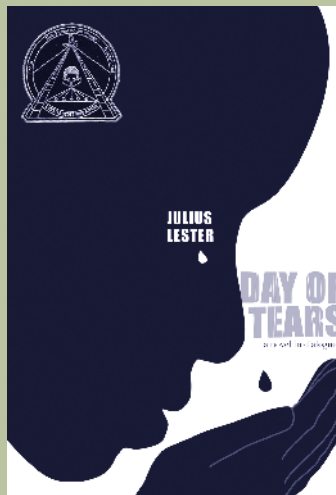


# DAY OF TEARS

By Julius Lester

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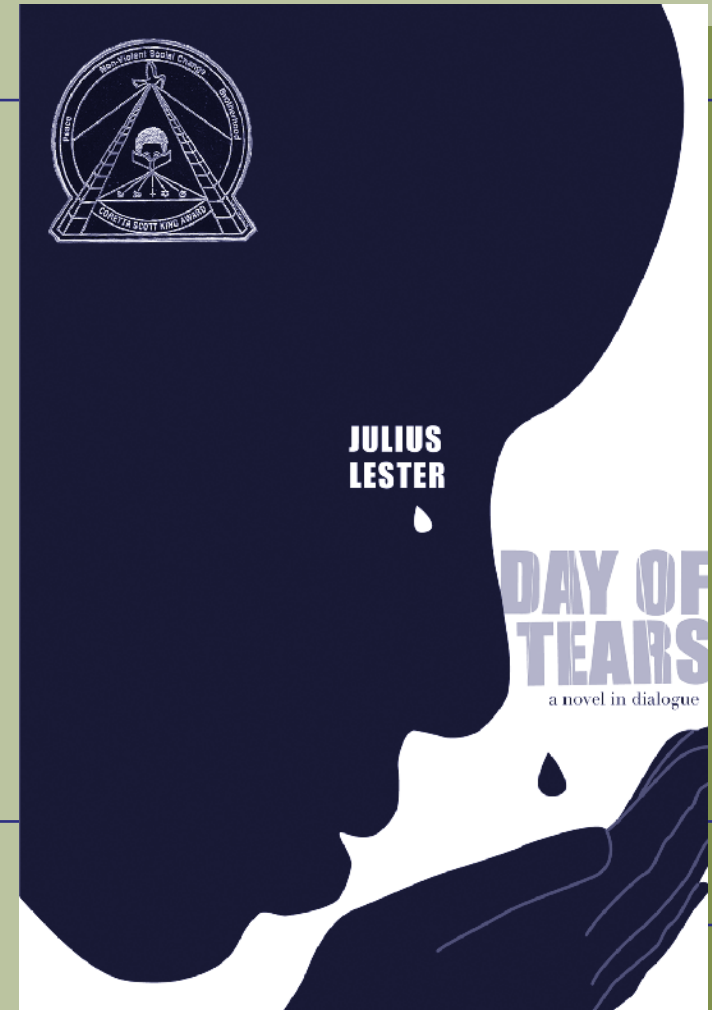


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TEACHER'S GUIDE  
JUMP AT THE SUN

## INTRODUCTION

In *Day of Tears*, Julius Lester exposes the devastating reality of the slave experience. The novel begins with the largest slave auction in American history (later known as The Weeping Time). During the auction, members of slave families are sold to different masters and must face the fact that they will never see each other again. Lester takes you into the minds of the slaves and masters as he follows a girl's journey from slavery to a life of freedom.

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## ACTIVITIES

### KEEP A READING JOURNAL

Have the students write down everything they know about the slavery of black people in America before reading the novel. Have them jot down reactions, questions, and thoughts. Ask the students to revisit their initial list after completing the book. Has the book revealed anything surprising about slavery? Did the students have misconceptions that have now changed?

### RESEARCH PROJECTS

Have two or three students work together to research a topic and give a presentation to the class. The students should create visual aids to accompany their presentations. Organize all of the projects in the room, to create a museum. Invite parents, as well as other students in the school, to visit the museum.

