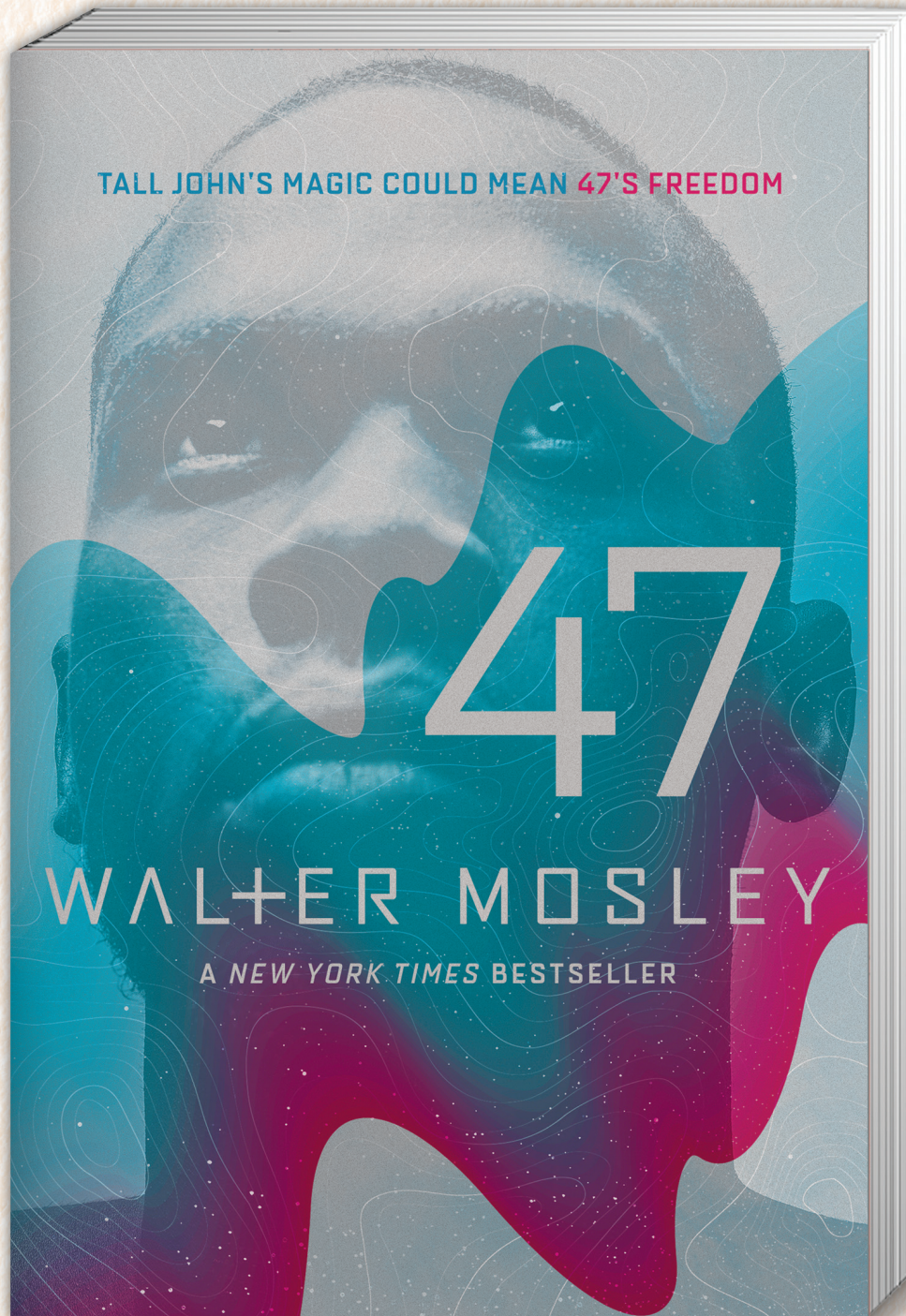


LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

educator's guide | ages 12 & up



LittleBrownLibrary.com



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note to teachers, librarians, group leaders

This is not your mother's or grandmother's slavery novel. Young readers will find little here of the pathos of slavery that so easily bores and tires. It is peopled with those who are enslaved, yet they are empowered human beings. The book urges young readers to fully imagine teen years spent doing slave labor and simultaneously to envision unknown worlds of personal potential and victory.

