

# BOX

## HENRY BROWN MAILS HIMSELF TO FREEDOM

Carole Boston Weatherford  
*illustrated by Michele Wood*

### Introduction

*What have I to fear?*

*My master broke every promise to me.*

*I lost my beloved wife and our dear children.*

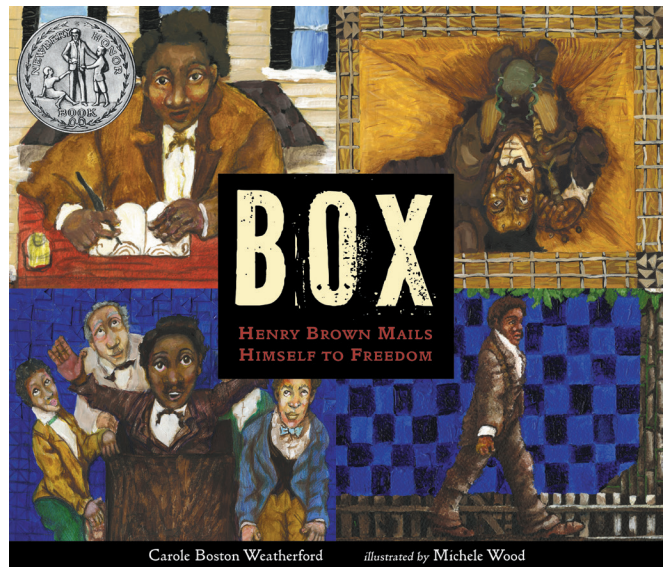
*All sold south. Neither my time nor my body is mine.*

*The breath of life is all I have to lose.*

*And bondage is suffocating me.*

Henry Brown wrote that long before he came to be known as Box, he “entered the world a slave.” He was put to work as a child and passed down from one generation to the next—as property. When he was an adult, his wife and children were sold away from him out of spite. Henry Brown watched as his family left bound in chains, headed to the deeper South. What more could be taken from him? But then hope—and help—came in the form of the Underground Railroad. Escape!

In stanzas of six lines, each line representing one side of a box, celebrated poet Carole Boston Weatherford powerfully narrates Henry Brown’s story of how he came to send himself in a box from slavery to freedom. Strikingly illustrated in rich



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hues and patterns by artist Michele Wood, *BOX* is augmented with historical records and an introductory excerpt from Henry’s own writing as well as a time line, notes from the author and illustrator, and a bibliography. *BOX: Henry Brown Mails Himself to Freedom* was a 2021 Newbery Honor Book.

Oftentimes, enslavement and the institution of slavery are children’s first introduction to African American history. Without thoughtful preparation, it is easy to focus on, and teach, incorrect understandings of enslavement and to perpetuate false narratives that do not allow students to understand African Americans as fully realized, independent people who exercised agency even during enslavement. For that reason, *BOX* should be taught through the lens of what Black history scholar Dr. LaGarrett King calls “Black historical consciousness.” Adopting this stance, which

### Common Core Connections

This guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work

this guide takes, enables educators to “teach through Black history” rather than “teach about Black history,” as it encourages readers to “recognize Black people’s full humanity.” Since *BOX: Henry Brown Mails Himself to Freedom* is a true account of his remarkable journey, readers are more able to accurately envision and understand the horrific system of enslavement and the ways that Brown worked diligently to secure his freedom. This guide is intended to help teachers be prepared to teach about Henry Box Brown’s self-liberation from enslavement while providing context about the racist institutions of slavery and the agency of African Americans.

## Pre-Teaching

Preparation for teaching this book should also include an educator’s robust understanding of enslavement. Learning for Justice’s Teaching Hard History: American Slavery has a framework that can support this preparation. Its Key Concept #5 reads: “Enslaved people resisted the efforts of their enslavers to reduce them to commodities in both revolutionary and everyday ways.” Watching the accompanying video featuring historian Tera Hunter (<https://www.learningforjustice.org/frameworks/teaching-hard-history/american-slavery/classroom-videos>) can help educators prepare to introduce this concept, explain slavery as a system, and discuss the impact of family separation on Henry’s decision to self-liberate by mailing himself to Philadelphia. However, it is imperative teachers do not consider recreating Henry Brown’s enslavement, or any type of enslavement whatsoever, as such role-playing can cause significant trauma and harm to students. Also, educators should aim to have ongoing conversations and learning opportunities throughout the year with students so they build their understanding of the many ways Black people have contributed to the country; Black history is, indeed, American history.

