

# FREDERICK DOUGLASS

*The Lion Who Wrote History*

By Walter Dean Myers • Illustrations by Floyd Cooper

## Teaching Guide

### About the Book

Powerful words and stunning illustrations convey the heroic life of Frederick Douglass in this picture-book biography. Despite being born into slavery and barred from education, Douglass learned to read and set his sights on freedom. He risked his life to escape and then dedicated that life to helping others. His courage and his passion for justice shine forth from the pages, inspiring readers to consider how they, too, can make the world a better place.

### Before Reading

This picture book biography touches on many topics related to Frederick Douglass and American history, some of which may be unfamiliar to certain students. Before reading the book as a class, consider reviewing such subjects as slavery, the abolition movement, the Civil War, and the women's rights movement. You might also discuss the importance of public speaking in a time before radio, television, film, and other similar media.

### Discussion Questions

1. Frederick Douglass was a person of great courage. Describe some of the risks that he took. Why did he take those risks? What were the consequences? What qualities besides courage did he need to overcome so many challenges and succeed?
2. Re-read the opening paragraph. Find evidence in the text of Douglass's "careful decisions" and his accomplishments. How did they make his life better? How did they change the history of America?
3. What do you learn about slavery from this book? Why was Frederick Douglass willing to risk so much to escape slavery? The author puts quotation marks around the words *property* and *owned* when referring to slavery. Why do you think he does that?
4. How was learning to read, first from Mrs. Auld and then through his own efforts, important to Frederick Douglass's future accomplishments? Why did slave owners forbid slaves from reading? What would your own future be like if you never learned to read?
5. "Free black sailors had always been a problem for slaveholders," writes the author. Why were they a problem for slaveholders? What effect did meeting such sailors have on Frederick Douglass, and how did they help him?
6. Discuss the book's subtitle, "The Lion Who Wrote History," and the book's final line, "His voice, born to the soft tones of the slave population, truly became a lion's roar." Come up with a list of words you associate with lions. Which of the words apply to Douglass, and why? Why does the author focus on Douglass's voice in the final line?
7. Look at the different close-ups of Douglass's face in the illustrations. Identify the emotions that his face shows in specific pictures. How do the illustrations add to your understanding of what kind of person Frederick Douglass was?
8. Authors write biographies for different reasons. Why do you think Myers chose to write about Frederick Douglass? Find evidence to show what the author thinks of Douglass and what he feels about him. What conclusions can you draw about the illustrator's attitude towards his subject?

*Common Core State Standards (Reading Standards for Informational Text): RI.2-5.1, RI.2-5.2, RI.2-5.3, RI.2-5.4, RI.2-3.6, RI.2-4.7*



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## Classroom Activities

- 1. Persuasive Powers.** Douglass was a powerful speaker who changed minds. As a class, discuss what makes a speech persuasive. Have students pick topics that matter to them on which their classmates might not agree. Each student should craft a simple speech aimed at persuading their audience and deliver the speech to a small group or the class. The speech can be only a few sentences for younger students and a few paragraphs for older ones.
- 2. A Traveling Man.** Frederick Douglass traveled more than many people of his day. In small groups, have students list the cities, states, and other geographical features mentioned in the text. Have them research the locations like New Bedford, Seneca Falls, and the Susquehanna River. Then give them a map of the East Coast states where they can highlight the places and trace some of his journeys.
- 3. Who's a Hero?** Have the class talk about what makes someone a hero and how Frederick Douglass fits their criteria. Then gather together picture-story biographies of famous people such as Abraham Lincoln, Amelia Earhart, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and others. Have pairs of students read one of the books and discuss whether that person was a hero. Each pair should give a brief summary of the person in the biography and their qualities.
- 4. Digging Deeper.** As a class, compile a list of topics covered in this biography that students would like to research. For younger students, it could include broad topics like whaling and trains; for older students, it could include John Brown, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the 1848 Seneca Falls women's rights convention. Have pairs of students choose a topic and research it, presenting their findings to the class.
- 5. A Visit to Cedar Hill.** The National Park Service maintains a website about Frederick Douglass and Cedar Hill, his elegant last home ([www.nps.gov/frdo/index.htm](http://www.nps.gov/frdo/index.htm)). The website has many photographs and illustrations of Douglass and his family as well as videos of Cedar Hill. It also shows children who've won an Oratorical Contest giving one of Douglass's speeches. Have students browse the website and find interesting facts or images to share in small groups.
- 6. Meet the Author, Meet the Illustrator.** Both the author and illustrator have rich bodies of work for this age group. In small groups or as a class, learn more about either Myers or Cooper by researching him and studying some of his other books. Have students find similarities and differences among the books. Set up a spot in the classroom to display the books and biographical information. See "About the Author" and "About the Illustrator" on this page for book suggestions.
- 7. Extra! Extra! Read All About It.** In addition to public speaking, Frederick Douglass shared what he believed by publishing newspapers such as the *North Star*. Have students put together a