While excellent for individual reading and as a base for essays and papers, this book can be useful far beyond the classroom. Group activities and discussions can easily flow from it for a wide range of gatherings.

Pre-Reading Activities

1. Slavery, then and now: What do you know about slavery and where did you learn it? Are movies and books about slavery historically accurate? Most people would rather watch a movie or read about any other subject than slavery. Why? Give some reasons people don't talk about slavery. Is it necessary for young people today to think about slavery?

Introduce this question with a contemporary media clip where the word "slavery" is used or a black person is seen in shackles.
2. Choices=freedom: This book hinges on the principle that people have choices. No matter how constricted, there is always some choice. Ask students to describe a situation where they felt they had no choice. Then examine the circumstances carefully and make a written list of the choices available to them. What are things that prevent us from realizing our choices when we are in situations where we feel we have no choice? What are factors that prevent us from acting on our choices? Is there anyone, anytime, who has no choices? Finally, what are the responsibilities that come with the freedom to make choices?

3. Names: (what I call myself/what I call you if we're alike/what I let those who are not like me call me): Most names get meaning by who uses them, what they are used for, how they are used, when they are used, and where they are used. Do you have a nickname that only certain people may call you? What are those people really saying about you when they use that nickname? How do they use the nickname? Give an example. What are the occasions that you're likely to be glad to be called by your nickname, and what are some when you wouldn't? Where are you comfortable being nicknamed and where do you prefer using your real name?

- How much of how we feel about nicknames applies to group names?
- What is the difference between a name and a label?
- Why do some groups embrace their pejorative labels and other groups don't?
- How about a number representing who you are (e.g., a social security number, a student ID number, a driver's license number)? Does this practice diminish you as a person?
- In what instance has society used numbers to glorify an individual or group of individuals (sports figures)?

4. Beauty: Write the one thing that most makes a person beautiful to you. Toss these into a circle and ask one person to read them all. Does anyone in the room possess them ALL?
5. Myth: Greek, Roman, and even Norse mythology continue to be popularized. But all cultures have myths. A powerful figure in the mythology of enslaved Africans and their descendants was High John. A bit of Internet research will provide some background on High John the Conqueror, a major figure in African American mythology.

Visit these sites:

<http://www.luckymojo.com/johntheconqueror.html>

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<http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1993/v50-1-article4.htm>

http://rootsblog.typepad.com/rootsblog/2004/08/zora_neale_hurs.html

What do you think made High John emerge in African American mythology?

reading activities:

Preface

1. What year does the story open? What common items that we have today would have seemed like “science fiction” to people living back then?

Chapter 1

1. Instead of a family, the main character’s childhood was shaped by Big Mama Flore, Mud Albert, and Champ Noland. What familial roles did each one play in his childhood?
2. Most children have imaginary places they fear. 47 feared a real place. What was it and what had he heard went on there?
3. Bible teachings, no matter how unschooled the teacher, were a central part of life in the community of the enslaved. How does the author, in this first chapter, make it clear that the Bible was taught on this particular plantation?
4. Who was the first person to beat 47 and why?
5. What single words describe 47’s official relationship to Eloise? What single words describe his feelings toward her? What single words describe her attitude toward him?
6. Are children free? Was 47 free?
7. Put yourself in the place of Tobias Turner and Mr. Stewart. What would you have done differently?

Chapter 2

1. What two powerful biblical references does the author use to explain 47’s changed feelings about Big Mama Flore in this chapter?
2. Instead of feeding him food that would keep him from growing, how else could Big Mama Flore have prepared 47 for what happened at the beginning of Chapter 2?
3. What modern living situation can be compared to the slave cabins?
4. How would you feel about Pritchard, if the story ended on page 16, with these words: “They called the horse doctor for Pritchard. After he surveyed the damage to the screaming slave’s leg the veterinarian advised Tobias to put Pritchard down.”
5. How do you feel about him at the end of the chapter? Why?
6. What was similar about Mud Albert and 84?

