

Martha
AND
THE Slave
Catchers

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ILLUSTRATED BY
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A STUDY GUIDE

7
SEVEN STORIES



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PART ONE: SUMMARY

Framed with rich historical detail and context, *Martha and the Slave Catchers* is a riveting tale about a young girl's experience growing up in an abolitionist community in rural Connecticut. As a young child, Martha Bartlett witnesses her parents helping fugitive slaves escape to freedom. Martha's life changes dramatically when a pregnant fugitive slave arrives, gives birth to a baby boy, and then tragically dies. The Bartletts decide to raise this infant as their own. They name him Jake. He does not speak or behave like other children his age. Today he likely would be considered to be on the autism spectrum. When the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 is enacted, slave ads soon appear in the community. Slave catchers arrive, kidnap young Jake, and flee south to Maryland. Determined to rescue her brother, thirteen-year-old Martha promises her parents that she will go along with Harriet Tubman's plan to bring Jake back to freedom. On her trip south to meet Tubman, Martha is challenged and confused by the adults around her. Upon her arrival in Maryland, Martha is impatient to rescue Jake. Rather than waiting for Tubman, Martha ventures out on her own to disastrous effect. Martha is soon imprisoned on the same plantation where Jake is being held! Can they use the Underground Railroad to escape? Can they outwit the slave catchers who are in hot pursuit? Along the way, Martha develops a deeper understanding about her own identity and the power of love.

Purpose: This curriculum guide provides a variety of progressive classroom approaches (reading strategies, discussion questions, explorations, projects, and extensions) to further develop the reader's understanding of historical, social, and literary themes within *Martha and the Slave Catchers*.

PART TWO: PRIMING THE PUMP

1. PREPARING THE CLASSROOM

Create space on classroom walls (or a nearby hallway) for relevant material that relates to this novel. For example, consider posting:

- everyday images from nineteenth-century life (modes of transportation, everyday household objects, New England farm life, school house, churches).
- a large political map of the U.S. in 1850
- physical map showing eastern seaboard (e.g., Maryland to Canada)

2. UNDERSTANDING STUDENT BACKGROUND

Historical Content: Before beginning *Martha and the Slave Catchers*, explore your students' prior understanding about our nation's history with such terms as: "slavery," "1800s," "Underground Railroad." This could be approached as a team brainstorming activity or as individual journal entries. Students could then update these preliminary responses midway through the novel, and then after finishing the text. This could serve as an informal assessment strategy—what did they think they know and what have they now learned?

Genre Familiarity: What is historical fiction? What time periods and/or historical figures have students previously encountered by reading historical fiction? Generate from the class a list of "Tips When Reading Historical Fiction."

3. PRE-READING STRATEGIES

Explore the book's cover, illustrations, and maps within the text. Have the class generate a list of details they notice and questions that emerge from examining these images (e.g., setting, characters, plot).

PART THREE: HELPFUL READING STRATEGIES

1. DESIGN TIME LINES

With the exception of the first chapter, the story of *Martha and the Slave Catchers* proceeds in chronological order. Have students create a timeline of key events as they read this story. Timelines can be written and/or drawn. After they finish the final chapter, remind them to re-read chapter one.

2. CREATE CHARACTER LISTS

Every time students encounter a new character have them take note of: physical features, personality traits, and their relationship to Martha and her family. Add to a character's list when any new detail is provided in subsequent chapters.

3. DISPLAY NOTABLE QUOTES

When a character says something intriguing, poetic, or thought provoking, invite a student to write it down for public display on the classroom wall. What makes for a memorable quote?

4. ENACT DIALOGUE

Working in teams, have students identify pivotal conversations in the story. Have teams of students develop a way to present this dialogue to the class (e.g., live, recorded). As an alternative, students could pose in tableau form (or a series of tableaux) to silently depict a memorable scene.

