

Never Caught: The Story of Ona Judge

By Erica Armstrong Dunbar and Kathleen Van Cleve

About the Book

Even the youngest American student knows about George Washington: the brave general, the first president of the United States, the “father” of our country. What many don’t know is that Washington was a slave owner. In *Never Caught: The Story of Ona Judge*, authors Erica Armstrong Dunbar and Kathleen van Cleve tell the compelling story of George and Martha Washington’s slave, Ona Judge, who, at age twenty-two, successfully escaped from a life of bondage. From her birth at Mount Vernon through childhood years spent beside her mother learning how to mend and make clothes, to being “called up” to the main house to tend to Martha Washington’s every need, readers get a true sense of what it was like to live in slavery. Shortly after Martha decides to “give” Ona as a wedding gift, she makes her daring escape to freedom. This story of one slave’s courage to defy America’s famously powerful man will inspire young readers and help them to view the nation’s earliest days in a whole new light.

Discussion Questions

The discussion questions below particularly address the following English Language Arts Common Core State Standards: (RL.5.4) (RI.5.3, 10) (RI.6.4)

1. In the Author’s Note, Erica Armstrong Dunbar writes, “While all of this can be uncomfortable to read about and discuss, we must do so. If we want to build a better present and future, we must recognize and understand the problems of the past.” What do you think Dunbar meant by this statement? How can history impact the present?
2. The authors emphasize the monumental decision George Washington made in siding with the colonists over King George III by saying, “Turning publicly against his ancestors and the reigning monarch would be a massive and dangerous step.” How was Ona’s decision and successful execution of escape just as “massive and dangerous”? How much was at stake?
3. The authors write, “Like her mother, Ona learned how to persevere in the face of extreme hardship.” Discuss examples of Ona’s perseverance, and how her experiences shaped her. What other character traits aided Ona in her daily life as a slave, in her ability to escape, and while she lived as a free black woman? Which traits do you think were the most important?
4. In chapter two, you read that, “Slave owners, including George Washington, referred to their human property as ‘servants,’ not slaves. Perhaps even way back then, among people who supported slavery wholeheartedly, this choice of words implied that somewhere, deep in their conscience, they knew it was wrong.” How would using the word *servant* justify the institution

of slavery in the minds of slave owners? Why might they be uncomfortable with the word *slaves*?

5. What is the definition of *benevolent*? Why do you think George Washington considered himself a “benevolent slave owner”? Do you agree with Washington’s view? How did keeping Ona as a slave restrict her life?

6. Why was the institution of slavery seen as a necessity to preserving the Southern way of life? Why did the Northern states come to see the immorality of slavery, while the Southern states went to great lengths to deny its evils?

7. Discuss why William Lee, after experiencing life in Philadelphia among free black people, insisted that everyone, even George Washington, refer to him by his full name. How do you feel about your name? Does it comprise your identity?

8. Discuss what the authors mean by the passage, “The bitter fact that she [Ona] was enslaved did not change the better fact that her mind was free to think as she chose. In this spirit, Ona entered Philadelphia with a locked sense of how the world was and left Philadelphia with a sense of how it could be, even for her.” What did Ona learn in Philadelphia?

9. Ona’s life in New York City further fueled her desire for freedom. Reread and discuss the meaning of the following lines: “Standing alongside white servants, Ona would see even more clearly the distinction between their lives and hers. To be a slave—even the favored slave of the wife of the president of the United States—was to be seen as inhuman. To be free was to be given your humanity back.” Discuss the inhumanity of Martha’s decision to give Ona to Eliza as a wedding present.

10. Reread chapter ten, and review the contents of the law. Why do you think members of Congress did not have to abide by this law? Discuss how slave owners like George and Martha Washington justified keeping humans in bondage, and how the Gradual Abolition Act of Pennsylvania challenged and threatened those beliefs. How did Washington’s plan to send his slaves to New Jersey days before the six-month waiting period was up contradict what you’ve been taught about the first president’s character? Why did he insist his actions remain private?

11. The authors wrote, “People like Martha Washington had a stubborn belief in the negative stereotype of black people that they were lazy, rebellious, and unreasonable.” What is a stereotype? Why can stereotyping be so problematic?