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Chapter 4

1. The veterinarian had suggested Tobias kill Pritchard when he was no longer able to work, just as they would kill a horse. Do you think Tobias would have had a funeral for a horse? What contradiction is made clear by the funeral in this chapter?
2. Tobias's wife and Pike's wife both have more personal relationships with slaves (Una/Psalma; Pike's wife/Lemuel). What does that mean?

Chapter 5

1. Would you have tried to run away?
2. What was 47's state of mind just before he met Tall John?
3. Describe something you have seen in a movie that might be like the scene where 47 and Tall John first meet. Who or what do you think Tall John is? Where is he from? What capabilities does he have?
4. What made 47 have his first feeling of freedom?

Chapter 6

1. In the previous chapter, Tall John tells 47, "No master, no nigger either." (p.48). Now, when caught by Tobias and his dogs, Tall John is scraping and bowing and saying, "Yes, suh" and "Mastuh." Is Tall John's use of these words different from 47's use of them? If so, how? If not, why not?

Chapter 7

1. How do you think Tall John knew 47's name?
3. What does the healing attributed to 47's mother, Psalma have in common with the way Tall John's healing powers were first introduced ("I heard a silvery musical note")?
4. What does "Neither nigger nor master be" mean to you?
5. When Tall John tells 47, "And you are special, Forty-seven. In your mind and your heart, in your blood. You carry within you the potential of what farty old Plato called the philosopher-king," (p. 67) what is he saying?
6. "[if] a man calls you a slave and you nod your head . . . you have made yourself a slave." Is this a true principle?
7. Can you envision Tall John's world, where people are green to blue to red? Do you think they all get along?
8. What reasons might 47 have thought Tall John came to find him?

Chapter 8

1. Tall John has had many names, so he easily gives 84 a new name. What is it and what are other names by which she is called?
2. Why does Tall John talk "slave" talk with 84 and not with 47?

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Chapter 9

1. What showed that slaves were hungry, not well fed?
2. What do Hollywood images of slavery show?
3. 47's dream on page 86 indicates a subconscious change. Describe the dream and its meaning.
4. Why would Tall John feel lost in the same way 84's sons were lost?

Chapter 10

1. What attitude needed to change in 47 on his last day in the slave cabin, before they could go to freedom?

Chapter 11

1. What attitude that needed to change in 47, still has not changed in this chapter, as reflected in his feelings about Eloise?

Chapter 12

1. This chapter reveals why Tall John has sought out 47. What was Tall John's purpose in finding 47? What is going on that is more important than slavery?
2. Tall John makes a scientific revelation to 47. Explain it.
3. What is Wall in relation to Pike?

Chapter 13

1. How does Tall John change in this chapter?
2. How are beings born in this place and what are the two conflicting races named?
3. What is Tall John's name?

Chapter 14

1. How is Nola's relationship to Eloise similar to 47's relationship to Eloise?
2. What do Tall John's words "we cannot heal without teaching" mean?
3. What did 47's attendance at the healing teach 47? ("This was possibly the most important lesson John ever taught me; that our so-called masters

were not all-powerful, that they were also weak and vulnerable at times" [p. 133])

Chapter 15

1. What does the green powder do and why does Wall, as Pike, want it?
2. Did 47 want to help Eloise for the same reason she wanted to save Tall John?
3. What do his actions say about his character?
4. How can he make these choices and still be enslaved?

Chapter 16

1. 84 saves Tall John. "She nearly carried John and I supported myself by holding onto her shoulder," said 47. Reflect back on Tall John saying she was a "nice girl" (p. 79) and carrying her cotton sack. What do you think about their relationship?
2. Stewart was not a slave owner. What could have motivated him to do what he did?

Chapters 17 and 18

1. Describe 47's experience with the creature of light. (p. 170).
2. For what purpose did Tall John pass all his knowledge to 47?

Chapters 19 and 20

1. What stands out about the battle in these chapters that is totally different from the encounters after Eloise's healing (Chapter 14)?
2. Slavery was by birth, often referred to as by blood, yet 47 has the perfect "blood code to hold the powers of the Tamal." Do you believe who you are is determined by birth or your bloodline?
3. Do you feel that the changes in 47 occurred more because of the choices he made in his circumstances or because of the creature of light?

