

MIDDLE & HIGH SCHOOL STUDY GUIDE
FOR

THE NIGHT I FREED JOHN BROWN

An award-winning novel for young readers

by John Michael Cummings



2009 Winner of The Paterson Prize for Books for Young People
(Grades 7-12)

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Recommended by USA TODAY for Black History Month

"...a blend of history and suspense."

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Kirkus Reviews: "Characterizations are sharp, the setting eerily evoked.
A highly original meditation on how the past can haunt the present."

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The Boston Globe: "There are marvelous plot twists and surprises right
to the very end... and his prose can be pure poetry."

~

The Buffalo News: "A compelling narrative of a troubled family and a
dark secret of past grudges and grievances."

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BookPage: "It tells us to make our own happy endings, and that life goes
on, whether we like it or not."

~

Teenreads.com: "Cummings has a special talent for description, painting
vividly clear pictures with his animated words. This novel is amazing!"

Author Visit Testimonials

“John spoke to my Brooklyn students—many of whom have never been out of their own neighborhoods—with frankness, enthusiasm, and sensitivity for both his own personal journey in becoming a writer and for his topic. He brings to his audience a refreshing candor and a gentle style of speaking.”

-- Linda Moser-Mata, Librarian, *The Secondary School for Law, Journalism and Research, Brooklyn, NY*

“John’s engaging presentation is full of invaluable information for the aspiring novelist. His advice on perseverance comes from his own real-life experience—he’s a humble, witty, funny guy with a message for writers of any age.”

-- Becky Mayle, Reference Librarian, *Marion County Public Library, Fairmont, WV*

“Mr. Cummings’ visit to our school emphasized the ability to succeed through hard work and determination...his visit provided our students with a unique opportunity—a real treat for us!”

-- Linda Kirk, Guidance Counselor, *Valley High School, Pine Grove, WV*

“John is very charismatic...My staff and I appreciate his high energy sales and are impressed with the crowds of people he captured here.”

-- Carol Bolyard, Store Manager, *Borders Express, Bridgeport, WV*

Making History Impact the Present

A Purpose for Reading *The Night I Freed John Brown*

2009 marks the 150th anniversary of John Brown’s famous abolitionist raid on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia (then Virginia)—an act of insurrection that grabbed national headlines and helped push the nation into Civil War.

John Brown believed he could free the slaves, and job one was to arm them for their fight for freedom. Though Brown was hanged for treason, was he a madman? A murderer? Or was he a saint? The question, pondered and debated, lives on unanswered.

For ages 10 and up, *The Night I Freed John Brown* (Philomel Books, Penguin Group) tells the story of a mistreated 13-year-old growing up in Brown’s shadow in the modern-day town where the white preacher-turned-revolutionary was captured. Harpers Ferry is today also a national historical park.

When young Josh defies his harsh, controlling father and takes part in the town’s annual play about John Brown’s celebrated treason trial, playing the role of Brown’s brave son who fought by his father’s side against federal troops, our shy, sheltered hero is liberated—transformed!—by the experience. He feels as freed by John Brown as the slaves did 150 years before him.

The Night I Freed John Brown is a modern-day parallel on the historical events at Harpers Ferry, showing that any one of us, at any time, can need liberating from an oppressive force.

As I’ve been reading from my novel at schools and libraries, I’m finding that John Brown is a name of great resonance with African-American children. When I explain Brown’s role in history as a stepping stone among many that has led to this historical black presidency, the excitement in the classroom is electric. But when I further explain how, in my novel, a poor, neglected white boy in West Virginia is inspired by the spirit of John Brown in modern times, these young students

“The crimes of this guilty land will be purged away but with blood!”
—John Brown, 1859

Sample Classroom Projects: Group & Individual

How to include *The Night I Freed John Brown* in your Classroom Studies!

Social Studies & History

An Essay about John Brown

Who was John Brown? What did he stand for? How did he steer the course of history?

Have your students write a hamburger essay, or three-tier persuasive essay, on the paradoxical John Brown. How does history view revolutionaries like him? Does the end justify the means? Was he right? Or wrong?

Encourage your students to outline and pre-write, using excerpts from the novel of Josh's personal feelings toward John Brown. Make sure students grab readers with a narrative hook, then narrow the focus to a thesis. Have them draft and refine the material.

John Brown is morally elusive--but he can be captured in words!

...All my life I had been looking down John Brown's barrel.
When I was little, Mom said my nightmares were because
of him. In my scariest dreams, John Brown came to
life, crashed through the picture window, shattering it all
over the street, and started toward my house, the long bayonet
gleaming on the end of his rifle...