newspaper with short articles that draw from some of the other activities listed above. The articles can be about Douglass, places he went, other heroes, and topics from the "Digging Deeper" activity or the persuasive speeches. Publish it using a free historic newspaper template such as this one: [www.presentationmagazine.com/editable-old-newspaper-template-4520.htm](http://www.presentationmagazine.com/editable-old-newspaper-template-4520.htm)

- 8. A Variety of Vocabulary.** Myers uses a rich vocabulary, including quotes from Douglass, to tell his story. Have students note unfamiliar vocabulary as they read the text. They should each choose one new word, write down the sentence in which it's used, find the definition, and use it in their own sentence.

*Common Core State Standards (Speaking and Listening):* SL.2-5.1, SL.3-5.4

*Common Core State Standards (Reading Standards for Informational Text):* RI.2-5.1, RI. 2-5.4, RI. 2-5.7

*Common Core State Standards (Writing):* W.2-5.2



### About the Author

Five-time Coretta Scott King Award winner Walter Dean Myers (1937-2014) was the acclaimed author of a wide variety of nonfiction and fiction for young people. His nonfiction includes *We Are America: A Tribute from the Heart*; *Now Is Your Time!: The African-American Struggle for Freedom*; *I've Seen the Promised Land: The Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*; *Malcom X: A Fire Burning Brightly*; and *Patrol: An American Soldier in Vietnam*, a Jane Addams Children's Book Award winner. His illustrious list of young adult novels includes *Juba*; *Darius & Twig*; *All the Right Stuff*; *Lockdown*; *Dope Sick*; *Autobiography of My Dead Brother*; *New York Times* bestseller *Monster*, the first winner of the Michael L. Printz Award; and many more. He was a National Ambassador for Young People's Literature and an inaugural NYC Literary Honoree. Learn more about him online at [www.walterdeanmyersbooks.net](http://www.walterdeanmyersbooks.net) and [www.who-is-america.com](http://www.who-is-america.com).



### About the Illustrator

Floyd Cooper received a Coretta Scott King Award for *The Blacker the Berry* and a Coretta Scott King Honor for his illustrations in *Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea*, both by Joyce Carol Thomas. He is the author/illustrator of *Coming Home: From the Life of Langston Hughes*, *Mandela: From the Life of the South African Statesman*, and *Cumbayah*, and has also illustrated books by Charles Smith, Eloise Greenfield, Joyce Carol Thomas, Nikki Grimes, Virginia Hamilton, and more. Born and raised in Tulsa, Oklahoma, he received a degree in fine arts from the University of Oklahoma and, after graduating, worked as an artist for a major greeting card company. He now lives in Easton, Pennsylvania, with his wife and children. You can visit him online at [www.floydcooper.com](http://www.floydcooper.com).

Teaching guide prepared by Kathleen Odean, librarian, author, and Common Core workshop presenter.

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