

Kwame Alexander Curriculum Guide and Classroom Resources

Winner of the 2025 Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers' Literature –

Kwame Alexander

Lesson ideas for selected reading: *The Door of No Return* by Kwame Alexander

Prepared by Laura Raphael, MA, MLIS, Children's Services Coordinator, Tulsa City-County Library

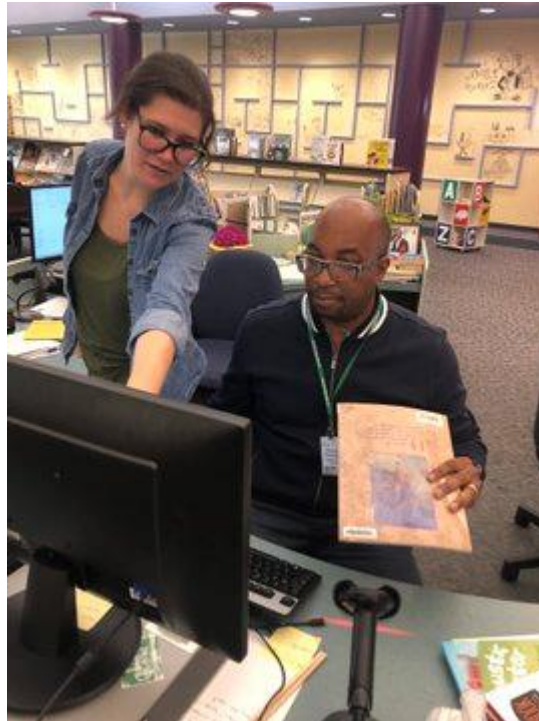
<https://kwamealexander.com/>



Newbery Award winner **Kwame Alexander** is a prolific poet and writer of picture books and verse novels for older children and young adults. His earliest work, including *The Crossover*, which was awarded the 2015 Newbery Medal, is set in contemporary times with young African-Americans as protagonists and sports as a key element. Recently, Kwame has turned to historical fiction. ***The Door of No Return*** is the first of a planned trilogy that follows Kofi Offin, an 11-year-old boy in 1860s Ghana who is violently uprooted from his everyday world into slavery and across the ocean. ***Black Star*** is the second in the series and follows Kofi's granddaughter in 1920s United States. Kwame Alexander is best known for his well-drawn characters, moving themes, and playfulness with language.

Getting To Know Kwame Alexander

Although Kwame Alexander was a teacher for a brief time (“for one year only”), he is still a staunch reading and education advocate. He frequently surprises schools and classes with last-minute visits and presentations. Here, he acted as “librarian for a day” at a school that invited him to spend a day there:



Reading Rockets has an extensive page for Kwame that is a perfect introduction to him and his works: <https://www.readingrockets.org/people-and-organizations/kwame-alexander>

It includes over 20 video clips of him discussing topics such as how he finds time to write, what “The Crossover” means to him, and more.

Other Kwame Alexander Resources

- **Reading and Discussion Guides**

There are several curriculum and discussion guides to Kwame Alexander’s books, including for *The Door of No Return* and its follow-up, *Black Star*, here:

<https://kwamealexander.com/authorstudy/classroom-materials/>

EDUCATOR GUIDE
AGES 12 AND UP
LittleBrownLibrary.com

DEAR EDUCATORS,

You are in for quite an adventure. Think of this as the first chapter in the retelling of a story you've only ever partially understood. Rarely does a book written for young people so intimately capture a uniquely individual experience within the larger narrative of a collective history. In the Americas, and around the world, people of African descent have shaped nations and changed the course of human history. Though this story begins in a world that is geographically and temporally far away from the many of us inhabit today, readers will see themselves in its protagonist, Kofi Ofori.

As you read with students, consider what you think you know about the African continent, Ghana and its people, and the traditions of the global African diaspora. Kofi's story is one to which anyone can relate. It is a journey of innocence to experience, one that begins as all of ours do, with family, tradition, and community. A wise person once said, "There is a universalism to be found in specificity," and for a long time, Chinua Achebe's seminal work *Things Fall Apart* has presented an opportunity for students to analyze the impact of colonization on civilization and the individuals within it. Through Kofi's voice, his relationships, his tribulations, and his triumphs, *The Door of No Return* continues that tradition with a story every bit as riveting and revelatory.

