

**Literature Circle Guide to *The Mostly True Adventures of Homer P. Figg***  
**by Rodman Philbrick**

**Book Summary**

The year is 1863 and 12-year-old Homer P. Figg and his older brother Harold are living with their ornery uncle Squinton Leach in Pine Swamp, Maine. Uncle Squint mistreats both boys by overworking and underfeeding them. In order to punish Harold and Homer (and to make money for himself), Squint illegally sells Harold to the U.S. Army, even though Harold is two years younger than the legal military age. Homer runs away from the farm to rescue his brother, and along the way he meets a variety of larger-than-life characters. While on his journey, Homer finds himself in the midst of several adventures: he helps runaway slaves by tricking the slave catchers; he rides on a train and a steamship for the first time; he is featured as an attraction (“Pig Boy”) while traveling with a Medicine Show; he is accused of being a spy and escapes with a hot-air balloon; he is captured by the Confederate army, and finally ends up in the middle of the Battle of Gettysburg. In the end, he rescues his brother by shooting him, and both boys are taken in by the kindly Brewster family.

**Author Information**

Rodman Philbrick grew up on the New England coast and worked as a longshoreman and ship builder. He has written screenplays and detective novels, in addition to many young adult novels, including *Freak the Mighty*, which was made into a movie. He currently lives with his wife in Maine and the Florida Keys.

**Suggested Answers to Literature Circle Questions**

1. Homer’s adventure starts in chapter one when he eats a scrap of stale bread. What happens next?  
**While feeding the hogs, Homer eats a scrap of stale bread intended for the hogs. Squint catches Homer, but Homer doesn’t stop eating. When Squint raises a fist to hit Homer, Harold stops him and tells his uncle that Homer is eating because he’s hungry, that Squint doesn’t feed either of them well enough. Harold prevents Squint from hitting Homer, and as a result, Squint ends up falling face first into the hog pen.**
2. When he’s imprisoned in the root cellar, Homer comes up with his plan to run away from Squint and find his brother. What does Homer hear that motivates him to do this?  
**Homer loves his brother, who has always been there for him ever since their parents died. Homer grows angry as he listens to the conversation between Squint and Corny and learns that the two men have made money from selling Harold into the Army to take the place of a wealthy man’s son. Additionally, the two men have lied about Harold’s age; Harold is two years younger than the legal fighting age. Homer is so upset by this news that he decides to go rescue Harold from the Army.**
3. Who is Mr. Samuel Reed? How does Homer help him, and how does he later save Homer?  
**Mr. Samuel Reed is an African-American free man from Rhode Island who is a conductor on the Underground Railroad. Homer helps him by suggesting to Samuel Reed’s captors that they should preserve his life rather than kill him in order to make**

**money. Later, Samuel Reed saves Homer by knocking Smelt and Stink unconscious with an iron bar, so that Homer can escape from them.**

4. From the list Homer writes of “Things Uncle Hates” (p. 8) about his Uncle Squint, what can we tell about Squinton Leach?  
**“Squint” is a grumpy, cheap complainer. He has a negative attitude about everything, from his nephews, to his horses, to women, to the political situation of his time. Squint’s pessimism dominates his thinking; he is a miserable man.**
5. Homer is prepared to lie to Mr. Brewster in order to save himself from Smelt and Stink, but he finds that he can’t. Why doesn’t he lie to Mr. Brewster?  
**The Brewsters have been so kind and generous with Homer that he can’t bring himself to lie to Mr. Brewster. In a short time he has grown to respect Mr. Brewster deeply. As he says, “I decide that lying to Jedediah Brewster is like lying to God” (p. 58). He is also taken off guard when Mr. Brewster announces that he knows that Homer has been in communication with Smelt and Stink. Homer also feels sympathy for Samuel Reed and he decides to help rather than betray the conductor.**
6. What are some clues from chapters 15 and 16 that Mr. Webster B. Willow is not a reliable chaperone for Homer?  
**Right after Homer meets Mr. Willow, he doubts Mr. Willow’s judgment. Mr. Willow is young, inexperienced, and visibly nervous. He is insecure and eager to impress first Mr. Brewster and then the Nibblys. He is so nervous that he becomes motion sick even before the train starts. He gets lost easily, and he is immediately fooled by the Nibblys.**
7. Kate and Frank Nibbly pose as a wealthy brother and sister, but they turn out to be impostors, who fool Mr. Willow in order to rob him. Imagine a short conversation between Kate and Frank right after they have met Mr. Willow and Homer. Who are they really? What are their true feelings about Homer and Mr. Willow?  
**Students’ answers will vary. The Nibblys probably feel suspicious of Homer, who is wiser than Mr. Willow. They no doubt feel excited to find such a gullible victim as Mr. Willow, especially after Homer slipped and revealed that he doesn’t trust Mr. Willow’s good sense. They are probably excited about the large sum of money Mr. Willow has in his possession from Mr. Brewster. They are eager to get rid of Homer, who is clearly much sharper than Mr. Willow.**
8. Homer is the “Pig Boy” act in the Medicine Show, and he enjoys his act much more than he ever imagined he would. In your own words, explain why you think Homer enjoys his part.  
**As “Pig Boy,” Homer enjoys the chance to get dirty and act wild as he performs. Homer likely enjoys the attention and the opportunity to scare the audience with his wild antics.**
9. When Mr. Brewster shows Homer the runaway slaves he is hiding in his basement, how does Homer feel about what he sees? What is his response to Mr. Brewster’s secret?  
**Homer is miserable and he can’t eat. He feels a deep connection with the slaves, since he’s been similarly mistreated by Squint. He feels motivated to do anything he can to**

**help Mr. Brewster's cause; he says he can't "do nothing" now. He says that he wants a gun so he is ready to fight for the runaways' freedom when the time comes.**

10. Homer is horrified by the sight and sound of the wounded soldiers, and he comforts himself by imagining his life after he finds his brother. Reread his dream on page 180. What can we tell about Homer from what he imagines here?

