

A Curriculum Guide to

***Lift Your Light a Little Higher:
The Story of Stephen Bishop: Slave-Explorer***

By Heather Henson

Illustrated by Bryan Collier

Background/Summary

In this picture book history, readers learn about Stephen Bishop, a slave and an explorer. Bishop narrates his own story, telling how he became a skilled explorer of Mammoth Cave in Kentucky after his master told him to learn enough about the cave so that he could guide paying customers. In the process of learning about the cave, Bishop learns that he is not just a slave, he is a man—a man who craves learning and eventually teaches himself to read and write, a man who was the first to cross parts of the cave no one thought possible, and a man who was the first to find eyeless fish and albino crawdads in a hidden stream. Inside the cave, Stephen Bishop finds dignity and self-respect. He says, “A man—down here, that’s what I am—a man, not just a slave.”

Expressive watercolor and paper collage illustrations by Bryan Collier add information and emotion to this compelling story of personal growth and self-respect, even under oppressive circumstances. This book contributes to our growing understanding of history by shining a light on a little known African American explorer.

Discussion Questions/Activities

Key Ideas and Details

The discussion questions and activities below draw on Common Core State Standards for reading informational text (RI) that ask children to ask and answer questions about key details in a text (**RI.K–3.1**), identify the main topic and key details that support it (**RI.K–3.2**), and describe the relationship between a series of events, concepts, or ideas (**RI.K–3.3**).

1. Stephen Bishop was both a slave and an explorer. How did being a slave affect his life? How did being an explorer?
2. Where and when does the story take place? Why is it important to know this?
3. Stephen Bishop tells us, “I am famous far and wide—across the great ocean itself.” What made Stephen so famous that even Queen Elizabeth knew about him?
4. Explain what Stephen Bishop means when he says, “But being known is not the same as being free, no sir.”

5. Why did visitors to the cave want to candle-write their names? Why did Stephen Bishop? How did they do this?
6. How did being a guide help Stephen Bishop see himself as a man, not just a slave? What actions showed him as a man?
7. The beginning of the book compares a journey into the past to a journey into a cave. In what ways are the two journeys similar? In what ways are they different?
8. At the end of the book Stephen Bishop gives us this advice: “Sometimes you just got to go beyond what’s written down to get to what’s been left untold.” What did he mean by this? Do you agree?
9. The title of the book, *Lift Your Light a Little Higher*, is also the title of a hymn, or song of praise or celebration. Why do you think the author chose this title to tell Stephen Bishop’s story? In what ways did Stephen lift his “light,” or spirit, higher?
10. If you could ask Stephen Bishop questions about his life, what would they be? Use the words listed below to begin your questions:
 - Who?
 - What?
 - When?
 - Where?
 - Why?
 - How?
 How do you think he would answer your questions?

Craft and Structure

To learn about craft and structure, the Common Core State Standards asks us to help students learn and understand vocabulary words and phrases (**RI.K–3.4**), think about the features of nonfiction text (**RI.K–3.5**), and assess the author’s point of view (**RI.K–3.6**). The questions and activities below emphasize these understandings.

11. Using Repetition for Emphasis. The author repeats words like *because* and *man* several times to show that these words are important and should be remembered. Read aloud the examples below. Discuss how repetition works to emphasize an idea.

Example #1

Why is it against the law to teach me
my letters?

Because I am a slave. **Because** I am the property
of a white man. **Because** I am **bought and sold**,
same as an ox or mule; **bought and sold**
along with the land I work

Example #2

Down here, I am Guide—a man able to walk
before other men, not behind, a man able to school
even the brightest scholar, a man able to bring
a crowd of folks deep into the belly of the earth
and back again, safe and sound. A man—
down here, that’s what I am—a man,
not just a slave.

12. Rank the Opposites. Arrange the words in the box below in a way that makes a bridge from the word *light* to *dark*, its opposite. Work with a partner. You can use a dictionary to help you. Explain why you put the words where you did. Which word is the closest in meaning to *light*? Which is the next closest?

light _____ x
_____ x _____ x _____ x _____ x _____ x
dark

glowing	dim	shining	murky
ablaze	luminous	drab	gloomy

13. Connect Two. Below are two lists of words from the book. Connect a word from list 1 with a word from list 2. Write a two-to-three sentence explanation of the connection. Try to connect all the words.

