

A GUIDE TO

Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad

Ann Petry

“On my Underground Railroad, I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger.”

THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

This is a biography of a heroic woman who led more than three hundred people out of slavery into freedom. The writer brings Harriet Tubman to life in a narrative that imagines conversations and thoughts but also includes facts, anecdotes, and quotations from contemporary accounts and newspaper articles. Most chapters end with an italicized summary of a historical event in the concurrent antislavery conflict.

Setting: c. 1820–1913, plantations in Maryland near the Chesapeake Bay; later, Baltimore; Wilmington, Delaware; and several cities in the North: Philadelphia; Boston; St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada; Cape May, New Jersey; and Auburn, New York.

Protagonist: Harriet Tubman, an African American woman born in slavery who escapes to freedom and becomes the legendary “Moses,” devoting her life to conducting people out of bondage to the “promised land.”

Conflicts: The focus of the book is the external conflict between the human desire for freedom, epitomized by Harriet Tubman, and those powerful forces that would enslave people for economic profit. There are also external conflicts between Harriet Tubman and those with different values—such as her husband, who threatens to betray her—and between Harriet and the frightened people who want to turn back on the perilous journey to the North. Harriet Tubman also experiences many personal conflicts—fear, doubt, a longing for love and children, and the problems posed by her severe physical disabilities.

Themes: People will face extraordinary obstacles to obtain freedom. To those who do not possess it, freedom is more than a word—it is life itself.

BACKGROUND

Slavery. People have practiced slavery—owning other human beings as property that can be bought and sold—throughout history. People were first kidnapped from Africa and sold in the so-called New World in 1619. In the early years, many of these people became indentured servants, working without wages for a stated period of time, usually seven years. But by 1660, Maryland and Virginia had made the laws applying to black slaves different from those pertaining to indentured servants who were white or American Indian. Black servants became slaves for life. If they could somehow get enough money, they could buy their own freedom, but that was nearly impossible. Slaves were treated as if they were subhuman and were forbidden to learn to read and write, a situation that helped foster racial prejudice in America. When cotton became the most important crop in the South, the power and prosperity of the Southern states depended heavily on slave labor. Most planters owned a few slaves; the wealthiest planters owned hundreds of them. By 1819, the United States was evenly balanced between eleven states that allowed slavery and eleven states that had passed legislation outlawing the practice. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 officially prohibited slavery north of Missouri’s southern border. Then, in the 1830s, the American Anti-Slavery Society was founded to work for the abolition of slavery. The issue increasingly divided the nation. With the election of Abraham Lincoln, who had come out strongly against the spread of slavery to the Western territories, the slave states seceded from the United States and formed the Confederacy. At the end of the Civil War in 1865, the states, now reunified, ratified the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, officially ending slavery throughout the United States.

The Underground Railroad. An organization that helped people escape from slavery, the Underground Railroad set up secret overland and sea routes that led to places where runaways could be free. The “stations” were houses and barns owned by people who hid the

fugitives and helped them to the next place at which they could find aid. The “conductors,” brave men and women like Harriet Tubman, guided runaways from one safe station to the next. At first, runaways were considered free when they crossed over into a free state in the North. But increasingly strict fugitive slave laws later made it illegal for anyone, even in a free state, to help runaways escape. To gain freedom, people had to cross the border into Mexico or Canada.

MAJOR PEOPLE IN THE BOOK (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Edward Brodas, the owner of the Maryland plantation where Harriet Tubman was born.

Harriet Greene, also known as **Old Rit**, mother of Harriet Tubman and ten other children. Born into slavery, Old Rit was highly valued by Brodas and worked in his house. She was a religious woman skilled in folk medicine.

Benjamin Ross, father of Harriet Tubman; a trusted worker with a reputation for honesty.

Harriet Ross Tubman, a woman of great personal courage and physical strength. After escaping from slavery, she devoted her entire life to freeing others.

Mr. and Mrs. James Cook, farmers who couldn't afford to own slaves and so hired six-year-old Harriet to work for them.