Along the path to *The Door of No Return*, readers will travel with Kofi as he goes further and further away from what is familiar, forcing himself to reconcile his past with his present and potential future. Through poetry that resonates, vivid imagery, and unforgettable characterization, Kwame Alexander rebuilds a world that is at once long gone and all around us. I've always seen education as a means to attain enlightenment, and an invitation to engage in social transformation if one decides to take it. However, throughout human history, education has also been used as a means of oppression and a tool for colonization. My hope is that this guide will help educators, librarians, caregivers, students, and anyone else interested in reading this work hold important conversations and engage in meaningful activities so that we can transform the way young people have traditionally engaged with books. As I write this, education systems are under unprecedented pressure. Change is necessary, even if we are slow to accept it, and I think this is a tremendous opportunity to create reparative educational spaces. Consider this your invitation to let this book guide you as you open *The Door of No Return*.

Yours in Solidarity,
Julia E. Torres
Librarian, Educator, Scholar

THEMES TO WATCH FOR AND CONSIDER


- Family
- Food
- Storytelling
- Identity
- Love
- Fate vs. Free Will
- Coming of Age
- Betrayal vs. Loyalty
- Courage
- Tradition

Continued on the next page ...



Guide for Educators

Black Star
by Kwame Alexander



When I began writing *The Door of No Return*, I thought I'd be telling the story of one boy—Kofi. But in finishing it, I found myself on the shores of the new world, a place where Black people's heartbreaking history has been written about numerous times. And I realized I wanted to do something different. I wanted to tell the epic story of not just a boy, but of his family over generations.


For *Black Star*, I drew from my family's history, from the stories of my grandparents and great grandparents who all lived in an area of Chesapeake, Virginia called Bell's Mill. I told a story that I was familiar with about a Black family living in an all Black and self-sustaining community. Where they were defined not by the tragedy and trauma they experienced or their relationship with the larger white community, but by the way they lived their lives and went about their business. How they did their thing. I call it Matter-of-Fact Black.

Black Star was also inspired by a fifth grader who loved my books, but questioned why I never had a female protagonist. And so, calling on my experience of growing up with two sisters, my mom, two grandmothers who loved to cook for me, and a bunch of aunts I created my heroine, Charley Cutley.

I'm so excited to share this book with you. I hope you delight in it as I do, and spot the joy, resilience, and pride weaving throughout this community. I hope you stumble across the multiple meanings of *Black Star* that I am still discovering, like how in 1957, one hundred years after Kofi was taken from his homeland, Ghana won their independence and debuted their new flag of red, yellow, and green with a black star at the center. I hope you enjoy playing ball with Charley and Cool Willie Green and I hope you love this family as I do.

Thank you for championing Kofi's story and making *The Door of No Return* a #1 Kids' Indie Next Pick. I entrust you now with Charley, and hope that you show her the same love and support you showed her grandfather.

kwame
Kwame Alexander



- **Community Poem Series with NPR**

For the last few years, Kwame Alexander has been writing poems with community members about a series of topics. Find this podcast here: <https://kwamealexander.com/about/podlinks/>

Specifically for teachers:

<https://www.npr.org/2022/05/31/1102065218/crowdsourced-poem-teachers-kwame-alexander>

- **Notable Interviews**

There are multiple terrific interviews in print and video of Kwame Alexander.

Interview Book Trust:

<https://www.booktrust.org.uk/news-and-features/features/2018/april/interview-with-the-mac--kwame-alexander/>

- **Excerpt from interview about “mirrors and windows” in books:**

Do you think it's important for kids to 'see themselves' in a book?

Yes. Of course. Equally important is for students NOT to see themselves in books and to see you in a book. Like books are mirrors. You've got to be able to see what's possible, I can overcome that challenge, I can get over grief or I can fall in love, I can do what's impossible because I read it in a book. But this kid over here is just like me, he may not look like me, sound Curriculum guide for *The Door of No Return* by 2025 Zarrow Award winner Kwame Alexander – Created by Youth Services Department, Tulsa City-County Library, page 3

like me, live near me, he may live on the other side of the world, but I can become a little bit more connected to people who don't look, think or act like me. But here's the thing books are also like windows. I've got to see outside myself so I can become more empathetic to the world. Books are about me understanding me. Books are also about me understanding you.

Why do you include recommendations for other great books in your books?

Books are like amusement parks and sometimes children get to pick the rides. It's the only thing that matters. I write books that are maybe like a rollercoaster, but there are books that are like candy floss, books like the spider, like the water park. There are so many rides and I can only be part of one. I think it's so important to be able to share other rides with young people and give them choice. Choice is so important in developing a lifelong love of literature! So why not Karen Hesse's *Out of the Dust*? Why not *Moonrise* by Sarah Crossan? Why not *Brown Girl Dreaming* by Jacqueline Woodson, why not *Love that Dog* by Sharon Creech. There are so many rides at the park. Let your children choose!

How important are librarians like The Mac in Booked?

I think librarians are so important because they help kids imagine a better world with the books they have on the shelves. Can you imagine going to a place where you can get a book that's full of knowledge, power, inspiration, energy, dreams and what's possible? And you get it for free!

