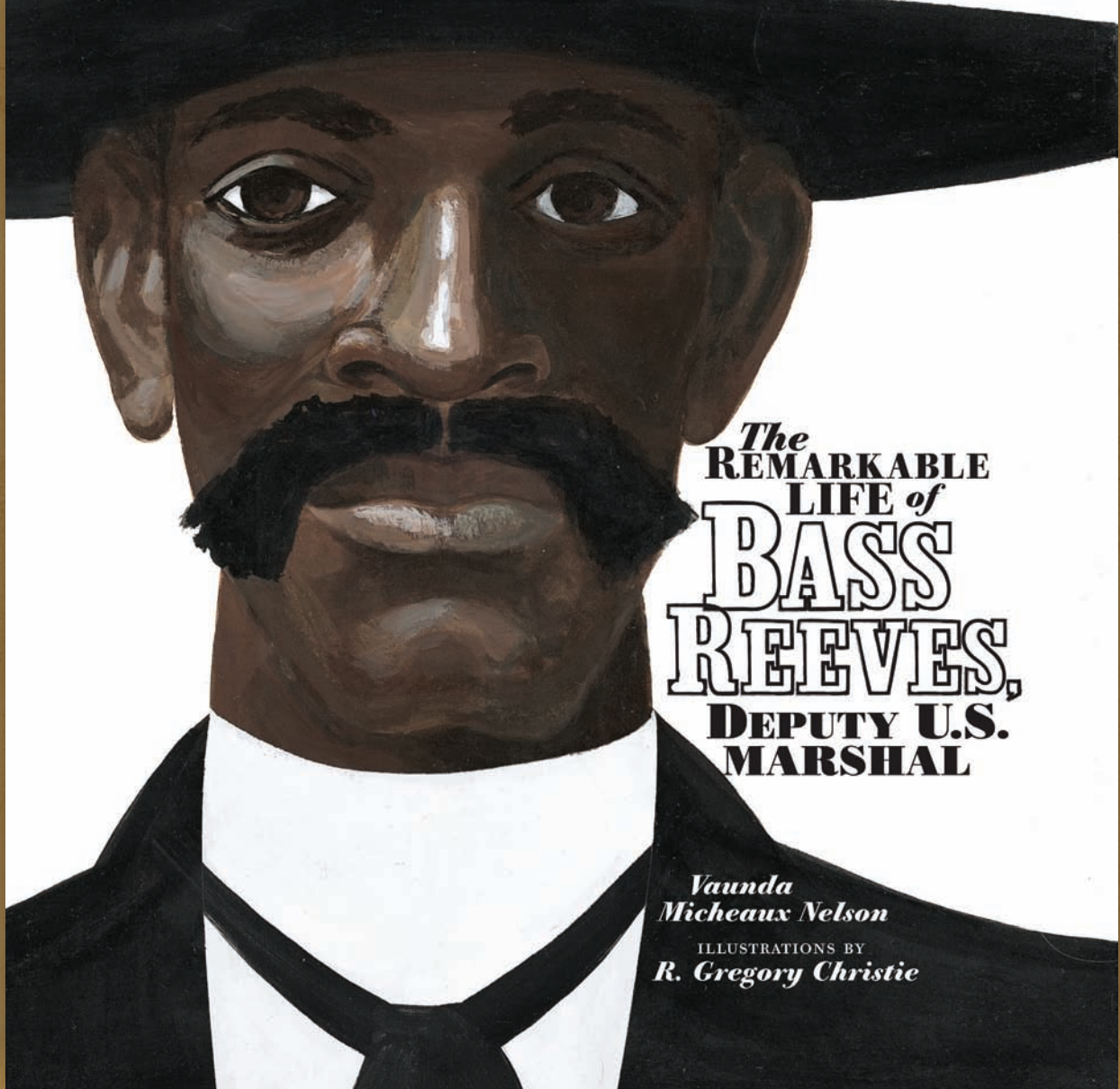


# **BAD NEWS** *for* **OUTLAWS**



*The*  
**REMARKABLE**  
*LIFE of*  
**BASS**  
**REEVES,**  
**DEPUTY U.S.**  
**MARSHAL**

*Vaunda*  
*Micheaux Nelson*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY  
*R. Gregory Christie*

# **Discussion Guide**





**Sitting tall in the saddle**, with a wide-brimmed black hat and twin Colt pistols on his belt, Bass Reeves seemed bigger than life. Outlaws feared him. Law-abiding citizens respected him. As a peace officer, he was cunning and fearless. When a lawbreaker heard Bass Reeves had his warrant, he knew it was the end of the trail, because Bass always got his man, dead or alive. He achieved all this in spite of whites who didn't like the notion of a black lawman.

