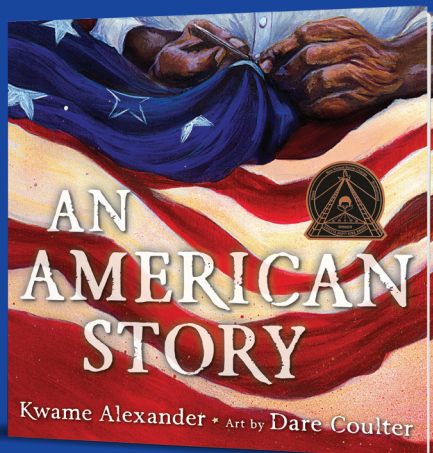


# EDUCATOR GUIDE

## AGES 7 AND UP

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## DEAR TEACHERS,

If you're like me, you've often wrestled with questions about America's past. Why at times in America's past were only some people considered to be "created equal"? Why doesn't justice under the law look the same for every human, regardless of skin color? Why do we teach young people to say the Pledge of Allegiance in grade school, to sing the national anthem, and to celebrate freedom on the Fourth of July when we as a society, are not free? So much of the complicated legacy of America (and when I say "America," I do mean all of the Americas, but in this case, specifically, North America) has woven through its fabric words that roll around in the mouth like small stones. Words like "enslavement," "genocide," and "murder" are words we wish we did not know, and yet we must. In order to understand where we're going, we have to at least confront, and see with clear eyes, where we have been. Doing this may bring up feelings we also do not want to feel. Emotions like guilt, sorrow, and shame seem like they shouldn't have a place in our knowledge institutions. What place is there in a school or library for bad feelings when we come to these places to cultivate a lifelong love of learning, to do things that feel good? In the notes from the author and illustrator of *An American Story* we are reminded that "there is a wrong to be righted, even if it's complicated and takes a long time" and that we do so that "we can all stop being afraid, so we can start moving closer to our better selves." Let this guide be a resource for you as you step bravely onto the path toward a future full of healing and of hope.

## ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

1. What feelings do you feel when you're someplace you don't want to be without a way to escape?
2. When you have the ability to read, what opportunities do you have access to that others do not??
3. What are some things that could happen when a person is forced to labor without being paid?
4. How can a situation that isn't fair be made fair? Is it possible?

## WORDS TO KNOW:

- Breeches
- Clenching
- Conducting
- Emancipation
- Horror
- Sacrifice
- Scheming
- Shackle
- Sly
- Talking drum
- Threshing
- Tormented
- Trickster



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## USEFUL TERMS TO KNOW AND DISCUSS:

**Oppression** — Consider introducing the word “oppression” as a force enacted on a person by society and one that acts in powerful ways over long periods of time. Oppression often shapes the way we see ourselves and others. An example might be our oppression of people experiencing homelessness, which can impact them for their entire lives and one part of which is the denial of basic rights, like the right to vote, because they cannot register to vote without a physical address.

**Enslavement** — Work with young learners to understand the difference between different terms used to describe the enslavement of Africans. The terms “enslavement of African people” or “enslaved Africans” is preferable to referring to individuals as “slaves.”

**Injustice** — Help young people learn the difference between justice and injustice, both as a moral principle, and a social practice or institution. They may have questions about how we determine what’s fair and unfair. It might be helpful to ask them to think about power and how much power a wronged person has to change their circumstances in comparison to a person with the power to wrong another.

**Colonization** — Discuss the global practice of colonization and the ways in which African people have moved or been moved around the globe, sometimes by choice, but for the vast majority of the time, by force.

Additional resources: [The Middle Passage: White Ships / Black Cargo](#) by Tom Feelings;

[The Middle Passage: Kids | Britannica Kids | Homework Help](#)

**Work vs. Labor** — Examine the difference between work, which implies payment for labor, and labor without payment. Merriam-Webster has three primary definitions:

**a:** to perform work or fulfill duties regularly for wages or salary

**b:** to perform or carry through a task requiring sustained effort or continuous repeated operations

**c:** to exert oneself physically or mentally especially in sustained effort for a purpose or under compulsion or necessity

## ACTIVITIES:

### Part One

African Folktales, Talking Drums, and Spirituals

Throughout *An American Story*, there will be references to African folktales. Consider using [Black Folktales](#) by Julius Lester or another guide to explore African folktales, many of which made their way over to this side of the Atlantic, in more depth. Then, illustrate the folktales or write new ones and analyze them for character, theme, and setting. Many of the stories also teach morals. What are some of the beliefs held by the people who created these folktales?