- **Video: how teachers should handle discussing history of slavery**

This short video is useful in watching if you are concerned about how to introduce and teach such a heavy topic as slavery in your classroom:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1WZiMVFT8E>

“Balance tragedy with the triumph. The pain with the hope. The woe with the wonder. Good books can do that.”



Vocabulary

Not surprisingly, Kwame Alexander uses rich and frequently challenging vocabulary. While students don't need to know all of the words to enjoy his work, it does enrich comprehension to have a basic understanding of many of them. Please find below a list of vocabulary words and page numbers where they first appear that you may want to pre-teach or emphasize during the reading of *The Door of No Return*. **Key words are in bold.**

NOTE: Kwame Alexander provides an excellent glossary of African-specific words in the Twi language on pages 405-9.

foreigners (p.1)	rod (p. 7)	penalty (p. 24)
adversary (p. 28)	banished (p. 30)	wrath (p. 30)
departed (p. 37)	harboring (p. 40)	access (p. 40)
heirs (p. 41)	wretched (p. 43)	fortress (p. 44)
retaliate (p. 51)	squander (p. 59)	barbarian (p. 59)
gullible (p. 67)	victorious (p. 69)	opponent (p. 79)
capture (p. 81)	squabble (p. 84)	captivating (p. 90)
festive (p. 92)	spectators (p. 94)	ferociously (. 96)
challenge (p. 106)	sage (p. 108)	ruthlessly (p. 114)
gallops (p. 115)	surrender (p. 118)	mammoth (p. 120)
forfeit (p. 122)	exceed (p. 123)	abandoned (p. 123)
plantain (p. 126)	clenched (p. 128)	initiation (p. 131)
stockade (p. 136)	retribution (p. 136)	commotion (p. 137)
magnitude (p. 138)	negligent (p. 138)	fury (p. 141)
acquittal (p. 143)	witness (p. 149)	sneer (p. 151)
protectors (p. 155)	whirl (p. 158)	sync (p. 159)
clamored (p. 163)	mahogany (p. 165)	seizes (p. 169)
trespassers (p. 174)	gusts(p. 176)	outcome (p. 179)
outmatched (p. 179)	ceremony (p. 186)	scavenger (p. 194)
smitten (p. 194)	seclusion (p. 195)	dreadful (p. 201)
inevitable (p. 202)	bandit (p. 212)	origin (p. 217)
frenzied (p. 219)	drenched (p. 222)	trembling (p. 222)
vicious (p. 224)	machete (p. 225)	shackle (p. 226)
cell (p. 231)	ponder (p. 234)	rite of passage (p. 239)
glower (p. 242)	murky (p. 243)	marauders (p. 247)
consequence (p. 249)	summoning (p. 253)	scavenged (p. 253)
massive (p. 257)	listless (p. 261)	dangling (p. 262)

throbbing (p. 266)	agitate (p. 269)	soothe (p. 272)
dispute (p. 274)	towering (p. 278)	avenge (p. 278)
grasscutter (p. 280)	detached (p. 281)	rubbish (p. 284)
stunted (p. 292)	tempest (p. 296)	petrified (p. 298)
sinister (p. 301)	captors (p. 303)	simper (p. 205)
cargo (p. 306)	negotiate (p. 307)	captives (p. 308)
reeks (p. 314)	retching (p. 315)	distractions (p. 327)
rationed (p. 329)	misfortune (p. 335)	solace (p.. 337)
severed (p. 339)	commotion (p. 343)	scurry (p. 343)
hatch (p. 346)	devour (p. 347)	colossal (p. 350)
vessel (p. 350)	cannon (p. 353)	scowls (p. 361)
wreckage (p. 363)	cowardice (p. 363)	radiant (p. 367)
vanishes (p. 371)	calamity (p. 374)	pallor (p. 385)
maneuver (p. 387)	abandon (p. 388)	

Background Knowledge: Database Articles

Having a firm knowledge of various topics, from trading on the Gold Coast during the medieval period to slavery practices in later centuries, will enrich your students' reading and comprehension of *The Door of No Return*.

African-American Experience is an excellent database that the Tulsa City-County Library subscribes to and that you can access with your library card number.

- Go to www.tulsalibrary.org.
- Select "Research" tab at top.
- Select "Databases" on rotating banners or scroll down and click "Databases" box on bottom left corner of page.
- Select "African-American Experience" from list.
- Enter your last name and library card number to access.

This fully searchable database includes primary sources such as journals and letters, maps and photographs, and reference articles related to the African-American experience.

Scheduled Maintenance - Saturday, February 8th from 8:00 AM - 12:00 PM PT.