#### Possible topics

- The Weeping Time (create a mural; look at the historical documents)
- Economics of slavery
- The Underground Railroad (write a description of the history; create a 3-D map in papier-mâché outlining the underground railroad and using craft materials for people, houses, boats, etc.)
- “Jumping the broom” wedding celebrations
- High John and Brer Rabbit (the history of the oral tradition among black Americans)
- The Civil War (prepare a time line and/or a brief overview)
- The Emancipation Proclamation
- Canadian communities of former slaves
- Runaway-slave laws
- Enslaving Virginia (explore the reactions to a modern-day reenactment in 1999 of a slave auction in Colonial Williamsburg)

### READERS’ THEATER

Ask students to choose different characters and read their sections aloud. Discuss how the students feel assuming these roles.

### WRITING EXERCISE

Imagine yourself as a slave. Write a monologue about your experience and feelings. Feel free to imagine your own surroundings and circumstances. How do you get through each day? Do you have hope for freedom and a better life?

### ROLE-PLAYING

Argue different points of view based on the personalities of the characters presented in the novel. Here are some examples:

#### Master Butler

Why you feel you have no option but to sell your slaves

#### Mattie

Why you fear Emma’s attending the auction

#### Emma

Your fears about leaving your family and your hopes for future generations

#### Fanny Kemble

Why you left your husband, how you feel about slavery, and how you feel about your husband’s latest actions

#### Jeremiah Henry

How you feel about slavery and what part you can play in helping the slaves escape to the North

## COMPREHENSION CHECK

1. Describe the relationships between Mattie, Will, and Pierce Butler.
2. Why does Pierce Butler sell his slaves?
3. Why is Mattie worried about Emma's going to the auction with the Butler girls?
4. Why does Fanny Kemble leave the plantation?
5. How do Jeffrey and Dorcas get separated? What happens when Jeffrey finds Dorcas years later?
6. What does Emma say to Sarah when she leaves to go with her new owner?
7. Describe Sarah's relationship with her father when he is on his deathbed.
8. Why does Emma refuse to "jump the broom" with Joe in chapter 8?
9. Who is Mr. Henry? How does he help Joe and Emma?
10. How does Sampson feel about slavery? Does Sampson really stand in the way during the escape?
11. Describe Philadelphia as seen through Emma's eyes.
12. Why does Fanny warn Emma and Joe when she sees them in Philadelphia?
13. How do Sarah and Emma keep in touch?
14. To whom is Emma talking in the last chapter?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUPS\*

1. Why do you think it was illegal to teach slaves? What impact did this have on Emma's views on education?
2. How do you feel about Sampson's character? What did you discover about Sampson's true feelings toward slavery and about his relationship to his son?
3. Will says, "Master want to pretend like me and Mattie don't have feelings same as him." Why do you think the slaves were treated as if they were not capable of the same range of emotions as are whites?
4. How did the attitudes of the older slaves differ from those of the younger slaves?
5. Blacks and whites in this novel use the word "nigger" to refer to black people. How does this usage make you feel? What does it mean? Do you think it is appropriate for people to use that word today?
6. Were you surprised to learn the amount of racism blacks faced in the North? Write about the situation for blacks in the North based on the details provided in the novel. Were blacks equal to whites? How did they support themselves? Why did they have to fear being "caught" again by a white person?
7. Why did Julius Lester choose to write in the first person? How does this format affect the way the characters come across?
8. Julius Lester also places interludes throughout the novel. What is an interlude? How does it affect the way the story is told?