### Grades 3–5

Choose one folktale and illustrate your favorite part. Choose one quote from the story that you think is the most important. Write it on the lines below your drawing. Then, share your drawing and quote with a partner. If you like, choose two friends and make a new story with the three pictures and quotes you chose. What would be the beginning, middle, and end of your story?

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### Grades 6–8

Choose one folktale and identify the conflict, or problem, that the story is meant to solve or teach listeners about. If there is a conflict between two characters, who are they? If there is no conflict, try to identify the protagonist or main character and the lesson they are supposed to learn. Then, write your own story, set in the natural world, with animals as characters. Don't forget to give them personality!

## TALKING DRUMS AND SPIRITUALS

A Talking Drum is a uniquely West African instrument that is made to imitate the sound of human speech. "Skilled talking-drum drummers can imitate African tonal languages' sounds and cadence and reproduce proverbs and praise songs. The use of the talking-drum was forbidden in the United States during the enslavement era because of its ability to 'speak' in an unknown language and possibly incite rebellion." Additional resource: [Talking Drum | Smithsonian Institution](#)

"Spirituals are African American religious songs that evolved in the context of slavery primarily in the Southern United States. They were a mechanism for survival—a potent example of how humans can endure the worst of conditions. Spirituals combine elements of European American religious music with African musical characteristics. Their influence can be felt in virtually all subsequent forms of American music, including jazz, gospel, blues, rhythm and blues, country, rock and roll, and hip-hop." Additional resource: [Spirituals: About the Genre—Ballad of America](#)

### Grades 3–5

Take a look at photographs of American musical artists who are descended from Africans. Match the musical artists with the photos. How many can you guess?

*\*Educators: Provide a preview of sound clips from genres like jazz, ragtime, soul, funk and hip-hop so students can familiarize themselves with the genres. Then, provide pictures of African American musical artists with the genre of their music and their names. Then, play clips of songs and have students listen and match them with the pictures of the artists.*

Listen to clips of Talking Drums or invite a person who knows how to play Talking Drums into your classroom for a demonstration. Then, have students illustrate the song they think they've heard before understanding the lyrics. Then read or ask for an interpretation of the lyrics. Do what students hear match their illustrations?

### Grades 6–8

Research an American musical artist of African descent. Create a short presentation about their life and music.

*\*Educators: Role-play is strongly discouraged for this activity. Additional resource: [Appreciation and Appropriation Outside the Classroom | Learning for Justice](#)*

## WEALTH IN AMERICA

Learn about wealth accumulated from the labor of enslaved people and the legacy of generational wealth by using your resources to explore how much the average American farmer made from growing: cotton, sugar, corn, rice, tobacco, or coffee. Alternately, research wages for the average cook, domestic servant, field laborer, or builder during the 18th or 19th century and convert them into today's currency. Given the fact that such laborers worked for free, what do you think of the plan during emancipation to give every formerly enslaved person "40 acres and a mule"?

*\*Educators: This question might be best as a journal prompt rather than an open discussion.*



### Grades 3–5

Create paper cutout images of cotton, sugar, corn, rice, tobacco, or coffee, each one representing a crop. Then, give each student a map of the United States so that they can visualize where each crop was grown. Read a narrative about the slavery economy and have them match crops to the wealth of each region or state. It may help for each paper cutout to match a numeric value (such as \$500).

### Grades 6–8

Use your resources to research the American cotton industry between 1793 and 1860. With a small group, make a timeline showing the growth of the cotton industry in the United States on top of the line and the number of people whose free labor made it possible for each period of growth beneath the line. Consider dividing the timeline up by decades, or every 20 years.

### Additional Resources:

For Educators: [Vox | How slavery became America's first big business](#)

For Students: [Khan Academy | The slave economy](#)

## “WOOLEN BREECHES AND COTTON GOWNS...”

At various times in *An American Story*, there is juxtaposition, or the placing side by side of images and words that give more meaning because they are placed together than they would be if they were not. Sometimes authors use juxtaposition to help readers compare and contrast. Look for examples of the following types of language juxtaposition: alliteration (repetition of beginning sounds), anaphora (repetition of beginning words on different lines), parallel structure (repetition of the same words on more than one line). Look for examples of image juxtaposition: dark and light, day and night, inside and outside.