During the maintenance window, users might experience intermittent downtime.

The American Mosaic

The African American Experience

Search this database



[Advanced Search](#)

Explore by Time Periods



Africa and the Atlantic,
500-1550



Africans in Colonial North America,
1550s-1760



Hopes for a New Nation,
1763-1816



Pre-Civil War Era,
1816-1846

Here is a selection of resource titles that you may want to use in introducing *The Door of No Return*, perhaps through read-aloud and class discussion. “Asante” appears below, and titles that have an asterisk * are included as full-text in the Appendix of this guide.

- “Asante”
- “Gold Coast”
- “The Middle Passage”*
- “Cape Coast Castle”*
- “Olaudah Equiano: The Horrors of the Middle Passage”*
- “Slave Ships”
- “Resistance During Middle Passage”

Asante

Asante was a powerful West African empire during the era of the slave trade lasting from the 16th to 19th centuries. The name Asante (sometimes spelled "Ashanti" or "Ashantee") also refers to the language and ethnicity of the people of the Asante region of present-day Ghana. The Asante Empire was ruled by a king, known as the Asantehene, who ruled from the capital city, Kumase. The king was assisted by a large number of chiefs and priests and a large professional army. Asante participated heavily in trade with European slave traders on the Gold Coast and was recognized by Europeans on the coast as being the main source of the enslaved people who were sold at coastal markets. In exchange for captives, Asante received imported goods, including cotton and wool textiles, guns, alcohol, and tobacco.

The wealth of the Asante Empire was based on vast amounts of gold that the Asante people and their ancestors mined for personal use and for trade. Beginning around 1400, gold from the Asante area was traded to merchants who traversed the vast commercial networks spanning the Sahara desert. From the 15th to 18th centuries, this north-bound gold trade was gradually depleted by the growth of Asante's gold trade with European traders on the Atlantic coast, to the south. During the 18th century, the trade in enslaved Africans became a greater component of Asante's coastal trade than the gold trade. The main trading partner of the Asante Empire was the Dutch West India Company, which was based at Elmina on the Gold Coast. Throughout the 18th century, the Asantehene kept an ambassador at Elmina and maintained regular correspondence with the Dutch director-general there.

The power of the Asantehene was founded on his spiritual authority. The first Asantehene, Osei Tutu, became ruler of all the Asante people in 1701 when, according to tradition, a golden stool descended from the heavens and landed on his lap, signifying his divine right to be king. Subsequent Asantehenes expanded the kingdom through wars of conquest that continued into the 19th century. Prisoners of war taken during these battles to expand the empire were usually sold as slaves to European and American slavers on the Gold Coast. At its height, the Asante Empire encompassed an area slightly larger than present-day Ghana.

The golden stool has remained the symbol of Asante power since Osei Tutu's time. It was seized temporarily by British troops in 1901 as part of the colonial conquest of Asante. This golden stool is still an important possession of the Asantehene who resides in a palace in Kumase to this day.

Rebecca Shumway

Further Reading

Fynn, John Kofi. *Asante and Its Neighbors*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971;
Perbi, Akosua Adoma. *A History of Indigenous Slavery in Ghana: From the 15th to the 19th Centuries*. Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 2004; Yarak, Larry W. *Asante and the Dutch 1744–1873*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

MLA Citation

Shumway, Rebecca. "Asante." *The American Mosaic: The African American Experience*, ABC-CLIO, 2025, [africanamerican.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1406253](https://www.africanamerican.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/1406253). Accessed 21 Jan. 2025.

Lesson: Compare Your Life with Kofi's

Kofi's life before the festival (pages 1-94) was partially idyllic, partially everyday, and it looked a lot like kids' lives today in some respects.

In this lesson, ask students to make a chart (as a class, in small groups, or as individuals) that compares their lives with Kofi's life in different categories: Family; School; Food; Romance; and Sports. (You can always add more categories!)

Use the following chart:

How Is Your Life Similar to (and Different from) Kofi's?

<i>Category</i>	<i>Same</i>	<i>Different</i>
Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none">I see my grandfather frequently.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">My grandfather doesn't like to talk much.
School		
Food		
Romance		
Sports		
Siblings		
Cousins		

EXTENSION: Ask students to write sentences based on each category and either similarity or difference. Here are a few sentence stems to help:

Family – Same

In my family, _____. Similarly, in Kofi's family _____.

[Example: In my family, we like to play board games like Monopoly. Similarly, in Kofi's family, he plays a game called Oware with his brother and grandfather.]

Family – Different

[Example: In my family, we eat out a few times a week because of my soccer schedule. In Kofi's family, they eat home-made meals together every night at home.]