List 1	List 2
cave	dusty
Kentucky	guide
slave	property
candle-write	master
dark	learned
time	man
history	spirit
past	hidden stream
free	law
eyeless fish	famous

14. Author’s Note. Read the Author’s Note at the end of the book. What additional information does the author share about Stephen Bishop, Mammoth Cave, and

writing the book as if Stephen Bishop were speaking to us. How does this help you understand the book?

15. Illustrator's Process. Watch the video below in which the illustrator, Bryan Collier, explains how he uses watercolors and paper illustrations torn from old magazines to create his illustrations:
<http://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/collier>

Try out this process to create your own illustration about the book.

Integration of Information

The Common Core State Standards ask students to use both the illustrations and details to describe key ideas and to show how images contribute to and clarify a text (e.g., where, when, why, and how key events occur). (**RI.1–4.7**).

16. Beginning and Ending. Both the beginning and the ending of the book point out that it can be difficult to learn about the past. Look closely at the words and illustrations to see how the beginning introduces this idea and the ending adds to it.

Look closely at the first two opening pages of the book.

- What do the words tell you about learning about the past?
- What do the illustrations show you about learning about the past?

Look closely at the last pages of the story:

- What do the words tell you about learning about the past?
- What do the illustrations show you about learning about the past?

Writing

Common Core State Standards emphasizes writing informative and explanatory text in the early grades. The writing activities below provide experience writing to give an opinion (**W.K–3.1**), to inform (**W.K–3.2**), and to explain a sequence of events (**W.K–3.3**).

17. Writing from a Different Point of View. What if the story were told from a different perspective? Try writing the story as if Stephen Bishop's master *or* a visitor to the cave told it. Think about the thoughts and observations they could share.

Originally, the author planned to write the story as if the cave told it. Try that approach. Think about what the cave would and would not know about Stephen Bishop.

18. Writing about an Illustration. Pick one of the illustrations in the story to write about. Then follow these steps:
- **Observe:** Look carefully at the illustration. Write down what you see.

- **Reflect:** What is happening in this illustration? What thoughts do you have about the illustration?
- **Question:** What questions do you have about this illustration? Write them down.

Share your ideas with a partner or small group.

19. Giving Your Opinion. In an interview posted on her website, the author says: “History is made up of ordinary people doing extraordinary things.”

Does Stephen Bishop fit this description? Do you think he was an ordinary person who did extraordinary things? Write down what you think and why.

Extending the Experience of Reading the Book

20. Learn More about Heather Henson.

- Read an interview about the book at:
http://heatherhensonbooks.com/?page_id=551
- Read other books by Heather Henson:
 - *That Book Woman*, illustrated by David Small
 - *Grumpy Grandpa*, illustrated by Ross MacDonald

21. Learn More about Bryan Collier

- Read *School Library Journal*'s interview with Bryan Collier about his artwork and writing process:
<http://www.slj.com/2013/05/interviews/the-power-of-pictures-a-visit-with-bryan-collier/>
- Read other books illustrated by Bryan Collier:
 - *Barack Obama*, written by Nikki Grimes
 - *I, Too, Am America*, words by Langston Hughes
 - *Rosa*, written by Nikki Giovanni
 - *Martin's Big Words*, written by Doreen Rappaport
 - *Fifty Cents and a Dream: Young Booker T. Washington*, written by Jabari Asim
 - *Trombone Shorty*, written by Troy “Trombone Shorty” Andrews
 - *Knock Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me*, written by Daniel Beaty

22. Learn More about Mammoth Cave

- Find out more about Mammoth Cave National Park at the National Park Service website: <https://www.nps.gov/maca/index.htm>
- Google images of Mammoth Cave to see what it looks like

- Find out about black history at Mammoth Cave at:
<https://www.nps.gov/macaca/learn/historyculture/black-history.htm>

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