

Elijah of Buxton Discussion Guide

About the Book

In 1860, Elijah Freeman is only eleven years old when he is thrust into the “growned-up” world in the Buxton Settlement in Canada where he lives with his parents and other freed slaves. Elijah knows about slavery and the meaning of freedom from the stories told by those in his community. But Elijah was born free, so he has no first-hand knowledge of what it means to live a life of bondage. What he does know is that Mr. Leroy, a “growned-up friend,” is willing to risk everything to buy his wife and children out of slavery. Unfortunately Elijah learns a “growned-up” lesson about the untrustworthiness of strangers when the Preacher, a disreputable character from a nearby community, offers to help Mr. Leroy but ends up stealing his money. Mr. Leroy’s journey ends sadly, but Elijah’s effort to help him brings his own life full circle when he transports a baby girl to freedom. As a baby, Elijah was made a symbol of hope by Mr. Frederick Douglass, and now he has earned this distinction by becoming the youngest conductor on the Underground Railroad.

PRE-READING

Engage the class in a discussion about the Underground Railroad. Why was it called a “railroad”? What was the role of the conductor? Ask students to visit some of the “stations” in various states along the routes (www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/states.htm). How did the slaves know that these “stations” were safe?

Locate Buxton, Canada, on a map. Determine which “stations” might have served a slave traveling from Virginia. Map out a sample route.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Elijah’s ma sees him as “fra-gile.” What are the characteristics of a “fra-gile” person? How does Elijah get this reputation? At what point in the novel does Elijah’s ma begin to believe that he is no longer “fra-gile?” Discuss the moment when Elijah realizes that he has outgrown his reputation.
2. Describe the Right Reverend Deacon Doctor Zephariah W. Connerly the Third, the man Elijah and Cooter call the Preacher. What is the first clue that he isn’t an honest man? Discuss why the Preacher doesn’t live in the Settlement. Elijah knows that the Preacher can’t be trusted. Why does it take him so long to admit it? Why does Mr. Leroy put so much faith in the Preacher?
3. Which character contributes the most to Elijah’s growth as a person? Why does Elijah feel that being grown is much harder than it looks? How does Mr. Leroy treat him as a “growned-up” person by asking him if the Preacher is a thief?
4. How do Elijah’s talents help him out of some tough situations?
5. Explain why Elijah Freeman’s birth is a symbol of hope for the people of Buxton. How does he represent hope at the end of the novel?

6. The Buxton Settlement Creed is “one helping one to uplift all.” How does this creed represent the strong sense of community in Buxton? Explain how helping one another is uplifting to all. Discuss the many different things the citizens of Buxton do to help one another.

7. Living free in Canada doesn’t guarantee the people of Buxton a life without prejudices. What are some examples of the challenges they face?

8. Describe Elijah and Cooter’s friendship. How is Elijah a better friend than Cooter? Explain what Mr. Leroy means when he says to Elijah, “ Member that we gets ‘long but I ain’t your friend.” (p. 66) Why does Mr. Leroy think it important that Elijah understand the difference? Discuss whether Mr. Leroy ever sees Elijah as a friend.

9. Mr. Travis teaches the children in Buxton. What does he want his students to learn from the phrase -”Familiarity Breeds Contempt”? How does Cooter have a difficult time understanding this phrase? Explain how “respect” for his elders keeps Elijah from showing contempt for the Preacher.

10. Mr. Leroy is offended when Elijah uses a racial slur. Elijah explains, “Sir, I only said it ‘cause I hear lots of the children say it.” (p. 66) Why would Elijah think that hearing the word makes it okay to say it? How does Mr. Leroy help Elijah understand the “hatred” wrapped around the word? Discuss whether you feel that the word shows a lack of respect, both for those being spoken to, and for the speaker.

11. Mr. Frederick Douglass talks about freedom. Why does he say the second hardest step to freedom is the first one - and the hardest step of all is the last one? How is this true for people like Mrs. Holton and Mr. Leroy? Discuss what they gained by coming to Buxton. What did they lose? Discuss how Emma Collins helps slaves take that final step to freedom.

12. Christopher Paul Curtis is a master storyteller and uses humor to communicate his message. Discuss whether Curtis’ humor is conveyed more through character or through episodic scenes in the novel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Paul Curtis was born and reared in Flint, Michigan. After high school graduation, he worked on the assembly line of the Fisher Body Plant No. 1 and attended the Flint branch of the University of Michigan. His first book, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham - 1963*, received a Newbery Honor and Coretta Scott King Honor book citation in 1996, and *Bud, Not Buddy* received the Newbery Medal and Coretta Scott King Award in 2000. Today, he is a full-time writer, and makes his home with his wife and two children in Windsor, Ontario, Canada.

WEB LINKS

www.blackhistoricalmuseum.com/history.htm

The official site of the North American Black Historical Museum which makes a connection between

Canadian Black History and Black History of the United States.

<http://www.undergroundrailroadconductor.com/>

Shows various routes on the Underground Railroad.

www.nps.gov/archive/frdo/freddoug.html

The official site for the Frederick Douglas National Historic Site.

This guide was prepared by Pat Scales, Greenville, SC