Science

Botany with Josh

In a pivotal scene in the novel, Josh's father tells the family story of Cowmint, a lucky plant that grows in the weeds in their backyard. When Josh's father laughs off the plant as made up, Josh feels differently. There is magic in his backyard—he can feel it!

Join Josh in his impassioned search for this cure-all plant. Using field guides, help Josh and his family identify the plant Josh eventually finds and believes is the mythic Cowmint.

Take a safe walk through a garden or weed patch, looking for the Mint family. Which plants have square stalks, paired leaves, and a spicy aroma? Bring along an ordinary magnifying glass and enjoy close peeks at the odd-looking, upside-down pink and purple flower petals. Breathe in. Smell the peppermint and spearmint? Touch the leaves. Are they slick like plastic or fussy like a peach? Do any have bright green berries? Take notes in a journal. Maybe you can find the lost Cowmint plant and save poor Josh and his family!

...I dashed back over to the vacant lot and went on kicking weeds apart, finding mustard-colored flowers with berries that looked like black jelly beans... Then, suddenly, when I pulled back some high grass, a plant with the brightest green berries I'd ever seen appeared...

Art

Harpers Ferry, located at the tip of the eastern panhandle of West Virginia, is a hauntingly beautiful Civil War town that belongs in our country's unique heritage. High, sad-faced rock mountains surround it. Not one, but two rivers cut around it. Old-time trestle bridges span its variously green waters. And a church steeple, topped with a shimmering gold cross, pierces its sky.

Thomas Jefferson, in 1785, called the water gap at Harpers Ferry one of the "most stupendous scenes in nature...worth a voyage across the Atlantic."

Invite students to draw pictures of the town. Provide papers, pencils, markers, paints, and brushes. Have them look up photographs and paintings of the old town. Encourage them to draw and paint details—rocky outcroppings, bridge piers, and red and green tin rooftops.

See if they can capture the unforgettable lonesomeness of the historic place that compels Josh to join the spirit of John Brown in a run for freedom!

...You could see the St. Peter's bell tower standing straight and tall over the town, like Abe Lincoln's hat. The famous Stone Steps—a hundred crooked steps carved out of solid rock!—zigzagged down between old buildings. On the grassy knoll to our left, the white gravestones in St. Peter's Cemetery tilted against each other like dominoes...

Geography

The Civil War fractured the American landscape, and early on, John Brown's bloody boots did the breaking. Calling for a slave revolt, Brown antagonized the Nation into war.

In the fallout, 11 states seceded from the Union, Florida being the third, on January 10, 1861, after South Carolina and Mississippi. Four border slave states --Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware--did not secede. However, the north-western portion of Virginia seceded from herself, joining the Union as the new state of West Virginia on June 20, 1863.

Have students work in small groups to research and create a map of the region around Harpers Ferry in 1859. Show the two railroads and canal that made up the hub of transportation east to Washington and west into the Ohio Valley.

Why was the arsenal at Harpers Ferry of strategic importance to John Brown? What was his plan for a new American government?

...On a dark night in 1859, the abolitionist John Brown and his band of raiders came charging into the town on horseback, shooting up the place, trying to capture the town's armory for guns to fight the war against slavery. Today, tourists came here from all over to gawk at the old brick firehouse where they stabbed Brown with a sword...

Writing Activities

Exploring Description

Point out to students how John Michael Cummings uses description to create a sense of atmosphere in *The Night I Freed John Brown*. Read the following opening paragraph in the novel, then discuss with students the use of descriptive devices, such as adjectives, metaphors, and allusions.

...My new friend Luke hopped the rusted chain hanging low and heavy across the overgrown lane and caught up with me where the weeds became thick and dead trees lay everywhere. We had just entered a secret junglelike world. Vines curled down like snakes, and dark trees stood around like villains and thieves. Blanketing the ground were purple wildflowers and gooey webs of silver leaves. Dead ahead were the ghostly white ruins of a chapel, its jagged walls biting up through the black earth like bad teeth. Nearby, in speckles of sunlight, stood a vine-wrapped statue of the Virgin Mary, her arms missing. You could almost see her waving hello to us...

Then have students write a new passage for the novel in which Josh's eyes see someone or something that creates an equally strong atmosphere. Instruct students to amass details by carefully choosing and arranging words and phrases.

Paint a picture for the reader--but be judicious!