**Homer comforts himself by imagining life back in Maine once he's found his brother. He wants nothing more than to see his brother comfortable and happy again. Through his dream we see Homer's love for his brother and his deep desire for his brother's happiness. We also see his desire for justice, to right society's wrongs, to put an end to "wars and slavery and meanness and cruelty."**

11. In the final chapter of the book, Colonel Chamberlain tells Homer that if the war is still going on in two years, when he is officially old enough to be a soldier, he will call him back to join the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine. What has Colonel Chamberlain seen in Homer that suggests Homer could be an excellent soldier?

**Homer showed great bravery when he fearlessly carried the army's flag into the middle of the battle at Gettysburg. His single-minded dedication to his brother showed his remarkable commitment; his unwavering efforts to find and save his brother show his stamina and strength.**

12. Telling lies comes easily to Homer. Find two examples in the novel when Homer lies. In these instances, why does he lie?

**Following are examples of possible answers. When Homer first meets Smelt and Stink, he tells them he's "just lost in the woods" (p. 32), because he's running away and doesn't want any trouble with the two men. Later he tells the two men that if they let him go, his uncle, the richest man in Maine, will pay them in gold (p. 33). Again, he lies in this instance because he wants to be free of the two men. Also, when he meets the Brewster family for the first time, he tells a story about a time when his brother wrestled a rattlesnake to death and used the skin to make shoes for Homer (p. 47). In this case, he lies to impress his new acquaintances. And when he first meets Professor Fleabottom, he greatly embellishes the story of his adventures up until that point in order to entertain his new acquaintance (p. 155). Finally, when Mr. Willow is about to go into battle, Homer, who has seen the war firsthand already, tells him that he's "got nothing to be feared of" (p. 195). In this instance, Homer is lying to encourage Mr. Willow as he goes to fight.**

13. Homer closes his story with a short reflection on his experience in war: "I think in some ways it's like that for all of us, living with the ghosts of things that used to be, or never were. We're all of us haunted by yesterday, and we got no choice but to keep marching into our tomorrows." In your own words, explain why Homer says this and what you think he means. Can you connect his reflection to events in the novel?

**This question provides the opportunity to discuss the consequences of experiencing the horrors of war firsthand, as Homer has. Despite the horrific, violent wartime scenes he has witnessed, Homer is able to maintain his optimism through his inner strength and stamina, which he shows many times throughout the novel.**

14. Are there parts of Homer's "mostly true adventures" that you find unbelievable? Is Homer a narrator that we readers can trust?

**Students' answers will vary. Many might suggest the balloon ride as the most unbelievable event. As narrator, Homer does occasionally admit that he is stretching the truth in his story. Homer's reliability as a narrator would be an interesting debate topic for student discussion.**

15. *The Mostly True Adventures of Homer P. Figg* includes many serious topics like death, war, and slavery, yet at the same time the book has a lot of humor. Which episodes or characters in the book did you find funny? Why do you think the author, Rodman Philbrick, wrote the book to be both serious and funny at the same time?

**This novel deals with topics like slavery, war, and abuse, but the humor surrounding the narrator Homer keeps the book from being too dark. The many idiosyncratic characters and Homer's penchant for exaggeration help keep this novel light-hearted.**

*Note: These questions are keyed to Bloom's Taxonomy as follows: Knowledge: 1-3; Comprehension: 4-6; Application: 7-8; Analysis: 9-11; Synthesis: 12-13; Evaluation: 14-15.*

## Activities

1. *The Mostly True Adventures of Homer P. Figg* is told from Homer's point of view. Imagine that his brother Harold wrote a version of his own story, beginning with the moment he is conscripted into the Army. Write two pages of Harold's story from his point of view, including his thoughts and feelings about being a soldier in war and about being taken from home and his little brother.

**This activity gives students the opportunity to imagine the events of this story from the older brother Harold's point of view. Harold's point of view differs from Homer's: we learn in the final chapters of the book that Harold is relieved at being taken from Squint, the guardian who mistreats him, and also that he is somewhat relieved at being apart from his little brother, who represents a huge responsibility to him.**

2. Throughout his adventures, Homer meets a whole host of amazing characters, from Mr. Samuel Reed, the Underground Railroad conductor, to Mr. Dennett Bobbins, the balloonist. Create a set of character "baseball cards" for all of these characters. Each card should include an illustration based on Rodman Philbrick's descriptions as well as "stats" (important actions and personality characteristics) for each character.

**Students completing this assignment will review the characters in the novel, visualizing and describing them.**

3. Design a poster advertising Professor Fleabottom's Medicine Show. Use pictures and words to describe the various acts, including the Totally Tattooed Lady, the Talented Tumbling Brillo Brothers, and the Amazing Pig Boy.

**This assignment gives students the opportunity to consider how they would advertise for the Medicine Show (chapters 19-25) using pictures and text.**

