

Literature Circle Guide to *Elijah of Buxton* by Christopher Paul Curtis

Book Summary

Eleven-year-old Elijah and his parents live in Buxton, a settlement of runaway slaves in Canada. When a Buxton resident is swindled out of the money he hoped to use to buy his family out of slavery, Elijah must travel to America in a risky attempt to set things right. Outside the safety of Buxton, he encounters the terrifying reality of slavery. When he returns to the settlement, Elijah is no longer the timid little boy he once was.

Author Information

Before he became an award-winning author, Christopher Paul Curtis worked for thirteen years hanging car doors on an assembly line in Flint, Michigan. He is the author of six books for children, including *Bud, Not Buddy*, which won the Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Award in 2000. Curtis lives in Windsor, Ontario, with his wife and two children. He enjoys playing basketball and collecting old record albums.

Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions

1. What trick do Elijah and Cooter play on Ma? How does Ma teach Elijah a lesson?
Elijah and Cooter put a toady-frog in Ma's sewing basket. To teach Elijah a lesson, Ma puts a snake in the cookie jar.
2. What is Elijah's "gift from the Lord"? How does the Preacher want him to use it to "help the Settlement" and why doesn't the idea work?
Elijah's "gift from the Lord" is his ability to throw rocks. The Preacher wants him to "help the Settlement" by performing a rock-throwing act in the carnival. The Preacher's idea doesn't work because Sir Charles, the owner of the carnival, wants to buy Elijah, but he does not want to pay him for performing for a short period of time.
3. How does Mr. Leroy get the money to buy his family's freedom from slavery?
Mrs. Holton gives Mr. Leroy the money to buy his family's freedom from slavery because she no longer needs the money she had been saving to buy her husband's freedom.
4. Buxton is an unusual place with very special customs. In your own words, describe some of the rules and rituals that come with living there.
When former slaves first reach Buxton, they are greeted by a resident who tells them that they chose the most beautiful, perfect day to set themselves free. Then the residents of Buxton ring the Liberty Bell twenty times for each newly freed man, woman, or child. The new arrivals then climb the church steeple and rub the bell with their left hand.
In Buxton, all of the houses look similar on the outside, with a stoop, a picket fence, and a flower garden. Houses must be ten paces from the road. Residents must clear their own land and dig drainage ditches along their

properties. Adults who can't read or write must take night classes at the schoolhouse.

5. MaWee comes to Buxton under unusual circumstances. Compare his first impressions of the Settlement with the Taylor family's experience upon arrival. How and why are their perceptions so different? **MaWee is angry about being in Buxton and pouts on his first day there. He doesn't feel free because he now has to go to school and has a family watching over him. In contrast, the Taylor family yells and cries with joy when they arrive. Their perceptions are different because the Taylor family risked their lives for their freedom, while MaWee was brought to Buxton against his will and did not understand that he had been a slave in the carnival.**

6. Throughout the book, Elijah worries about being "fra-gile." What does "fra-gile" mean to him? Describe some of the situations in which Elijah is "fra-gile." **"Fra-gile" means easily upset, frightened, or worried. When he was younger, Elijah ran off screaming when Ma picked up a snake, and was afraid to go into the woods behind his house to pick blueberries alone because he was worried about bears and wolves. At the beginning of the book, he is "fra-gile" when he believes the Preacher's story about hoop snakes and when he screams and runs after finding the snake in the cookie jar. Elijah cries when the Taylor family arrives in Buxton, but he shows signs of changing when he reads the letter to Mrs. Holton without getting shaky or sniffing.**

7. Mr. Leroy says that eating fish is "like anything else in life. . . . If you go at it 'specting something bad to happen, all you gunn do is draw that bad thing to you. You caint be timid 'bout nothing you do, you got to go at it like you 'specting good things to come out of it" (p. 77). Using details from the book, show how Mr. Leroy truly lives by this philosophy. **Once Mr. Leroy has the money to buy his family's freedom, he isn't timid in how he goes about trying to do it. He trusts the Preacher to help him, even though Elijah's father tells him to be cautious. He's confident that good things will come of it, saying, "Sometimes you got to believe" (p. 231). When he realizes that the Preacher isn't coming back, Mr. Leroy leaps into action without planning ahead. Elijah worries that they won't be able to find the Preacher, but Mr. Leroy remains optimistic. As they start out on their journey, Mr. Leroy says, "Lijah, this here's gunn turn out all right. I feel it in my heart" (p. 274).**

8. When Mr. Leroy asks Elijah whether he thinks the Preacher can be trusted, Elijah says yes—and regrets it. List the Preacher's actions in the first half of the novel and classify each as trustworthy or untrustworthy. How are your conclusions different from those Elijah reaches on p. 234? **Students may list a variety of actions, most of which they will likely classify as untrustworthy. For example, the Preacher tells Elijah and Cooter a story about hoop snakes to scare them; the Preacher promises he will let Elijah shoot his mystery pistol but never allows him to; the Preacher takes four of Elijah's ten fish, claiming he has**

taken a tenth of them, all of which is untrustworthy. Also, he takes Elijah to the carnival, which is questionable. Students may also discuss the rumors about how the Preacher got his pistol and the kidnapping of MaWee.

