

ABOUT THE BOOK

When twelve-year old Ray falls in with a band of medicine show performers traveling through the South in a rickety old train, he feels at home for the first time in years. But something strange is going on. From a locked train car, Ray hears hypnotic singing. And the performers themselves—the strong man, the fire-eater, the escape artist with the tattooed hand, the blind sharpshooter...their talents seem magical.

Ray uncovers a connection between his missing father and these peculiar performers, a connection that leads Ray to discover that the old stories about John Henry are true in ways he never would have dreamed—and that an ancient evil this legendary hero fought is rising again.



Book One in *The Clockwork Dark* trilogy

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Ages 9 and up

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THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

MAKING CHOICES
APPRECIATION OF NATURE
CULTURAL DIVERSITY
GOOD VS. EVIL
CHANGE

OTHER TIES TO THE CURRICULUM:

LANGUAGE ARTS: Tall Tales, Legends, Folktales, Narrative Writing

SOCIAL STUDIES: American History, Technology, Economics

SCIENCE: Minerals, Magnetism, Animals, Plants, Simple Machines

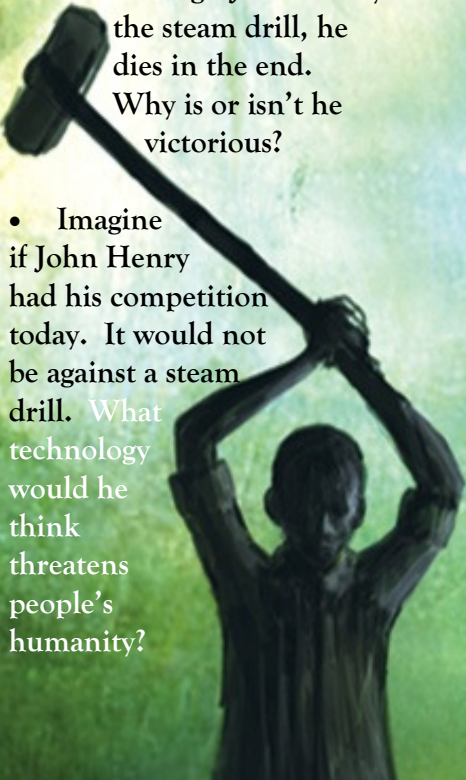
MORE LESSON IDEAS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS INSIDE...

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

The Nine Pound Hammer re-imagines the legend of the African-American steel-driver John Henry. Before beginning the novel, read the original folktale. Two excellent picture books make engaging read-alouds: *John Henry* by Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney and *John Henry: An American Legend* by Ezra Jack Keats.

Questions to consider:

- What makes John Henry a hero?
- Why does John Henry agree to have the competition against the steam drill?
- Even though John Henry beats the steam drill, he dies in the end. Why is or isn't he victorious?
- Imagine if John Henry had his competition today. It would not be against a steam drill. What technology would he think threatens people's humanity?



THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

MAKING CHOICES – Ray makes the difficult choice to leave his sister Sally in order to discover why his father gave him the lodestone. Was Ray right to leave Sally? What consequences, both good and bad, arise from his decision?

APPRECIATION OF NATURE – The Ramblers in the book are wilderness heroes who draw their power from nature, while the Gog draws his power from machines and technology. List examples from the book for both. What would the Ramblers and the Gog be like if they lived in our world today?

CULTURAL DIVERSITY – Much of the magic in *The Nine Pound Hammer* drew its inspiration from hoodoo. Hoodoo is a blend of African, European, and Native American magical customs that was traditionally practiced in the American South. Research the cultural origins of the hoodoo practices: lucky rabbit's foot; bottletree; toby (or mojo) bag; lodestones; eating cornbread, beans, and greens on New Years Day.

GOOD VS. EVIL – When Ray asks Mother Salagi what the Gog wants, she replies, "What all the wicked want... to rule. To steal the destiny right away from men. To possess what never should be possessed." Discuss examples from the news or from history, where individuals abuse their power over others in these ways.

CHANGE – The novel takes place in the late 19th century, an era of enormous social and technological change. Make a timeline from the US Civil War to World War I and label the year inventions were introduced, such as electricity, cars, planes, light bulbs, elevators, plastic, aspirin, cameras, bicycles, microphones, telephones, box cereal, radio, and gas engines. Discuss how such changes affected the daily lives of Americans.