### Grades 3–5

Choose one example of juxtaposition in *An American Story* and explain what you think the picture is trying to communicate. Take turns explaining to a partner choosing different images. Then, make your own picture showing juxtaposition with a dark image and a light one, or an image in color and one in black and white.

### Grades 6–8

Make a poster illustrating a situation you consider to be unfair. Create an example of juxtaposition using one of the forms mentioned in the instructions for this activity, or with two differently colored illustrations, or try both.

## FORGING AHEAD

Two posters in *An American Story* are being made by young people. One says, “Black Lives Matter.” One says, “It’s NEVER too LATE to learn and DO BETTER.” Make your own poster for your classroom, library, or another environment with a message describing one way the world can heal from the complicated, painful legacy slavery left behind by more than 400 years of slavery.

### Grades 3–5

What is a truth you feel should be spoken even if it’s hard?

### Grades 6–8

What are some ways we can do better in order to treat one another as equals, with love, and respect?

Consider reading the lyrics to “Lift Every Voice and Sing” or reading the Langston Hughes poem “Still Here” and encouraging students to illustrate these texts or create their own poems.



### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

*\*Educators: Consider the fact that young people will not all react the same way to these discussion questions. Our personal stories and lived experiences do influence the way we react to reading, learning about, and discussing the enslavement of African people in the Americas. Consider journaling, or holding small-group discussions, rather than asking questions in a large group*

#### Grades 3–5

Examine and discuss the faces, colors, and word sounds on each page.

#### Grades 6–8

Explore, examine, and discuss themes, images, and literary concepts like juxtaposition, repetition, and conflict.

1. What are the expressions on the faces of the African people before capture and enslavement
2. What activities are they doing?
3. Why do you think hands were handcuffed together?
4. What feelings do you think people feel “while people shackled below, crammed in small, hot spaces, cry...”
5. After they were captured and held on ships, why might “bold men and women” jump “into the sea, into the jaws of sharks”?

#### BREAK – BREATHE



6. What do the people’s faces look like as they labor for free?
7. Compare and contrast the facial expressions, colors, and experiences of the boy picking cotton in the field with the children playing in the yard.
8. What does it mean for someone to “refuse to be broken”?
9. How did enslaved people connect with one another and remember home?
10. What happened to enslaved people who managed to escape?
11. What happened when family members were sold away from one another?

#### BREAK – BREATHE

12. “About families torn apart, sold like cattle.” Compare the two boys, one with eyes shut and the other with eyes open. What do you think they are feeling?
13. When things feel too sad, or heavy, what is one important thing to know about the past?  
“You can’t change the past, but you can do better in the future.”
14. Why was the Civil War an important event for enslaved Africans?
15. Look at their faces and their eyes. What do you think the woman on the last page would say to the little girl?

#### Additional Resources:

[The 1619 Project: Born on the Water | Book Trailer](#)

[Stamped \(For Kids\) by Jason Reynold and Ibram X. Kendi, adapted by Sonja Cherry-Paul](#)

[We’re Gonna Keep On Talking: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Elementary Classroom](#)

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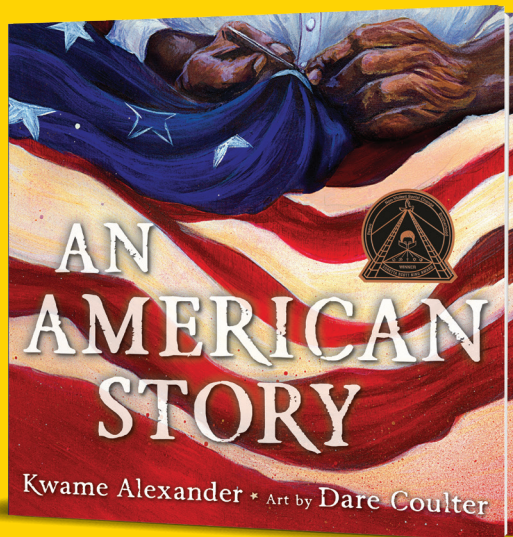


## **ABOUT THE BOOK**

Kwame Alexander, #1 *New York Times* Bestselling and award-winning author of *The Undefeated*, pens a powerful picture book that tells the story of American slavery through the voice of a teacher struggling to help her students understand its harrowing history.