9. At the beginning of the novel, Elijah has a hard time understanding the language of “growned folks.” He can’t tell when they are teasing or exaggerating and doesn’t always see why they act the way they do. Compare Elijah’s reasoning then with his understanding at the end of the book. Explain how he changes. **At the beginning of the book, Elijah doesn’t understand how his mother tells him to respect adults but not to believe everything they tell him. He isn’t able to see that the Preacher is a scoundrel because he takes the things people tell him at face value. Elijah begins to change when he understands why Mr. Taylor and the Duncan sisters decide to wait to tell Mr. Taylor’s wife that she might be related to the Duncans. At the end of the book, he sees the deeper meaning in Mrs. Chloe’s words when he recognizes that she’s telling him to take her baby with him. He has learned to see beyond the literal meaning of what he is told.**

10. Many of the people in *Elijah of Buxton* have physical and emotional scars from their days in slavery. Identify some of the ways slavery has left its mark on characters in the book. What do Elijah’s parents explain to him about former slaves? What does he learn about slavery on his own? **Mr. Leroy bears the physical scars of slavery: a brand of the letter *T* and the nub of a finger cut off by another slave. Pa tells Elijah that “it seems don’t no one get out of America without paying some terrible cost, without having something bad done permanent to them, without having something cut off of ’em or burnt into ’em or et up inside of ’em” (p. 179). Pa also tells Elijah about some of the emotional effects of slavery, saying that “once someone was a slave there’s always gonna be a something in ’em that knows parts ’bout life that freeborn folks caint never know, mostly horrific parts” (p. 101). Elijah also sees his mother’s emotional scars when she rubs her cheek as she tells the story about how her mother slapped her when she didn’t escape to Canada as a little girl.**
Elijah encounters the horrors of slavery firsthand in the barn in Michigan. When he sees the runaway slaves in chains, he says that some people in Buxton have thick scars on their ankles and wrists from wearing them, “but seeing the chains real warden’t the kind of thing you could imagine” (p. 300). During his encounter with the slaves, he realizes that slavery is nothing like playing “abolitionists and slavers.”

11. Doomed to slavery, Mrs. Chloe gives her daughter to Elijah in hopes that the baby will grow up safe and free. Imagine that Mrs. Chloe could have written Hope Too-mah-ee-nee a message to read when she grows up. What would she have said? Write a letter to Hope that explains the heartbreaking decision her mother faced. **Answers will vary, but students’ letters should explain that Mrs. Chloe was so desperate that she would have killed herself and her baby rather than return with the child to slavery. They may explain that Mrs. Chloe loved her**

baby dearly, promised her that she would never go back to Kentucky, and refused to break that promise—even if it meant giving the baby to a stranger.

12. Elijah works hard to help Mrs. Holton write a fitting tribute to her husband to be carved above the door of her home. If you were Elijah, what would you write to honor Mr. Leroy? Compose a few sentences to memorialize him. **Answers will vary, but students might mention his love for his family, his optimism, his bravery, and how hard he worked to earn money for his family’s freedom.**
13. The Preacher is known for his sweet talk and nonsense tales. If he were alive to defend himself at the end of the book, how do you think he would justify his actions? Write an argument he might use to convince the community that he did the right thing. **Answers will vary. One possible defense might be that the Preacher gambled intending to win money to support the Settlement in some way or to buy additional slaves their freedom.**
14. Elijah does not think you can learn a lesson by “talking the subject near to death” (p. 11). Discuss what makes a lesson “stick” for Elijah. What makes a lesson stick for you? **Elijah says a lesson “sticks” if “something happens to you personal” (p. 92). For example, the lesson “familiarity breeds contempt” “sticks” for Elijah when he uses a racial epithet in front of Mr. Leroy, who explains that he lost a finger to a fellow slave who ((Should this be “when he used”?) used the same epithet. Students’ answers to the second question will vary but will likely emphasize life experience or active learning.**
15. At the end of the book, Mr. Alston disappoints Elijah when he refuses to try to rescue the family in the barn. “I do truly feel for them poor souls what’s been caught, but they gots laws here,” he says (p. 324). Do you believe Mr. Alston and the other men could have done anything differently? From your point of view, do they share blame for allowing slave hunters to do their work? Why or why not? **Answers will vary. Students may defend Mr. Alston, arguing that it was too dangerous for Mr. Alston and the other men to help because they could have faced terrible consequences if they were caught. They may also argue that Mr. Alston and the men should have been willing to help and that their inaction and the inaction of others allowed slavery to persist for as long as it did. Both arguments are acceptable if they include explanations.**

Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom’s Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1–3; Comprehension: 4–6; Application: 7–8; Analysis: 9–10; Synthesis: 11–12; Evaluation: 13–15.

Activities

1. Turn one of your favorite scenes from *Elijah of Buxton* into a short play. Use the dialogue in the book to create a script that you can read with a few classmates.

Find or make simple props and scenery to make your scene come to life. Practice reading your lines together and perform the scene for your class.

2. Create an album of illustrations that show the important people, places, and objects in the fictional Buxton. Sketch “snapshots” of characters, scenes, and images that were memorable for you and arrange them in a booklet. Compose captions that explain what each illustration shows.
3. *Elijah of Buxton* is a work of fiction, but Buxton is a real place. Use the information Christopher Paul Curtis includes in his author’s note as a starting point for some research of your own about the Elgin Settlement and Buxton Mission of Raleigh. Prepare an informational report about the history of the Settlement to present to your class.

Other Books by This Author

The Watsons Go to Birmingham—1963; Bud, Not Buddy; Bucking the Sarge; Mr. Chickee’s Funny Money; Mr. Chickee’s Messy Mission.

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