Born into slavery in 1838, Bass had a hard and violent life, but he also had a strong sense of right and wrong that others admired. When Judge Isaac Parker tried to bring law and order to the lawless Indian Territories, he chose Bass to be a Deputy U.S. Marshal. Bass would quickly prove a smart choice.

For three decades, Bass was the most feared and respected lawman in the territories. He made more than 3,000 arrests, and though he was a crack shot and a quick draw, he only killed fourteen men in the line of duty.

The story of Bass Reeves is the story of a remarkable African American and a remarkable hero of the Old West.

## Discussion Questions

1. Can you name some of the western words and phrases used in *Bad News for Outlaws*? What do you think these phrases added to the story? Are there any phrases that people use today that people in the Old West would have found unusual or odd?
2. Bass Reeves used many clever plans to capture criminals. Can you think of any other tricks he might have pulled to catch outlaws?
3. How did disguises and tricks help Bass Reeves better perform his duties? Was it right of him to lie to these people? Why or why not?
4. Why was Bass Reeves not liked by some white men? Did he do something wrong? How has the perception of race changed from then to now?
5. Why did Bass Reeves choose not to shoot at the criminals unless his life was in danger even though Judge Parker said to simply bring them in "alive or dead"?
6. Why do you think Reeves was so fearless? Do you think it was his fearlessness that caused others to fear him?
7. What about Bass Reeves made him succeed at his job? Can you think of other people who have similar traits and have used them to succeed?
8. In the book, it states that Bass "buried Webb's body and turned in the outlaw's boots and gun belt as proof he'd gotten his man." Why do you think he would have done this as opposed to bringing in the body?
9. Who are some other famous outlaws of the Wild West? How do you think they would have fared if Bass Reeves had been issued their warrants?
10. The author describes Bass Reeves as being "honest as the day is long." What do you think that means? How did people know he was so honest?
11. For which side would Colonel George Reeves have fought during the Civil War? How did the outcome of the Civil War make Bass Reeves' life easier? Did it make his life harder in any way?
12. Why did Bass Reeves run away after his argument with his owner? What would have been the consequences if he would have been caught? What do you think would have happened if he had stayed?
13. What else do you know about Native Americans and the Indian Territory? Why was it unusual that Bass Reeves escaped there?



14. What did Bass Reeves learn after he escaped to Indian Territory? How did those skills help him become such a great lawman?
15. Did the fact that Bass was illiterate (that he couldn't read) affect his ability to be a Deputy U.S. Marshal? How did he adapt? What if you weren't able to read? How would life be more difficult?
16. Think of the dedication that it took for Bass Reeves to work through "bitter cold and sweltering heat." What are you dedicated to? How do you hope that dedication will help you throughout your life?
17. What does the author mean when she writes "many lawmen of the time weren't much better than the hard cases they arrested"? How was Bass Reeves different from some other lawmen?
18. Why did the infamous "Bandit Queen" Belle Starr turn herself in after countless years of leading a lawless life?
19. Think of the time when Bass Reeves saved the man the man from a lynch mob. What would you have done if you were in that situation?
20. One of the hardest things Bass Reeves had to do was arrest his own son. What does this say about his views of the law and family?
21. How do you think Bass Reeves' job of being a Deputy U.S. Marshal differed from being on the Muskogee, Oklahoma police force?
22. Why was it important for the author to mention that "blacks, whites, and Indians... attended his burial"?
23. If Bass Reeves was such an amazing lawman, why do you think he isn't as well known as Wyatt Earp or Bat Masterson?

## Further Reading and Websites

Fort Smith National Historic Site

<http://www.nps.gov/fosm/index.htm>

Located in Fort Smith, Arkansas, near the Oklahoma border, this park maintains the courthouse and other buildings from the time of Judge Parker. Starting in 2011, the park will host the U.S. Marshals Museum.

Kent, Deborah. *The Trail of Tears*. Danbury, CT: Children's Press, 2007. This book describes the forced march of Native Americans into Indian Territory.

Markel, Rita J. *Your Travel Guide to America's Old West*. Minneapolis: Twenty-First Century Books, 2004. This book gives readers an idea of what to eat, what to wear, and what life was like in the American West.

Oklahoma Historical Society

<http://www.okhistory.org/kids/index.html>

The kids section of this website has information, games, and photos about Oklahoma's history.

Paulsen, Gary. *The Legend of Bass Reeves*. New York: Laurel-Leaf, 2008. This book contains an imagined tale of Bass Reeves's boyhood and a fictionalized account of his later life.

Underwood, Deborah. *Nat Love*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publications Company, 2008. This story of Nat Love, and African American cowboy is based largely on his autobiography.

U.S. Marshal Service

<http://www.usmarshals.gov/usmsforkids/index.html>

This site gives an overview of the long history of U.S. Marshals.



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photograph by Drew Nelson



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King Illustrator Honor Award.

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### *Bad News for Outlaws*

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Interest Level: Grades 3-6

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