PART FOUR: END-OF-BOOK DISCUSSIONS

- Depending upon your time and structure, these questions can be explored in various settings (full class, small group, triad). You may also assign individuals different roles in these discussions such as: moderator, note-taker, time-keeper, presenter.
- While *Martha and the Slave Catchers* is a fictional tale, the author artfully integrates nineteenth-century history, culture, and geography within this story. How does this help the reader to better understand Martha and her life experiences? How does the nineteenth-century compare to the twenty-first century?
- Throughout her life, Martha struggles with her relationship to her brother, Jake. Why? How does Miss Lucy provide her with important insights about her brother? How does Martha and Jake's relationship shift on their journey to freedom?
- Martha has various reasons for wanting to leave home. Consider such issues as: her sense of guilt, her need to rescue Jake, her desire for adventure, her resentment toward her parents, her issues with Caleb. Discuss which factor is the most important reason for why she needs to leave home.
- Martha's journey on the Underground Railroad is as much a rescue tale as it is a story of her own personal voyage in understanding herself, her place in the world, and the importance of truth. What do her experiences teach her (about Jake, her identity, her family)? How has this journey changed her?
- Although Miss Lucy is enslaved and never attended school, she appears to have deeper insight into Jake's capacities than Martha. Why? How do Miss Lucy's teachings help Jake and Martha in their escape on the Underground Railroad? How does Miss Lucy help Martha develop a deeper understanding of and respect for Jake?
- Why is Jake, with his special learning needs, able to learn key lessons from Miss Lucy about the woods (e.g., moss on trees, finding food, listening for the river), while quick-witted Martha has difficulty understanding key lessons about safety on the Underground Railroad? How do aspects of Martha's personality become an obstacle for her?

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- When Jake is kidnapped, Martha collapses both physically and emotionally. How do her family and friends help her get through this crisis? Have you experienced a traumatic emotional upset or know people who suffer from depression? What strategies do you use to get through tough times? What strategies do you use to comfort others going through difficult situations?



PART FIVE: EXPLORATIONS

- **Fact or Fiction?** Which parts of this story seem based on facts and which parts seem based on imagination? How can you tell? Go to the author’s website <http://harrietalonso.com> to read “What are the facts behind *Martha and the Slave Catchers*?”
- **Spirituals:** First read and then discuss the lyrics to the song “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” How do you think the words provided comfort to those who were enslaved? Next have the students listen to the song and follow along with the lyrics, and even sing along to the music. Explore other spirituals from this period.
- **Understanding Jake:** Throughout this story, Jake is described in a variety of ways. Some of the descriptions follow a pattern for those identified as on the autism spectrum. To find out more about this condition, explore “Autism Speaks” (www.autismspeaks.org). Service dogs can be trained to work with those with disabilities. Explore the videos at “Educated Canines Assisting with Disabilities” (www.ecadi.org) showing the ways that dogs are helping people with special needs.
- **Freedom Seekers:** While an overwhelming number of the enslaved died in slavery, some managed to escape. In light of the perils they faced, all of these escapes were remarkable. Students may be interested in learning more about this. For instance students might want to investigate: Ellen and William Kraft (Ellen impersonated a wealthy sick white male attended by William, who pretended to be the manservant), Henry “Box” Brown (who shipped himself to freedom in a box), Frederick Douglass (who disguised himself as a sailor), and Harriet Jacobs (who hid in an attic for seven years before escaping).
- **Conductors:** These individuals worked on different Underground Railroad systems. They helped to guide people to freedom. Invite students to research their life stories and to learn about their courage in the midst of danger. Some well-known conductors include William Still, Harriet Tubman, Levi and Catherine Coffin, among others. There are plenty of online resources including the Harriet Tubman Underground Railroad website at www.nps.gov/hatu.
- **Place Names on the Southbound Route:** On her way south, Martha travels to various places in Connecticut: Brooklyn, Norwich, and New London. Go to the Connecticut Freedom Trail website (www.ctfreedomtrail.org) and explore these

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three sites on their two maps—the Freedom Trail and the Underground Railroad. To read more go to www.connecticuthistory.org and click on “Towns.”