Lesson: Create Adinkra Symbols for Characters or Places

Kwame Alexander includes several symbols throughout the book and has a section explaining each one (pp. 410-414). As he explains: “Used for hundreds of years by Ghanaians, Adinkra symbols capture the history, way of life, and philosophy of the Asante people. Their representations and meanings are linked to fables and are used to bestow wisdom and knowledge. They are popular on fabrics, pottery, buildings, and crafts and as tattoos.”

Two examples:



“**Sankofa** is portrayed by a mythical bird turning its head backward to eat a precious egg. The symbol means that we should remember and learn from the past to make positive progress in the future. The literal translation is ‘to retrieve.’”

“**Bin Nka Bi** represents peace and harmony. It depicts two fish biting each other’s tails, and the direct translation is ‘No one should bite the other.’”



1. Explore and discuss the different symbols as a class.
2. Ask students to work in small groups or on their own to create a new symbol that represents one of the characters or places in the novel.
3. Choose a character or place first.
4. Brainstorm and list qualities of that character or place.
5. List animals, weather patterns, or other natural phenomena that might be related to the character or place.
6. Draw symbol.
7. Write a short description explaining what the symbol means and how it represents the character or place.

Lesson: “The Wonderfals” and Ironic Language

Kofi’s grandfather, Nana Mosi, explains that “the wonderfals” were a group of traders from overseas who, in addition to the gold in Africa’s coast, “wanted bone. And blood. Ours.” (“A History,” pp. 173-5) Later, readers discover that these “wonderfals” are trading African people into slavery and sending them overseas in ships.

This is...not “wonderful” at all. It is exactly the opposite: horrific, gruesome, and dreadful.

Ironic language is often a word used for something that is the opposite of what it actually means or represents, and “the wonderfals” is an excellent example of this.

1. Introduce and discuss “the wonderfals” and whether they are, in fact, wonderful or not.
2. Discuss this use of ironic language.
3. Brainstorm, as a class or in small groups, a list of items, places, or experiences that they do not like.
4. For each item on the list, ask students to provide descriptive words to explain why they don’t like them.
5. List several “opposite” words that could be used ironically to describe that item, experience, or place.

EXAMPLES:

Item, experience, place	Descriptive words	Ironic word(s)
Getting a cold or flu	Miserable, exhausting	Lovely time; Vacation; Joyful days
Math test you didn’t study enough for	Scary	Math-tastic
Under my bed		
The old washcloth nobody wants to use		
A zit on your nose		

Book Reviews: *The Door of No Return*

Booklist:

Grades 6-9 /* Starred Review */ Kofi lives a simple life, but it is a life he loves. He's 11, just on the cusp of becoming a man, and he finds that there are things he must tackle before coming of age: proving his strength by beating his cousin at a swimming match, speaking up so that the girl he likes knows that he admires her, and learning what the elders really mean by their coded language. When Kofi's brother accidentally kills a neighboring chief's nephew in a wrestling match, Kofi instinctively knows that everything in the world is going to change; he just doesn't realize how much. Alexander weaves a breathtaking tale that is ripe with the juxtaposing emotions that come with any coming-of-age story. Through Alexander's verse, readers are reminded of the beauty and unbounded richness that Ghana and her people have to offer. Simultaneously, while offering a picture of mirth and tangible humanity, Alexander immerses readers in the reality of being Asante during the age of slavery. We see Kofi's humanity slowly ripped away alongside the dehumanization of an entire race. Alexander has written a masterpiece, one that powerfully and truthfully gives agency to the Black voices of the past. Profound and important reading. HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY: Alexander is one of the biggest names in kidlit right now, and his ardent fans will be eagerly awaiting his latest. -- Nashae Jones (Reviewed 8/1/2022) (Booklist, vol 118, number 22, p51)

School Library Journal:

/* Starred Review */ Gr 5 Up—The beginning of a planned trilogy set in western Africa in 1860, the latest offering from Newbery winner Alexander introduces readers to Kofi Offin. His experiences are a window to what life would have been like for a boy growing up in that specific place and time. He has a crush on Ama. He loves his grandfather's stories. He has learned English in school but speaks Twi with his family and friends. His cousin bullies him and he challenges him to a swimming race. When Kofi's brother accidentally kills his opponent in a wrestling match, the gentle verse narrative is disrupted because the family of the dead wrestler captures Kofi and his brother. They take them away from their village to the coast; Kofi goes through the door of no return and is put on a boat where things get very bad very quickly. The cliff-hanger ensures that future volumes will tackle the rest of Kofi's story. Books with enslaved main characters certainly exist in juvenile fiction, but the reality of the transatlantic slave trade hasn't been so adeptly captured for young readers to date. This important book is ideal for classroom discussion; shelve alongside Sharon Draper's *Copper Sun* and Julius Lester's *Day of Tears*. VERDICT Told in Alexander's lyrical and masterly style, this gritty and compelling novel of Kofi's life should be included in all library collections that serve young readers.—Kristin L. Anderson --Kristin L. Anderson (Reviewed 09/01/2022) (School Library Journal, vol 68, issue 9, p108)