Journal Entry

Invite students to reread passages in *The Night I Freed John Brown* that describe Josh's feelings toward his father. You might want to break up the class into small groups to brainstorm some strong adjectives and verbs that might help them to describe Josh's feelings. Then, individually, have students imagine that Josh keeps a journal. Ask them to write a journal entry from Josh's point of view. Encourage them to use the language and ideas they've learned from reading Josh's narration in the novel.

...In moments like these, I wondered whether he wanted me to respond. It seemed he was asking me a question, as if he thought I were older suddenly, as if we were alone in the world and he wanted me to be his friend...

News Article

Remind students that the theft of valuable religious items at the church school would have been made the news. Have students write a news article about the thefts that might have appeared in the local paper at the time. Remind them to write a headline for their article, and to answer the questions who, what, where, when, why, and how.

Theft at Church School Raises Questions

Harpers Ferry, WV--Thousands of dollars in church antiques and valuables were stolen from the Marist Church Retreat near the Bakerton Underpass on Wednesday. Police and parish officials are at a loss...

Sample Comprehension Questions

1. What effect does the tall white house Josh's father grew up in have on Josh? Why is he drawn to it? What secrets about the house does he tell his best friend Luke once inside it?
 2. What and where is Jefferson's Rock? How is Josh's view from the rock different from the tourists' view? What does he see?
 3. Why is Josh ashamed of his brothers? Describe how his brothers sharply contrast in appearance with the tourists? What is meant by "I'm-getting-big-and-belligerent West Virginia look"?
 4. In the cave under Jefferson's Rock, Luke tells Josh that John Brown's sons died for their father--and that he would gladly do the same for his dad. Josh, however, does not have the same love for his father. What does this say about how John Brown's "meanness" differs from Josh's father's meanness?
 5. What reason does Josh's father initially give for his grudge against Catholic Church?
 6. Josh sees Mr. Richmond's house and his father's tall white childhood home as identical. What explanation does Josh's father offer Mr. Richmond for this so-called figment of Josh's imagination? What mineral causes the "cake icing" appearance to houses?
 7. Why is Mr. Richmond impressed by Josh's father? Why does Josh then feel inspired to find Cowmint?
 8. According to Luke, his father hired Josh's cousin Ricky Hardaway for house repairs because of whose recommendation?
 9. Josh, with Luke's help, sneaks into the Catholic church next door. How has the church changed? What does Josh think of Father Ron?
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Vocabulary & Language

Have students create a word web around the concept of a loving father. Ask students to add categories such as kindness, patience, nurturing, and acceptance. As students read the novel, have them add antonyms to each category, such as mean, angry, critical, and hateful. When students have finished reading, they can share what they know as well as the context clues they used to locate each word.

ESL

John Michael Cummings' figurative language may be a pleasant challenge for those whose first language is not English. Encourage them to confidently interpret sentences like "The sky is angry, and the ground is thirsty." You might have ESL students work with English-speaking partners to locate passages whose meaning cannot be literal. Have them discuss how figurative language achieves a special effect or meaning.

...Your mother was a bigmouth bass coming up the Shenandoah.
I was a catfish in the Potomac. We came together down there at The
Point, and she nearly gobbled me up...

More Praise *The Night I Freed John Brown*

by John Michael Cummings

The Orange County Register:

"Thoughtful and compelling...This moody, almost Gothic, novel will offer you a pleasant few hours to be sure."

The Baton Rouge Advocate:

"...Lively characters whose voices ring true. Josh is every young boy who ever resented his own culture and family."

The Bluefield Daily Telegraph:

"A masterful work crafted in the time-honored genre that Mark Twain milked so gracefully in 'Tom Sawyer'."

David M. Kinchen, Huntingtonnews.net Book Critic:

"It's one of the best novels I've read in a long time...Calling all librarians out there: Buy this book!"

The ALAN Review:

"It is a fast-paced story that addresses themes like: familial relationships, identity development and brotherhood."

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle:

"It isn't every day a debut novel is praised by a Poet Laureate, Newbery Honor recipient, and Pushcart Prize winner."

Mid-American Review:

"Cummings keeps a sense of suspense thrumming through the book...the story is mature, sad, affecting, and challenging."

Black Warrior Review:

"The use of history as a narrative tool adds a scope rarely attempted in the realm of young adult literature."

The Texas Review:

"Plenty of action and authentic dialogue. You care about our young hero, because he cares about so many things."

Gulf Stream Magazine:

"Fresh and unique...the feeling of uncanniness never leaves the novel."

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