*\*In addition to these questions, have the students submit topics from their reading journals for discussion.*

## AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIUS LESTER

### Q. What was the inspiration for this novel?

A. I know people think writers get “inspired,” but the reality is sometimes different. The idea for the novel came from Garen Thomas, my editor at Hyperion. I was unfamiliar with what history calls “The Weeping Time.” I found the idea intriguing, and did some research to see what the story possibilities were. The fact that the auction was done for the benefit of Pierce Butler was further intriguing, as he was married to Fanny Kemble, a remarkable woman whose name I was familiar with. I read several biographies of Fanny Kemble, as well as the book her youngest daughter wrote defending slavery. If there was a moment of “inspiration” it came when I saw a notice for a photo show in a magazine. (I am also a photographer.) The photo was a 19th-century daguerreotype of a 9 to 10-year-old slave girl holding a white girl of about 2-3 on her lap. I kept that photo on my desk as I wrote the book.

### Q. *Day of Tears* is a mixture of history and fiction. How did you craft your story around the historical facts?

A. I’ve written a lot of historical fiction set during slavery. So, the facts of what life was like during slavery are things I know from past research and I don’t have to research anew. The key to historical fiction is making the characters believable and real, and this means integrating the facts into the narrative so they aren’t even recognizable as facts. But the other side of historical fiction is ignoring the history to make a better story. For example, *Day of Tears* opens on the last day of the slave auction, and there is the scene in which slaves are taken to the barn and put into a wagon and taken into town. Historically, all the slaves were moved to town before the first day of the auction. Dramatically, however, it was better to have a scene in which the slaves are being moved.

### Q. How did you choose the format for this novel? Do you see it as a future play?

A. I don’t see this as a play. I don’t like plays. I think I came to the format because, as I said, I’ve written a lot of historical fiction based on slavery, and I didn’t want to repeat myself. So, I wondered, how could I approach this story in a different way? Not sure how the idea of doing it in dialogue came to me, but when it did, I was intrigued by the challenge. Could I convey a sense of place and character without descriptive sections?



I had a call-in radio show in New York from 1968 to 1975. I loved radio, because all you had to use was your voice. So, in writing the novel I think I drew on my years in radio and my consciousness of how much the voice can convey.

### Q. What do you hope readers will take from this novel?

A. I never know how to answer this question. I have also written adult fiction, and this is not a question I get asked about my adult books. There seems to be an assumption that children’s books have a didactic element. I just hope the readers are moved by the various stories in the novel.

### Q. How did you become interested in writing books for young people?

A. I write for all ages. I’ve done picture books, YA novels, nonfiction, poetry, and fiction and nonfiction for adult readers. I wonder sometimes if the way we categorize books isn’t artificial, more something that is market-driven than [something that] has any reality in the writing of the books. I like to tell stories, and there is more opportunity to do that in books for children, as well as science fiction and fantasy. I simply see myself as a writer, and adults read my YA books and never know that [they were] marketed for YA. I just write, and the books find the readers they’re supposed to have.

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**Q. What was your favorite book as a child?**

**A.** Didn't have one. I read tons of comic books and murder magazines.

**Q. What advice would you give young writers?**

**A.** Read, read, read, read. To be a writer you have to know what has been written. You have to understand how writers achieve certain effects. I don't care what you read. Like I said, I read comic books. I don't read comics anymore, but I love mysteries and detective fiction and fantasy novels and read a lot of each. The important thing is to read.

## FOR FURTHER READING

**Fanny Butler Leigh**

*Ten Years on a Georgia Plantation Since the War*

**Catherine Clinton**

*Fanny Kemble's Civil Wars*

**Christopher Conlon**

*The Weeping Time: Elegy in Three Voices*

## WEB SITES

**Fanny Kemble and Pierce Butler**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p1569.htm>

**The Weeping Time**

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4p2918.htm>

**The Largest Slave Auction**

*America's Story from America's Library*

[http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb.reform/jb\\_reform\\_slaveauc\\_1.html](http://www.americaslibrary.gov/jb.reform/jb_reform_slaveauc_1.html)

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### About the author of this guide

**Taunya Nesin** received her undergraduate degree in English and American Language and Literature from Harvard University. She went on to Teacher's College at Columbia University, where she earned a master's degree in Curriculum and Teaching. She has spent four years in the classroom teaching various levels of elementary school. She is currently freelancing while spending time with her toddler in Newton, Massachusetts.