Miss Susan, a cruel, hot-tempered woman who hired seven-year-old Harriet to clean her house and take care of her baby; she beat Harriet unmercifully.

Doc Thompson, overseer who, after Edward Brodas's death, became the guardian of Brodas's young heir and manager of the Brodas plantation.

John Tubman, a free black man who married Harriet in 1844; he refused to go north with her.

William Still, a black man who worked with the Underground Railroad; served as secretary and record-keeper of the Vigilance Committee in Philadelphia.

Thomas Garrett, a Quaker who hid fugitives in Wilmington and helped transport them to the next stop on the Underground Railroad.

Nelson Davis, second husband of Harriet Tubman; because of his service in the Civil War, Tubman received a small pension after his death.

SUMMARY

Chapter 1. Tubman's story begins in 1820 on the Brodas plantation on the Tidewater, or Eastern Shore, of Maryland. Brodas's large house is contrasted with the crude, one-room, windowless cabins in the plantation's slave quarter. The term *manumission* is introduced: Many people held in slavery pinned their hopes on the promise that if they were faithful and hardworking, the master would manumit (free) them when he died. *The historical note at the chapter's end mentions Thomas and Sarah Garrett and John Brown.*

Chapter 2. Harriet's early years are described as typical of the way children held in slavery were raised. When she was two years old, the adults began whispering about new laws that further restricted their freedom of movement. Denmark Vesey, a free African American who planned a rebellion to free the slaves, had been hanged. We learn that Brodas had promised to free Old Rit and her children when he died, but Old Rit, like all enslaved mothers, worried that her children would be sold. *The historical note is on Theodore Parker.*

Chapter 3. Using historical details, the writer puts us inside the mind of the six-year-old Harriet and helps us understand, at least in a limited way, what slave life was like on the Brodas plantation. Petry also begins to reveal Harriet's **character traits**, describing her as “slow of speech, but quick to laugh.” The chapter ends on an ominous note: The old woman who cares for the children in the Quarter warns little Harriet that soon the overseer will “be settin' you a task.” *The historical note points out that 1826 is the year Thomas Jefferson died.*

Chapter 4. When she was only six years old, Harriet was hired out to Mrs. Cook, a weaver married to a poor trapper. Harriet inspected trap lines, a job that, in **metaphor, foreshadowed** her adult mission: She hated to see the muskrats caught in traps. However, the little girl became very ill with measles and bronchitis and was sent back to her mother. The bronchitis caused her voice to be husky for the rest of her life. When she was returned to the Cooks, the child, who loved the outdoors, had to stay indoors and weave. Mrs. Cook finally sent her home, saying she was unteachable. *The historical note focuses on the ambiguous situation of runaway slaves who had fled to Canada.*

Chapter 5. At the age of seven, Harriet was hired out as a child's nurse by Miss Susan, the child's mother. An abusive and ill-tempered woman, she whipped Harriet. But Harriet learned a skill that later served her well: to sleep while still being able to hear sounds. Whipped so often that she carried horrible scars on her back all her life, the seven-year-old finally ran away and hid in a pigpen until she was so starved she returned to her mistress. *Historical note: Henry Clay is told by the Canadian government that it cannot agree to surrender fugitive slaves.*

Chapter 6. Returned again to the Brodas plantation like an unsatisfactory purchase, Harriet was next hired out to someone who had her do fieldwork, like a man. Although a backbreaking job, it proved more to Harriet's liking than housework. During this time, Harriet heard her first story of a slave who escaped “on an underground road.” She also heard about Nat Turner, a slave executed for leading a bloody rebellion in Virginia. Fearful of insurrections, the owners made conditions more difficult for the slaves; blacks were now forbidden to learn to read and write, or even to congregate in church services. *Historical note: In 1831, the Virginia Assembly, alarmed at Turner's rebellion, petitioned for emancipation.*

Chapter 7. As Harriet was helping a slave escape, the overseer threw a weight at the fleeing man, which hit Harriet on the head. Old Rit, who had already lost two of her girls, sold South as part of the chain gangs, nursed her daughter back to health. Although Harriet recovered, the blow left her subject to violent headaches and profound sleeping seizures. Brodas tried to sell Harriet, but no one would buy a woman who was so “damaged.” Then suddenly the old master died. *The historical note is on William Lloyd Garrison, the famous abolitionist.*