- **Place Names on the Northbound Route:** On her way to Canada, Martha travels through upstate New York. Learn more about Albany, Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo on the NY State Underground Railroad Heritage Trail at <https://parks.ny.gov>. Click on “Discover History” then “Heritage Trails” and finally “Underground Railroad.” The Erie Canal and the Underground Railroad at <http://eriecanalway.org> provides an interactive map showing historic sites, cemeteries, and monuments. Click on “Learn” then go to “History and Culture,” followed by “Social Reform and Innovation” and then finally “Underground Railroad.”
- **Place Name—LaGrange Plantation:** While the author created this place from her imagination, she subsequently found out that there was a plantation with that exact name in Maryland. It is also known as the Meredith House. Go to www.dorchesterhistory.com to find out more. Harriet Tubman was from this area (as was Frederick Douglass). There is a National Historical Park devoted to Harriet Tubman’s life.
- **Geography:** Closely examine the maps that chart Martha’s southbound and northbound routes. Where was the line between free and enslaved territory in 1850? Approximate the miles she had travelled south from Liberty Falls, Connecticut, to Dawes Plantation in Cambridge, Maryland, and then north to Aramintaville, Canada—by foot, on land, on water.
- **Primary Sources:** Both the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov) and the National Archives (www.archives.gov) contain primary source material on this time period, including: slave narratives, ads for runaway slaves, and photographs. In addition there are teacher and student resources for using these primary sources in the classroom.
- **Abolitionist Newspapers:** Martha first learned about the Fugitive Slave Law by reading the headlines from an article in *The Liberator*, a real anti-slavery newspaper from the mid-nineteenth century. Explore an article from William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator* (<http://fair-use.org/the-liberator>) or locate the actual article (September 27, 1850, p. 2). Another abolitionist newspaper to explore is Frederick Douglass’s *The North Star*. Search for it on the Library of Congress’s website (www.loc.gov). Can you locate publications today that argue for progressive social change (e.g., *Mother Jones*)?

- **Language:** Explore the language used in *Martha and the Slave Catchers*. Certain words (e.g. “vexed”) and expressions (e.g. “knee high to a bumble bee”) were unique to the nineteenth century. Some characters (e.g. Martha’s mother) used Quaker Plain Speech and such terms as “thee” and “thou.” Other characters spoke in a way that indicated their connection to a geographical region (e.g. Mr. Bartlett calling his daughter “Mahthah” indicating his New England roots, Lucy calling her grandson “chile” indicating her Southern roots). In her Letter to the Reader, author Harriet Alonso provides additional background about nineteenth-century language.

PART SIX: PROJECT-BASED WORK

- **Material Culture:** *Martha and the Slave Catchers* provides a rich context for nineteenth-century life in rural Connecticut. Create a center that explores everyday objects from this time period. Chapter one will help students to get started. Some of the objects mentioned include: rocking chair, quilt, fireplace, wax seal, ragdoll. Students could create models of these objects and conduct research on them. Time frame: on-going.
- **Lessons Learned on the Underground Railroad:** The Underground Railroad consisted of locations (often homes, barns, etc.) that sheltered fugitives on their journey to freedom. It was called “underground” because it was secret, not because it was subterranean. Those who worked on it were VERY careful and able to improvise on a moment’s notice. People’s lives depended upon these skilled conductors and their knowledge of local hiding places. Suppose that while in Canada, waiting to return home to Connecticut, Martha and Jake decide to write a secret guide for the Underground Railroad. This book would help conductors in their work with guiding fugitive slaves north to freedom. The adults are completely opposed to this project. In fact, they have absolutely forbidden Martha and Jake to work on it. But as you well know, nothing stops Martha. Help them write this book—chapter headings include: “Underground Etiquette: Dos and Don’ts,” “Reading the Stars and the Trees,” “Eating/Drinking on the Run,” “Night Travel,” “Hiding Places,” “Communicating in Code,” “Avoiding Risks and Dangers,” and “Creating Disguises.” Reread chapters nine through thirteen for ideas. Time frame: one week
- **Anti-Slavery Fair:** These were fund-raising events to help promote the abolitionist cause and to finance rescue and resettlement efforts for those escaping slavery. Transform the classroom to a fair where students can create items for “sale” at this event, including nineteenth-century games (www.ushist.com/19th-century-toys-and-games.shtml), household objects, and sugar-free snacks (or molasses candy). Students might also be interested in “buying” such publications as the children’s magazine *The Slave’s Friend* (www.merrycoz.org), the *Anti-Slavery Alphabet* (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16081/16081-h/16081-h.htm>), and articles from *The Liberator* (www.fair-use.org/the-liberator). After socializing and buying things, students could then take their seats to hear the stories of invited abolitionists, conductors, and freed slaves. Have students research and then read the words of such individuals as: Angelina Grimké, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Harriet Tubman. Consider ending

