, Nat Turner, Anthony Burns, Dred Scott, and others). Working in small cooperative groups, have students research the lives and accomplishments of these individuals.

Although the 13th Amendment to the Constitution abolished slavery in 1865, African Americans have faced issues of equality and “color barriers” to the present day. Have students work in small groups and research some of the individuals who have made notable contributions in government, the arts, literature, sports, religion, science, and other areas. Possible subjects include: Langston Hughes, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Marian Anderson, Bessie Coleman, Madame C. J. Walker, Bessie Smith, Zora Neale Hurston, Mary McLeod Bethune, Jackie Robinson, Louis Armstrong, W.E.B. DuBois, William H. Johnson, and many others.

Make a timeline of African American history. Place individuals that the students have researched on the timeline, as well as specific events such as the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the 13th Amendment, and general time frames for the bulk of the slave trade and activity on the Underground Railroad.

Since enslaved people were typically not allowed to learn to read and write, storytelling was an important means of communication. Many of the stories were about gaining freedom and involved the symbol of flying; others were animal tales (e.g., the “Uncle Remus” stories). Locate some of these stories to read (or tell) to students. *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton (Knopf) is a useful collection.

Revisit the book so that students can examine the illustrations. Look for the Big Dipper and Peg Leg Joe’s special mark that he left for escaping slaves to find. Use this opportunity to provide some background to the Underground Railroad activities.

Brainstorm with students why there were so many people who wanted to help runaway slaves. Depending on the age level of your students, discuss what might happen to people who assisted runaway slaves. Help students understand that escaped slaves were not safe even in the northern states (Fugitive Slave Law).



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## **Book Reviews:**

*A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman* by David A. Adler, illus. by Samuel Byrd

*Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkinson, illus. by James Ransome

## **Supplementary Booklist:**

*The Underground Railroad* by Raymond Bial

*Barefoot: Escape on the Underground Railroad* by Pamela Duncan Edwards, illus. by Henry Cole

*Many Thousand Gone: African Americans from Slavery to Freedom* by Virginia Hamilton, illus. by Leo & Diane Dillon

*Now Let Me Fly: The Story of a Slave Family* by Dolores Johnson

*Frederick Douglass: The Last Day of Slavery* by William Miller, illus. by Cedric Lucas

*Aunt Harriet's Underground Railroad in the Sky* by Faith Ringgold

*Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman* by Alan Schroeder, illus. by Jerry Pinkney

*Nettie's Trip South* by Ann Turner, illus. by Ronald Himler

## **Related Themes:**

- civil rights
- Abraham Lincoln
- African American history

## **Related Reading Rainbow Programs:**

- Program #81 — Tar Beach
- Program #91 — Amazing Grace
- Program #55 — Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters

**About the Author/Illustrator:** Jeanette Winter is the author/illustrator of numerous books for children that include biographical fiction, retellings of folktales, and stories



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from many cultures. She found the inspiration for *Follow the Drinking Gourd* in slave narratives and a folksong.