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CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS – America has a rich tradition of tall tales. These are stories that are related as truth, but have exaggerations or unbelievable elements. In what ways is *The Nine Pound Hammer* a tall tale, and in what ways isn't it? Have students take a real event from their lives and exaggerate it into an tall tale story.

WRITING – Beginning on p. 208, we learn how Si came to be taken in by Peg Leg Nel. Make up a story for how either Seth, Marisol, or Redfeather joined Peg Leg Nel's medicine show. Make sure your story also explains how their special talent was helpful or harmful when they were young.

SOCIAL STUDIES – Both Peg Leg Nel and Grevol live aboard trains. Trains have had a crucial role in America's economic and geographic growth. Learn more about the history of trains in America and create a poster to display the findings.

Before radio, movies, and television, medicine shows were a major source of entertainment for rural communities in America. Research the history of medicine shows as well as their influence on commercial television and today's infomercial. Have students write a skit where they try to convince others to buy a made-up product using medicine show style speech.

ART – Have students make their own toby (mojo) bag. Cut out 4" x 8" rectangles of red felt, fold into a square, and sew up two of the sides. Wrap a piece of string around the top to close the toby. Students can choose special objects to include in their toby and explain to the class why the objects have personal importance.

SCIENCE – Imagine you were a Rambler. What animal would you transform into? Research this animal's traits, habitat, diet, and behavior.

Ramblers gather wild plants for charms in their toby bags. Pick 5 plants that grow wild in your neighborhood. List characteristics of these plants and make up a magical power based on each plant's traits.

Ray's lodestone guides him on his quest. Learn more about lodestones by ordering a classroom set. Experiment with these naturally magnetized rocks to discover how they compare with other magnets and magnetic objects. Research how the mineral magnetite becomes a lodestone.

Draw a diagram of a steam train. Label the types of cars and the parts of the engine. Explain how a steam locomotive works and discuss what simple machines are crucial to the engine.

MUSIC – The song "John Henry" has a long history in American folk music. Country, blues, rock, and jazz artists have a wide variety of interpretations. Download versions of the song "John Henry" by Bruce Springsteen, Bill Monroe, Harry Belafonte, Leadbelly, Merle Travis, and others. What elements in John Henry's story do the artists focus on? Why do you think so many people throughout the years have enjoyed the story-song of John Henry?

Listen to other examples of American roots music (Cajun, bluegrass, ragtime, Appalachian, etc) that tell stories through songs. These are sometimes called ballads. Discuss the stories and find out more about the people who sang these songs.

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DISCUSSION POINTS

1. After discovering the Gog's identity, re-read Mister Grevol's speech to Ray on p. 9. Is his advice good or bad? What does it reveal about the Gog's motives?
2. A series of strange encounters led Ray to the medicine show: discovering Hobnob, finding the silver dagger, riding on the bear, and ultimately being rescued by Conker and Si. Was this luck, coincidence, or do you think the lodestone played a role in guiding Ray through the Lost Wood? Explain.
3. Does Nel help or hinder the children of the medicine show by hiding the truth about the Ramblers and the Gog?
4. Ray's father gave him the lodestone as a guide. What helps you make difficult decisions and choices?
5. How does Conker change over the course of the novel because of his friendship with Ray?
6. On p. 156, Mother Salagi says that train tracks and telegraph lines are "walls," rather than being "bridges" to connect people. What current technology do you feel connects or disconnects people from each other?
7. Both Nel and the Pirate Queen are afraid to confront the Gog directly. In what ways are their motives similar and in what ways are they different?
8. When Ray tells Nel he wants to be a Rambler on p. 259, Nel says, "It's just a matter of finding the right path and listening to yourself." What do you think he means by this?
9. After the explosion of The Pitch Dark Train, Jolie does not return. What do you think happened to her? Speculate on what will happen in the next book.
10. Ray is the main character in *The Nine Pound Hammer*, but who is the real hero—Ray or Conker? Explain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



John Claude Bemis is a former elementary school teacher who lives with his wife and daughter in Hillsborough, North Carolina. In addition to being a writer, John is a musician who found inspiration for his fiction in old-time country and blues music and the Southern folklore at its heart. He has an undergraduate degree in education, a M.Ed in Literacy, and John is certified to teach Academically and Intellectually Gifted Education.

THE WOLF TREE *SUMMER 2010*



The adventures continue in Book Two of *The Clockwork Dark* trilogy.

AUDIOBOOK

The Nine Pound Hammer audiobook includes original music by the author. Listen to excerpts of it and other books at www.randomhouse.com/audio