the fair with the spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Time frame: two weeks

- **Memorials:** Did you know that the Statue of Liberty was designed to honor the abolition of slavery in the U.S.? It was first proposed by Édouard René de Laboulaye, the president of the French Anti-Slavery Society. The National Park Service has more information on the creation and design of this national monument. Go to www.nps.gov/stli and click on “Learn how Meanings Change over Time.” Have teams of students design memorials to honor the Underground Railroad. To trigger ideas, have students google “Monuments Commemorating the Underground Railroad” to examine the various designs that have been created. Once the teams have decided on their original design, have them create three-dimensional models of their memorial. They could also write a statement explaining the concept behind their creation. When ready, hold a “press conference” where each team presents their design and answers questions from the press. Time frame: two to three weeks

PART SEVEN: EXTENSIONS

- **Modern Abolitionists:** Slavery still exists today. How can we become informed on this issue and what is being done to abolish it? Go to www.freedomcenter.org to read about modern day abolitionists. This site has a free film, *Journey to Freedom*, linking historic slavery to human trafficking of today.
- **Writing a Missing Chapter:** Have students create a missing chapter from *Martha and the Slave Catchers*. Perhaps they want to envision what happened to Martha and Jake when they became adults or perhaps they want to extend the narrative on Miss Lucy, Robert Dawes, or others. Encourage students to use relevant primary source material from the Library of Congress (www.loc.gov) and/or the National Archives (www.archives.gov) within their chapter.
- **Current Events:** Passed in 1850, the Fugitive Slave Law gave citizens authority to turn in any individuals suspected of being a fugitive slave. Does this episode in Martha's life remind you of any similar situations of today? What would you do if an authority figure knocked on your front door demanding to search your home? What amendment in the Constitution provides citizens protection from unauthorized searches? Does the Constitution protect the undocumented?
- **Resistance:** Just as abolitionists took action against the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, our nation's people continue the democratic tradition of speaking out against controversial issues and policy. What are the controversies of today? What are the various ways that individuals and groups engage in civil disobedience? How does the First Amendment protect citizens' right to protest?
- **Living History:** Just as Martha's life intersected with the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, our own lives are also part of history. Discuss the intersection of recent historical events in the lives of your students. How is history all around us?
- **Making Change:** How did individuals on the Underground Railroad help to change history? In recent history, what individuals (and/or institutions) have shaped the course of human events for the better?
- **The Declaration of Independence:** One of this country's founding documents is the Declaration of Independence (1776). It states that "all men are created equal." How could a nation founded on this important principle legitimize the practice and profit of slavery? How is today's society still grappling with this history?