Publishers Weekly:

Curriculum guide for *The Door of No Return* by 2025 Zarrow Award winner Kwame Alexander – Created by Youth Services Department, Tulsa City-County Library, page 13

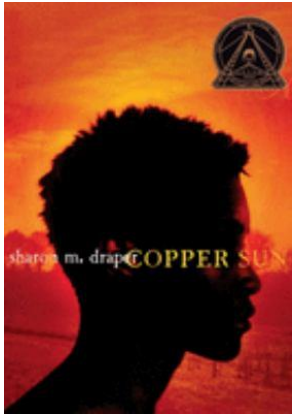
/ Starred Review */* Newbery Medalist Alexander’s gripping historical novel in verse, a trilogy opener rooted in the Asante Kingdom in 1860, centers 11-year-old Kofi Offin—a child deeply connected to water. In early, lyrical chapters that evoke a dreamlike childhood, Kofi lives with his family in Upper Kwanta, where he swims in the river that is his namesake, engages with best mate Ebo, crushes on longtime friend Ama, and listens to the tales of his village-storyteller grandfather, Nana Mosi—who details “the past/ like it lives/ in him, / like it still matters.” He also clashes with his cousin, a bully, and Mr. Goodluck Phillip, the schoolteacher imparting “the Queen’s English” and Shakespeare to students speaking their native Twi. When an annual festival pits wrestlers from Upper and Lower Kwanta against one another, and Kofi’s older brother, Kwasi, is set to represent their village, an unexpected death sets off a series of tragedies that upend Kofi’s world. Interweaving moments of joyful exuberance and heartbreaking sadness via sensate lines by turns sweet and stinging, Alexander’s sweeping novel conjures a captivating, resonant world of African tradition, life, and ancestral wisdom. Ages 10–up. Agent: Arielle Eckstut, Levine Greenberg Rostan Literary. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed 08/01/2022) (Publishers Weekly, vol 269, issue 32, p)

Kirkus:

/ Starred Review */* A boy’s life is turned upside down following a wrestling match in West Africa’s Asante Kingdom in 1860. Eleven-year-old Kofi Offin loves his family, admires his friend Ama, and tries to avoid his bully of a cousin. Kofi’s teacher, Mr. Goodluck Phillip, who canes him for speaking Twi, is convinced the students must learn the Queen’s English, but Kofi prefers the stories of Nana Mosi, his grandfather and the village storyteller. The place he truly feels at home is the river, where he practices swimming and dreams of defeating his cousin in a race. But before that can happen, all attention turns to the Kings Festival, which features highly anticipated wrestling contests against representatives from their rival village. This year, Kofi’s older brother, Kwasi, has been chosen to compete. During the match, Kwasi accidentally kills Prince Yaw Boateng, his opponent and the nephew of the King of Lower Kwanta, changing the direction of their lives when the king retaliates. The immediacy of this verse novel places readers alongside Kofi, thriving as a young boy surrounded by family love and legacy before being abruptly snatched from all he has known. Alexander’s rich language is lyrical and haunting as the water, long a source of comfort for Kofi, becomes full of uncertainty and danger. A riveting, not-to-be-missed trilogy opener that will leave readers invested in what is to come. (glossary) (Verse historical fiction. 10-18) (Kirkus Reviews, July 1, 2022)

Related Titles

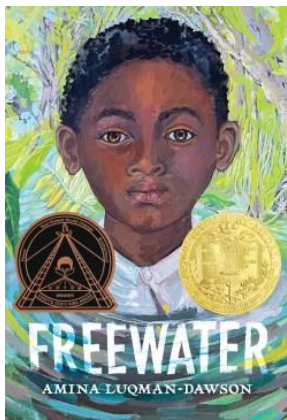
If you are looking for read-alikes of Raina Telgemeier’s realistic fiction graphic novels that follow adolescents as they handle everyday relationships and issues with family, friends, and schools, check these titles out:



Copper Sun by Sharon Draper

Two fifteen-year-old girls--one a slave and the other an indentured servant--escape their Carolina plantation and try to make their way to Fort Moses, Florida, a Spanish colony that gives sanctuary to slaves.