12. Review the excerpts of letters written by George Washington that appear throughout the book. Share your impressions of Washington based on his own words. If you could go back in time and speak to him, what would you say or ask? Why is it important for Americans to know this aspect of Washington’s character? Does this book change the way you view him?

13. How was the act of escaping slavery the “biggest risk” with the “highest reward”? Cite evidence from the text that proves the “overwhelming fear” that slaves contemplating escape

must have felt. What must Richard Allen have understood about the effect Ona's escape would have on the country? How was Ona's escape both a leap of faith and an act of desperation?

14. The advertisement describing Ona's escape states that the escape "happened without the least provocation." How would Ona disagree with this claim? Why does George Washington claim that he treated Ona "more like a child than a servant"? What does this statement tell you about Washington's true attitude toward his slaves? Why did the Washington family believe that they were "noble, caring, and providing for people whom they believed to be incapable of caring for themselves"? How did their perceptions deviate from reality?

15. After Ona's escape, her life changes dramatically. Describe how things changed for her as a fugitive slave. As a result of her escape, George Washington was put in a "difficult position." Reread and discuss chapter twenty, paying close attention to the following passage: "Runaways reminded Americans that slaves were people, not simply property, even if they worked for the president and were able to wear nice clothes. Ona's very escape proved that the idea of a 'benevolent slave owner' was a lie. Enslavement was never preferable over freedom, even if you got to wear pretty gowns." How did Washington's humiliation, anger, and vanity play into his decision to track her down?

16. What is a precedent? Why would Washington have set a "dangerous precedent" if he let Ona "negotiate for her own freedom"? Where do you think Ona found the courage and composure to refuse Burwell Bassett Jr.? Can you think of a time in your life when you stood up for yourself?

17. Dunbar writes, "You are about to encounter a story of bravery and heroism that will make you think differently about everything you have learned regarding American history." Now that you've finished the book, do you view American history differently? Explain your answer. What specific information has caused you to reconsider what you've been taught about George Washington and the early days of the United States?

Extension Activities

Brutal Broadside

In *Never Caught*, readers learn how Ona Judge and other slaves were subjected to endless hours of work and inhumane treatment; they were constantly fearful of being punished for the slightest mistake or perceived sign of disrespect toward their masters. Give students time to dig deeper into the history of the slave trade to understand how and where the South acquired their human property. Begin by showing students the broadside, *Description of a Slave Ship* (<https://blogs.princeton.edu/rarebooks/2008/05/219-years-ago-description-of-a/>).

Give students time to research this brutal industry, from a slave's capture in Africa to eventual purchase by a slave owner. Then have them write an essay that incorporates their reaction to this research, the most startling facts they've learned, and the messages they would have given to both the enslaved and slave owners.

A Letter to Ona

Throughout the text, the authors included excerpts of letters, many written by George Washington. After reading *Never Caught*, have students write a letter to Ona Judge. Encourage them to cite specific examples from the text to make their letters descriptive, including how they feel about her decision to escape and what they learned by reading about her life and extraordinary courage.

The O-N-A Rap

The authors referenced the hit musical *Hamilton* by saying, “Your debts are paid cause you don’t pay for labor. We plant seeds in the South. We create. Yeah, keep ranting. We know who’s really doing the planting.” Put students into pairs or small groups, and challenge them to write a rap lyric about the life of Ona Judge. Encourage students to scan the text for inspiration, factual information, vocabulary, dates, and character names. Give students an opportunity to share their finished raps with the class.

The Ona Judge Interview

Reread the transcript from the *Granite Freeman* found in the book’s reference section. Have each student write five to ten questions they would ask Ona if they had the chance to interview her for a news report. Encourage students to base their questions off the transcript text. Set up a mock TV studio and let students take turns being Ona and the reporter conducting the interview.

This guide was written by Colleen Carroll—reading teacher, literacy specialist, education consultant, and author of the twelve-volume series, How Artists See and four-volume How Artists See, Jr. (Abbeville Press). Contact Colleen at www.colleencarroll.us.

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