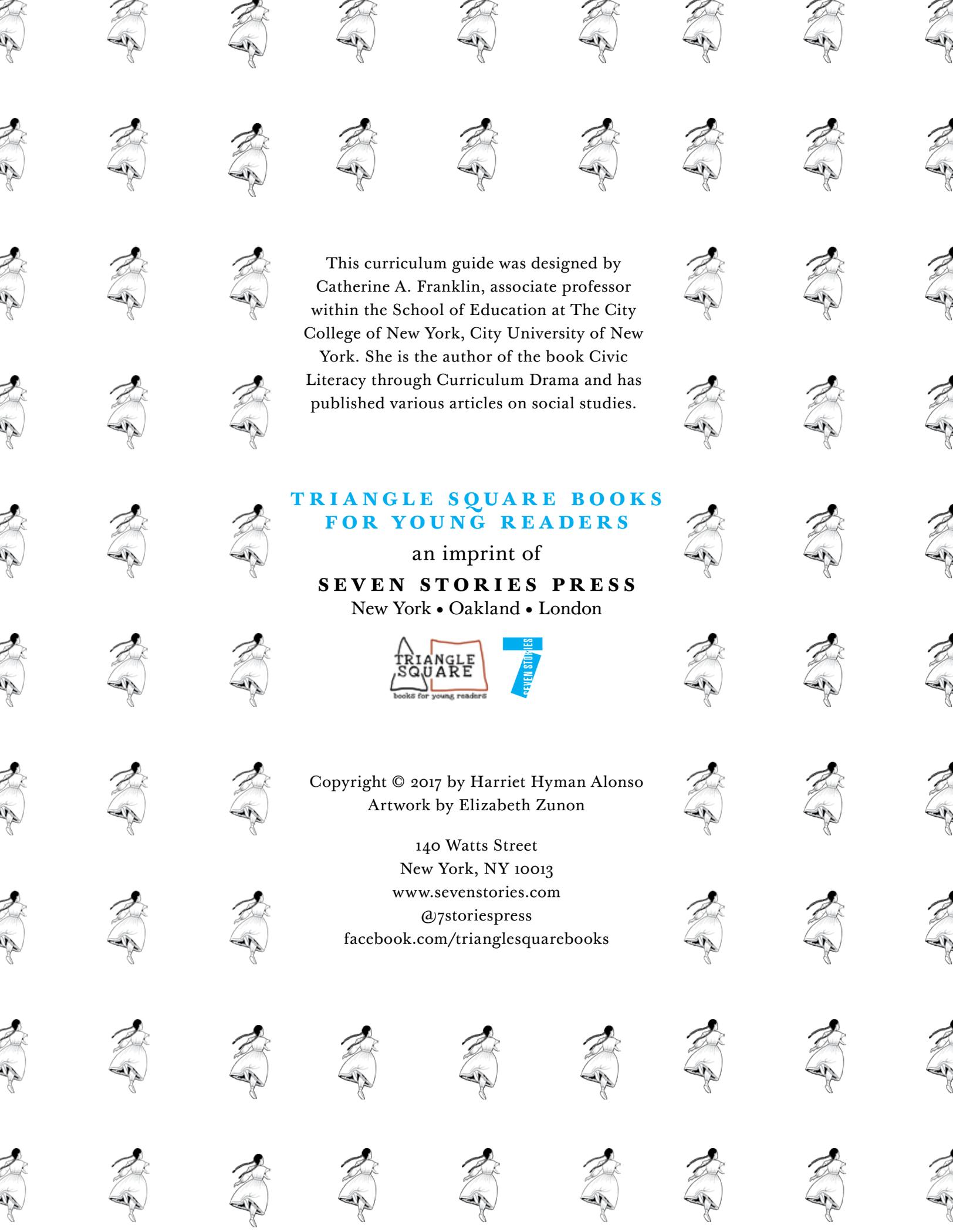
- **The U.S. Constitution:** The renowned abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, viewed the U.S. Constitution (1789) as a slave document. Explore Article 1, Section 2. How was the Constitution amended to change this practice? Explore the Thirteenth Amendment (1865), the Fourteenth Amendment (1868), and the Fifteenth Amendment (1870). To what extent does our current society provide equality and justice for all?



HARRIET HYMAN ALONSO is the author of five books, including the prize-winning biography, *Growing Up Abolitionist: The Story of the Garrison Children*, and a recipient of the National Endowment for the Humanities Research Fellowship. In 2017, the Peace History Society, an affiliate of the American Historical Association, awarded her with its Lifetime Achievement Award. A retired professor of History, she lives in Brooklyn, New York. *Martha and the Slave Catchers* is her first novel for younger readers.

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Remember to go to Harriet Alonso's website <http://harrietalonso.com> to read "what are the facts behind *Martha and the Slave Catchers*?"



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