From the fireside tales in an African village, through the unspeakable passage across the Atlantic, to the back-breaking work in the fields of the South, this is a story of a people's struggle and strength, horror, and hope. This is the story of American slavery, a story that needs to be told and understood by all of us. A testament to the resilience of the African American community, this book honors what has been and envisions what is to be..

With stunning mixed-media illustrations by newcomer Dare Coulter, this is a potent book for those who want to speak the truth. Perfect for family sharing, the classroom, and homeschooling.



HC 9780316473125

Also available in ebook and audio formats

## **PRAISE FOR THE BOOK**

Winner 2024 Coretta Scott King Book Award  
for Illustration

*New York Times* Best Children's Books

NPR Kids' Books We Love

*Horn Book* Fanfare

*Kirkus Reviews* Best Picture Books

*Publishers Weekly* Best Picture Books

CSMCL Best Books

Chicago Public Library Best of the Best Books

New York Public Library Best Books

★ "Powerful." —*Horn Book*

★ "Excellent & essential." —*School Library Journal*

★ "This is a probing and sensitive take on a devastating chapter of U.S. history." —*Kirkus*

★ "Beautifully crafted and brutally honest."  
—*Booklist*

★ "It's a layered, compassionate telling." —*Publishers Weekly*

★ "Alexander's sensitive, poetic text and Coulter's majestic art provide a stellar framework for young Americans to learn about their country's history." —*BookPage*



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**KWAME ALEXANDER** is a poet, educator, publisher, and *New York Times* bestselling author of 40 books, including *Becoming Muhammad Ali*, co-authored with James Patterson, the Caldecott Medal and Newbery Honor winning picture book, *The Undeclared*, illustrated by Kadir Nelson; and his Newbery Medal winning middle grade novel, *The Crossover*. A regular contributor to NPR's Morning Edition, Kwame is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Lee Bennet Hopkins Poetry Award, the Coretta Scott King Author Honor, three NAACP Image Award nominations, and the 2017 Inaugural Pat Conroy Legacy Award. In 2018, he opened the Barbara E. Alexander memorial Library and Health Clinic in Ghana, as a part of LEAP for Ghana, an international literacy program he co-founded. Kwame is also the Executive Producer, Showrunner, and Emmy-winning Writer of *The Crossover* TV series, based on his novel, which premiered on Disney+ in April 2023. Most recently he was appointed the Rudell Artistic Director of Literary Arts and Writer-in-Residence at the Chautauqua Institution.



Photo Credit Portia Wiggins Photography

His mission is to change the world, one word at a time.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**DARE COULTER** is an award-winning professional sculptor, artist, muralist, and illustrator. Her most recent notable work includes a 200-foot mural (with Kotis Street Art) in Greensboro, North Carolina honoring oft-unmentioned black cowboys, and a commission of a painting of Nina Simone from the National Trust for Historic Preservation that was used to raise funds to restore Nina Simone's childhood home. She has illustrated nine children's books, including Kwame Alexander's *An American Story* and her own *You Are My Sunshine*. While Dare is pursuing her dream of creating monumental sculptures to black joy all over the world, she is having a great time visiting schools and painting murals and sharing her passion for art with the world.

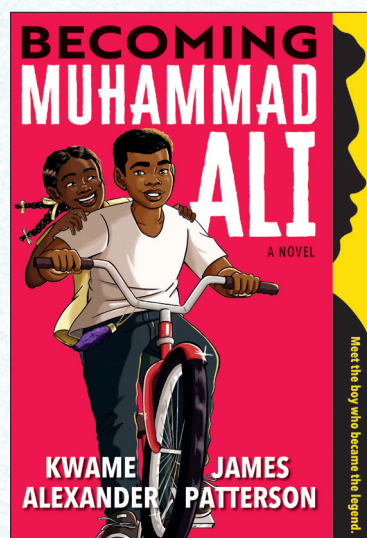


## ALSO BY KWAME ALEXANDER



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