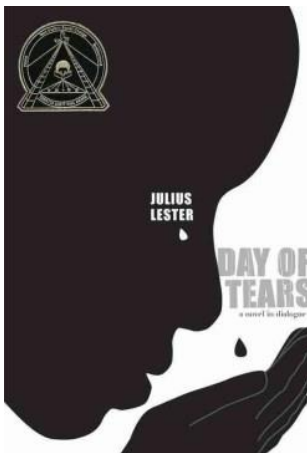
Action-packed and historically accurate, this heart-pumping story gets at some emotional truths of this difficult time in history.



Freewater By Julie Kim

After escaping Southerland Plantation with his little sister, 12-year-old Homer becomes part of a secret community called Freewater, where he finally finds a place to call home and the courage to go back and free his mother from enslavement.

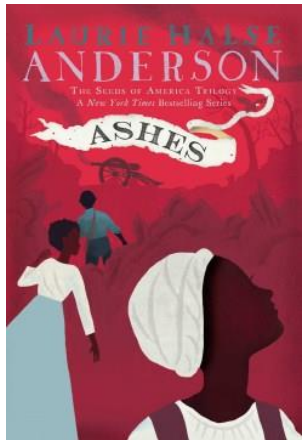
A more hopeful tale about a real place where slavery was not recognized and African-Americans could live in relative peace.



Day of Tears by Julius Lester

When gambling debts and greed enter into the Butler household, Pierce Butler decides to host the biggest slave auction in American history and breaks a promise by selling Emma, his most-valued slave and caretaker of his children--a decision that brings about unthinkable consequences.

Another sensitive portrayal of slavery and its dehumanizing effects on both people who are enslaved and those who enslave them.



Ashes by Laurie Halse Anderson

"As the Revolutionary War rages on, Isabel and Curzon are reported as runaways, and the awful Bellingham is determined to track them down. With purpose and faith, Isabel and Curzon march on, fiercely determined to find Isabel's little sister Ruth, who is enslaved in a Southern state."

Like The Door of No Return, this is a character-driven, first-person narrative that explores the difficulty of being young and not in power when external events interfere with your life.

Appendix: Full-Text Articles

From ABC-CLIO's The African American Experience website <https://africanamerican-abc-clio-com.db.tulsalibrary.org/>

Time Period: Africa and the Atlantic, 500-1550

Middle Passage

Overview



From the 15th through the 19th centuries, Europe's imperial powers forcibly transported between 9 million and 15 million Africans to the Americas. This process, known as the transatlantic slave trade, formed part of the larger process of European expansion during the same period.

Triangular Trade

The Middle Passage was one leg of the "triangular trade," a trade pattern that consisted of three voyages:

- From Europe (or later, the Americas) to Africa, carrying manufactured goods and alcohol
- From Africa to the Americas, carrying enslaved Africans
- From the Americas to Europe, carrying bills of exchange (essentially a bill for goods exchanged) and trade commodities



The Middle Passage refers to the second part of the journey, which brought enslaved Africans from the coast of Africa to the Americas.

Conditions Onboard

The experience of the Middle Passage varied widely, but in most cases it included cramped, unsanitary conditions with little food and water, few opportunities for exercise, frequent sexual assaults, suicides, and occasional shipboard rebellions. Captains of slave ships thought more of

maintaining security and preventing loss of life than of the comfort of the enslaved Africans, so the captives were subjected to constant supervision and discipline and received only the most basic level of care during the long, difficult transatlantic crossing.

Of the millions of Africans who endured the Middle Passage, many did not live to reach American shores. Disease, dehydration, abuse, and suicide contributed significantly to what scholars believe to be high mortality rates aboard slave ships. Other factors, such as overcrowding, length of the voyage, season of the year, provisions, sanitation, and medical care could affect the success of a voyage as well. During the late 18th century, legislation designed to improve conditions on slave ships and prevent high mortality rates attempted to reduce overcrowding and provide adequate provisions and medical care.

Diet and Exercise

In order to reduce disease and mortality—and thus protect their economic investment in a slaving voyage—merchants, captains, and crew generally provided the captive Africans with enough food, water, and exercise to sustain life. Although the food given to the captives normally prevented starvation, the lack of variety, small portions, and overall poor quality of the rations frequently left them hungry and unfulfilled. On the majority of slave ships, captives received two meals and one pint of water per day, taken on the deck of the ship. Rations might include maize, manioc flour, yams, millet, beans, and rice. The water given to the captives did not replace the water lost as the result of perspiration, seasickness, and diarrhea, and most suffered from significant dehydration during the Middle Passage.

The exercise afforded to enslaved Africans did little to alleviate the effects of the immobility that resulted from being confined below deck for the majority of the voyage. Once a day, typically after breakfast, the captives were forced to dance on the deck, often shackled together. "Dancing the slaves," as the practice was called, was done both for the entertainment of the crew and to prevent the illness and mortality that could result from lack of circulation and loss of muscle tone. The enslaved were forced to simulate joy and exuberance and could be flogged for exhibiting reluctance to participate and lack of enthusiasm.