Chapter 8. Because Brodas’s heir was too young, Doc Thompson managed the plantation for him. Harriet was hired out to work for John Stewart, who enjoyed exhibiting Harriet’s strength to his guests, a cruelty that made the young woman feel like an animal trained for spectators’ amusement. Harriet’s father now taught her how to find her way through the woods without making a sound—as if to prepare his daughter for the day she would have to escape. *Historical note: A mob tries to lynch Garrison in Boston.*

Chapter 9. Harriet painstakingly made a patchwork quilt for her wedding to John Tubman, a man who had always been free. She found out that, according to the will of her former mistress, Old Rit should have been set free long before Harriet’s birth. Realizing that she herself would have been born free if her mother had not been tricked, Harriet dreamed of running away. However, her husband told her he would betray her to the master if she tried to escape. *The historical note is on Thomas Garrett, who was found guilty of sheltering runaway slaves and was financially ruined by punitive fines. Garrett, however, refused to give up his work on the Underground Railroad.*

Chapter 10. When Brodas’s heir died, his slaves began to be sold off. Desperate for freedom but knowing that she might suddenly fall victim to a sleep seizure on the road, Harriet was afraid to escape alone. So she persuaded three of her brothers to accompany her; but her brothers changed their minds and forced her to return with them. Discovering then that *she* had been sold, Harriet knew that she must go north alone. Taking her quilt, the **symbol** of her hopes for marriage and love, she visited a white woman who had once offered her help. From this woman, Tubman learned about the Underground Railroad. She gave her cherished quilt to the woman and traveled ninety miles into the free state of Pennsylvania. There she felt she had landed in heaven. *Historical note: The argument about fugitive slaves escalates in Congress.*

Chapter 11. In Pennsylvania Harriet did housework to earn money. She met William Still, a black officer of a group that helped slaves escape. When she heard that her sister Mary was about to be sold, she went to Baltimore. After helping Mary and her children escape, she guided them to freedom on the Underground Railroad. Back in Philadelphia, Harriet heard of a new Fugitive Slave Law, which severely punished both

runaway slaves and the people who helped them. *Historical note: The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law widens the gap between North and South. Northerners claim that the law obliges them to become slave catchers.*

Chapter 12. Disguised as a man, Harriet Tubman returned to Maryland to try to persuade her husband to go north with her. Sadly, she found he had remarried. *Historical note: Theodore Parker writes a letter to the president, saying he will defy the Fugitive Slave Law.*

Chapter 13. Because of the Fugitive Slave Law, Tubman had to take her bands of fugitives all the way to Canada. Soon she became a legend to the people held in slavery, and they began to call her Moses. *Historical note: A group of abolitionists rescue a fugitive slave named Jerry and are charged with treason.*

Chapters 14 and 15. The plantation owners believed that Moses was a man and offered rewards for his capture. Moses would announce her secret arrival in a slave quarter by singing the forbidden spiritual “Go Down, Moses.” On her first trip to Canada in December 1851, Tubman led eleven people out of slavery. When she and her party passed through Philadelphia, William Still wrote down their names and the conditions of their slavery, a record that he later included in a book. Tubman’s group also stayed in Rochester, New York, with Frederick Douglass, who described such a visit in his autobiography. After a month’s journey, the group crossed the border into Canada. Now Tubman’s life took on a pattern: She spent the winter in St. Catharines in Canada, and spring and summer in Cape May, New Jersey, or Philadelphia, making two trips a year into slave territory. *Historical note: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s powerful antislavery novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin causes a sensation.*

Chapter 16. In 1854, Harriet returned to Maryland to rescue three of her brothers. *Historical note: The forcible return of fugitive slave Anthony Burns causes a furor in Boston. The South now holds three million people in slavery. Their estimated market value is one billion dollars.*