Finally, a note about language. At the end of the book in “A Note on Numbers and Language,” Carole Boston Weatherford explains her intentionality about the usage of historical and contemporary terms. As Dr. Gabrielle Forman explains, “Using enslaved (as an adjective) rather than “slave” (as a noun) disaggregates the condition of being enslaved with the status of “being” a slave. People weren’t slaves; they were enslaved” (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYsIX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KTN0zxRv0IQTOQs/mobilebasic>). Teachers should strive to use language that always centers the humanity of those who were enslaved as they teach this and other texts about enslavement.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why was Henry’s successful self-liberation such a powerful moment of resistance? What were some of the other ways (big and small) that people fought back against their enslavement, particularly for those who could not escape? Discuss the importance of these moments of resistance. What do they help us to understand about Black people during this time?
2. Identify the jobs throughout the book that relied on the labor of enslaved Black people. What does this range of jobs help us to understand about one of the primary purposes for slavery and the profits it generated for white people?
3. Consider the ways Black love, affection, and Henry and others’ insistence on family are represented in the book. What does this insistence help us to understand about how Black people found ways to maintain their own traditions? Then, build on that understanding to consider the impact of forced family separations, especially as a motivator for Henry to begin his process of self-liberation.
4. Upstanders are people who know something is wrong and take corrective action. Henry’s escape required the help of many upstanders along his journey. Identify those upstanders, their actions, and what they help the reader understand about the importance of action and community support.
5. Wood’s rich illustrations accentuate Weatherford’s text. Visual Thinking Strategies is a program that guides students and teachers as they engage in complex conversations about art ([www.vtshome.org](http://www.vtshome.org)). Drawing on some of the questions from

Visual Thinking Strategies, select illustrations for students and ask, “What’s going on in this picture? What do you see that makes you say that? What more can we find?”

- Once Henry escaped, he became an activist, using his performance skills to educate others about the horrors of slavery. Analyze the connection between the arts, activism, and action.

## Classroom Activities

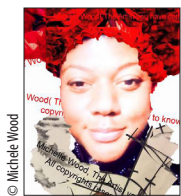
- Create a time line of resistance that includes Henry Brown, David Walker, Nat Turner, Anthony Burns, and others through the present day. Using Weatherford’s poems as a mentor text, have students write their own poems focused on one of these figures, being sure to stress characteristics that demonstrate independence, resistance, community love, and other qualities from the text.
- Beginning in Richmond, Virginia, have students trace Henry’s journey on a map and note the help from the community he received along the way. Also trace Henry’s trip to Europe and his eventual return to America. Add up the miles. As a point of comparison, ask students to add up the miles they travel to and from school. Reflect on the significance of the journeys and what they suggest about the distances Henry traveled for freedom.
- What are some of the lasting impacts of slavery? Spend some time discussing contemporary labor exploitation and the efforts of activists. Challenge students to think of their own solutions to the problem and to present a plan for action.
- What are the descendants of Henry Brown owed? What are reparations? Have students explore the efforts to pursue reparations by descendants of enslavement in the United States and present their findings. Some suggested ways include a collaborative Padlet, a slide deck, or a podcast.
- An axiom is something that is taken to be true. In the final poem, Henry says, “Freedom is fragile.” What would non-fragile freedom look like? Have students create a visual representation of their vision and include their role in making that freedom possible.

### About the Author



**Carole Boston Weatherford**, a *New York Times* best-selling author and poet, was named the 2019 *Washington Post*–Children’s Book Guild Nonfiction Award winner. Her numerous books for children include the Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book *Becoming Billie Holiday*, illustrated by Floyd Cooper; the Caldecott Honor Books *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom*, illustrated by Kadir Nelson, and *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*, illustrated by Ekua Holmes, which was also a Robert F. Sibert Honor Book; and the critically acclaimed *Schomburg: The Man Who Built a Library*, illustrated by Eric Velasquez. Carole Boston Weatherford lives in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

### About the Illustrator



**Michele Wood** is an illustrator, painter, filmmaker, and designer with a master’s in divinity from Christian Theological Seminary. She has won numerous awards for her illustration work, including a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Award, as well as a nomination for an NAACP Image Award. *BOX: Henry Brown Mails Himself to Freedom* is her first book with Candlewick Press. She lives in Indianapolis.



This guide was prepared by Dr. Kimberly N. Parker, director of the Crimson Summer Academy at Harvard and cofounder of #DisruptTexts.