Onboard Security



During meal times and exercise, captives were shackled in pairs to prevent mass suicide or violent retribution against their captors. Controlling the captives' mobility on a slave ship was a high priority, because the enslaved frequently committed or sought to commit suicide during the transatlantic voyage in response to the awful shipboard conditions, the fear of white cannibalism, or the belief that if they died they would return to their homeland. To avoid the possibility of captives throwing themselves

overboard, they were kept in the hold of the ship (often chained) and were allowed on deck only once or twice a day.

The shipboard experience was considerably different for men and women. In many cases, crews separated women, of whom there were fewer, from men, stowing male captives below deck and women and children above, where they were allowed to roam freely. Sexual assault and rape are thought to have been common experiences for female captives during the Middle Passage. Some scholars also believe that suicide rates were higher for women than men because of the abuse they suffered at the hands of captain and crew and the greater freedom of movement they were offered.

Duration

The crossing of the Middle Passage typically lasted from five weeks to three months, depending on where the ship was traveling to and from, seasonal conditions, weather, the size and condition of the ship, and the skill of the captain and crew. Ships departing from West Africa would normally complete the voyage in less time and with less difficulty than those departing from Southeast Africa. Voyages begun during the rainy season, from February through May, were more likely to meet with such problems as severe storms and disease. An experienced captain and crew could more easily navigate the hazardous journey than relative newcomers to the slave trade. No matter what preparations were made or how much care was taken to ensure the success of the voyage, the enslaved continued to resist their enslavement both aboard the ship and upon arrival in the Americas.

Toyin Falola

Image Credits

Deck plan of a slave ship: North Wind Picture Archives

Slaves taken from captured Arab ship: Library of Congress

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Cape Coast Castle

Reference Articles

Standing at 23,000 square feet, and located a couple of miles from Elmina Castle along the west coast of modern Ghana, Cape Coast Castle is a slave dungeon that held captured Africans as slaves for sale in the transatlantic slave trade. First established by the Swedish as a trading fort for the exchange of materials and goods in 1653, Cape Coast Castle soon took on a more tragic purpose. Because of its strategic location, European powers constantly fought for control over possession of the slave castle; since its inception, the Swedish, Dutch, Portuguese, and British actively contested each other for dominion over the castle and, as a result, it changed hands several times. Finally, in 1664, the British gained control over the castle; from 1664 until the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade on January 1, 1808, Cape Coast Castle served as British headquarters for the duration of their involvement in the slave trade.



Similar to other slave dungeons, upon arriving at Cape Coast Castle, men and women were separated, horded into segregated dungeons, and then chained together. Regardless of sex or point of origin, all slaves were harshly treated, poorly fed, and subjected to physical abuse and psychological trauma. In contrast to other slave dungeons along the former Gold Coast of Africa, Cape Coast Castle is unique because, unlike other slave warehouses such as Elmina and Christianborg castles, and other makeshift dungeons, slaves at Cape Coast Castle were confined underground until embarking for the New World. Slaves were held below the ground by slavers to prevent the possibility of potential uprisings. The underground dungeon was exposed to the earth; the floor was covered with feces, blood, mucus, and other bodily excretions. Furthermore, the close confinement and overcrowding, in addition to unsanitary living conditions, contributed to the spread of diseases such as dysentery, diarrhea, malaria, and smallpox. Many untold thousands died at Cape Coast and, very likely, far more enslaved Africans died in the various slave dungeons dotting the Atlantic African coastline than on slave ships.

What is also unique about Cape Coast Castle is its strategic positioning along the coast of Ghana. Specific to Cape Coast Castle is its natural barrier of jagged and once-impermeable rocks that nearly prevented penetration to the coast. Because of its location, slave traders had to travel

from their ships to the coast in smaller boats. Given the rough waters, the trek from the Atlantic to the littoral was frequently marked by numerous deaths via drowning as a result of capsized boats.

Today, Cape Coast Castle stands as a World Heritage Site, as identified by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Cape Coast Castle also serves as a point of destination where many people, especially persons of African descent, travel to visit yearly. Recently, a placard was placed on the other side of the so-called Door of No Return that reads "Door of Return." This Door of Return welcomes the descendants of enslaved Africans dispersed throughout the Western Hemisphere as a result of the transatlantic slave trade and is, perhaps, a lasting testament to their collective victory over the tragic circumstances that occurred at Cape Coast Castle.

Ashley Camille Bowden

Further Reading

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Cape Coast Castle: Julius Cruickshank

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