Chapter 17. Around Christmas, Harriet, her three brothers, and three other slaves hid near the cabin where Ben and Old Rit lived. Harriet sent two of the fugitives to the cabin to tell Ben they were nearby and needed food. Without looking at his children, so he could truthfully say he had not seen them, Ben brought them a Christmas dinner. Harriet promised Ben that she would return to get him and her mother. She conducted the six runaways to Canada. *Historical note: John Brown arrives in Kansas, 1855.*

Chapter 18. Harriet continued to bring slaves out from Maryland. From 1851 to 1857, eleven trips are noted in letters and record books. This chapter describes one particularly dangerous escape in which Tubman led her group across an icy river and hid them in a wagon under a load of bricks. *Historical note: John Brown murders five proslavery settlers in Kansas.*

Chapter 19. When she returned to Maryland to bring out her elderly parents, Harriet disguised herself so well that Doc Thompson failed to recognize her. She took her parents in a wagon to Wilmington, Delaware, and later they finally entered Canada. When she realized that the cold weather was too hard on them, Harriet bought a house for them in New York. In 1858, she met the fiery abolitionist John Brown, who said he was about to free the slaves and needed her help to lead the fugitives to Canada. *Historical note: Dred Scott, a fugitive slave, is returned forcibly to his “owner.”*

Chapter 20. By this time, 1859, Tubman was renowned as a public speaker. John Brown’s aborted seizure of the arsenal at Harpers Ferry resulted in his execution. *Historical note: John Brown is hanged on December 2, 1859.*

Chapter 21. During the Civil War Tubman served, without pay, as a scout, spy, and nurse. In 1863, she guided Colonel James Montgomery and his detachment of ex-slaves in a daring raid that rescued eight hundred people from slavery. *Historical note: Lincoln says in a speech that the cash value of slaves would affect the North just as it would the South.*

Chapter 22. Tubman spoke in the cause of women’s suffrage and raised money for schools for former slaves, even though she had barely enough money to support herself. After marrying a Civil War veteran who was already ill with tuberculosis, she founded a home in Auburn, New York, to care for him and for others in need. Still destitute as an old woman, the great deliverer of her people was peddling vegetables in Auburn.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Petry’s biography would serve as an excellent adjunct to American history classes focusing on the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly on the practice of slavery and the divisions caused by that issue in the United States. The natural follow-up to the biography is a research assignment, done either individually or in groups. Research could culminate in one of the following assignments: a written paper; an oral presentation with visuals, including a map of the Underground Railroad; a debate on issues raised in the book; or a bibliography of other materials (texts and art) dealing with issues raised in the book. The topics listed below are mostly taken from the brief historical notes that Petry uses to conclude most chapters.

- John Brown and the raid on Harpers Ferry
- The role taken by the Quakers in the abolitionist movement
- The Fugitive Slave Law
- Nat Turner’s insurrection
- William Lloyd Garrison
- Thomas Garrett’s Underground Railroad Station in Wilmington, Delaware
- Harriet Beecher Stowe and her novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*
- The case of Anthony Burns and the Fugitive Slave Law
- Abraham Lincoln on slavery
- The use of spirituals as code songs
- The Dred Scott case
- Slave narratives
- Frederick Douglass

MEET THE WRITER

Ann Petry (1911–1997) was born in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, and has lived there for most of her life. She graduated from the College of Pharmacy at the University of Connecticut and was a pharmacist, as her father had been before her, for several years. After she married, she moved to New York City and wrote for newspapers and advertising agencies before she began writing short stories and novels. Her best-known works for young people are *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* and *Tituba of Salem Village*.

READ ON

Virginia Hamilton, *Many Thousand Gone*. Stories of enslaved Africans who journeyed to freedom; based on historical documents and true accounts.

Jacob Lawrence, *Harriet and the Promised Land*. A picture book featuring paintings by the great African American artist; created as a tribute to Harriet Tubman and her work.

Abraham Lincoln, “The Gettysburg Address.” The speech delivered on November 19, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War.

Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream.” The momentous speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963.

John Lewis, *From Camelot to Kent State: The Sixties Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It*. An oral history of the civil rights movement.

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