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Chapters 21 and 22

1. "A manslave throwing off the yoke of slavery meant that the rules we had lived by our entire lives had been broken." (p. 192). Explain this.

Chapter 23

1. How does Tall John describe what we would call death (p. 206)?
2. What was the Queziastril used for and by whom?

Chapters 24 and 25

1. When did 47 become free, in your opinion?

vocabulary

Look up the word "vernacular."

One of the main characters in this novel is able to speak both the way those who are enslaved speak and the way the oppressors speak. Most young people today have more than one way of talking. Do you? Why?

essay questions

1. Follow 47 through the book as he moves from powerless to powerful to conqueror, and mention the key choices he makes that enable his growth.
2. Compare Eloise, 84, and Nola. How do they reflect or debunk stereotypes of teenage girls today?
3. If you were an author writing about slavery and unknown worlds, what magical scientific elements would you draw from this book?
4. Compare this book with another that you have read that is set during the period of slavery.
5. Compare this book with another that you have read that involves time/space mind travel and other worlds.

resources

Slavery is among the most documented of topics and there are myriad resources available. Here are a few excellent resources that might be compatible with the reading of this novel:

Sites/museums

National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Cincinnati, Ohio

National Park Service, Underground Railroad Network of 150 sites

Recommended reading

Beloved by Toni Morrison

Bound for Canaan: The Epic Story of the Underground Railroad, America's First Civil Rights Movement by Fergus M. Bordewich

Jubilee by Margaret Walker

Kindred by Octavia Butler

Lest We Forget: The Passage from Africa to Slavery and Emancipation Roots by Alex Haley

Slave Narratives by Schomburg Library series

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

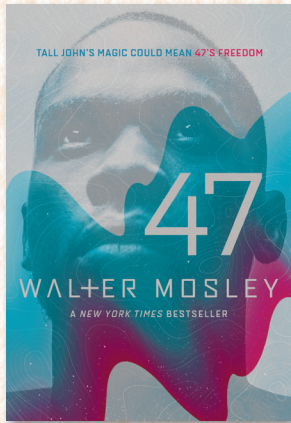
about the book

ALA Best Books for Young Adults nominee
Great Lakes Great Books Award
New York Times Bestseller

Reminiscent of Colson Whitehead's award-winning *The Underground Railroad*, Walter Mosley's *New York Times* bestselling YA novel explores race relations, African American legends, and the future from the mind of an 1830s slave.

"The story you are about to read concerns certain events that occurred in the early years of my life. It all happened over a hundred and seventy years ago. For many of you it might sound like a tall tale because I am no older today than I was back there in the year 1832. But this is no whopper I'm telling, it is a story about my boyhood as

a slave and my fated encounter with the amazing Tall John From Beyond Africa."



47, a young slave boy, is growing up on a plantation under the watchful eye of a brutal slave master. His life seems doomed, until he meets the mysterious Tall John, who not only introduces him to an unimaginable magical science, but teaches 47 the meaning of freedom.

A master storyteller, Mosley deftly mixes speculative and historical fiction in this daring novel.

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Age Range: 12 & up
Accelerated Reader: 5.3

praise for the book

★ "Equal parts history and tall tale, this engaging story related by an endearing narrator is so full of dramatic tension that few readers will realize they're learning something, too." —*Publisher's Weekly*

"A stirring story of escape from slavery in which [science fiction] and African American myth blend with the realism of plantation brutality and the courage of resistance." —*Booklist*

"Thrilling on many levels, the book's voices, sacrifices, climatic battles, and satisfying escapes will dazzle and provoke readers." —*The Horn Book*

"Powerfully described and haunting." —*Kliatt*

"Walter Mosley is a force to be reckoned with in this lifetime and those to come. His infinite imagination makes this incredible reading." —*Black Issues Book Review*

about the author



Walter Mosley is the author of the acclaimed Easy Rawlins and Fearless Jones series of mysteries, as well as numerous other works of fiction and nonfiction. He has won the Anisfield-Wolf Award, a Grammy Award, and in 2004 PEN USA lifetime achievement award. He was born in Los Angeles and lives in New York.