

# PASSENGER ON THE PEARL

*The True Story of Emily Edmonson's Flight from Slavery*

WINIFRED CONKLING

Common Core-Aligned Educator Guide Includes:

- Discussion questions for grades 6-10
- Group activities
- Essay prompts

## BOOK TALK:

In 1848, thirteen-year-old Emily Edmonson, five of her siblings, and seventy other enslaved people boarded the *Pearl* under cover of night in Washington, D.C., hoping to sail north to freedom. Within a day, the schooner was captured, and the Edmonsons were sent to New Orleans to be sold. *Passenger on the Pearl* is the story of this thwarted escape, of the ramifications of its attempt, and of a family for whom freedom was the ultimate goal.

Through an engaging narrative, informative sidebars, and more than fifty period photographs and illustrations, Winifred Conkling takes readers on Emily Edmonson's journey from enslaved person to teacher at a school for African American young women. Conkling illuminates a turbulent time in American history, showing the daily lives of enslaved people, the often-changing laws affecting them, the high cost of a failed escape, and the stories of slave traders and abolitionists.

“Emily’s story survives, in part, because she was much luckier than most other enslaved people in the mid-nineteenth century.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

**Winifred Conkling** learned about Emily and Mary Edmonson and their attempted escape on the *Pearl* when a statue of the sisters was erected in Alexandria, Virginia, in 2010, at the site of the building that once held the Bruin and Hill slave pen. (The building now houses commercial office space.) Curious, Conkling began to research the story of the girls’ journey to freedom and was thrilled to find extensive primary source materials, including the autobiography of Daniel Drayton, one of the captains of the *Pearl*, and an account written by Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the bestselling nineteenth-century novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Conkling studied journalism at Northwestern University and received her master of arts in writing for children and young adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She has written more than thirty nonfiction books for adults, most involving health and consumer topics. Her first book for children, the novel *Sylvia & Aki*, won the 2012 Jane Addams Children’s Book Award for Older Readers and the 2012 Tomás Rivera Mexican American Children’s Book Award. Conkling lives in northern Virginia with her husband and three children.



**Discussion Questions:**

Questions are broken down into sections of suggested nightly reading. You may also wish to assign context texts and texture texts while teaching *Passenger on the Pearl*, including articles from historic newspapers (e.g. the *Abolitionist Press*, the *Liberator*, the *North Star*, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*) and passages from the texts listed in pp. 154-162.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY\***

Primary performance objectives met through these discussion questions:

COMMON CORE STANDARD GRADE	ELA-LITERACY
6-8	RH.6-8.1, RH.6-8.2, RH.6-8.4, RH.6-8.8, RH.6-8.9 RI.6-8.1, RI.6-8.3
9-10	RH.9-10.1, RH.9-10.2, RH.9-10.4, RH.9-10.7, RI.9-10.3

\*Primary performance objectives are available at the end of the guide.

**CHAPTERS 1-5**

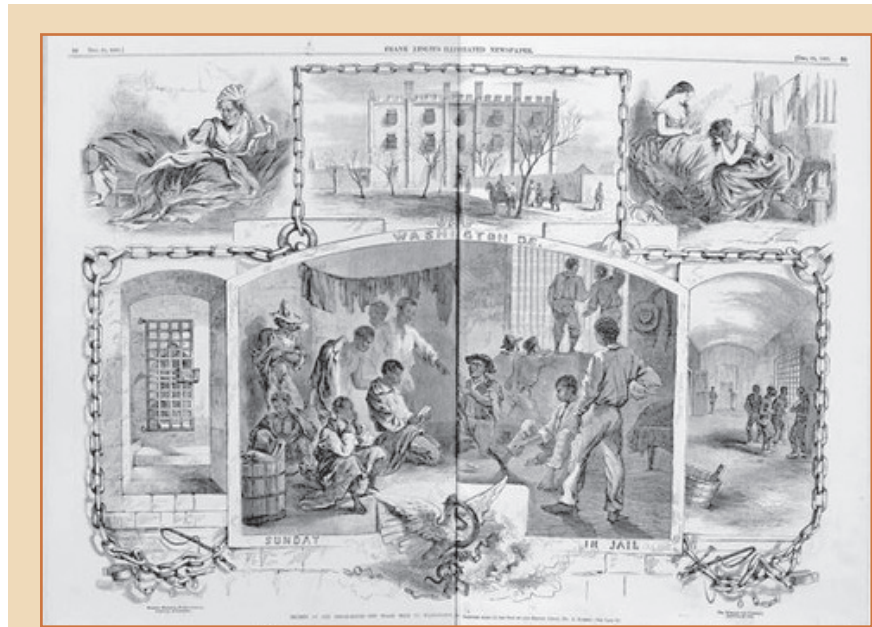
1. On p. 2 Milly Edmonson says to Paul Edmonson, “There ’tis now, Paul, our troubles is begun. This child isn’t ours. Oh, Paul what a thing it is to have children that isn’t ours!” Why does Milly feel this way? Describe motherhood from Emily’s mother’s point of view.
2. What are some lines of text that demonstrate how white people felt about enslaved people during this time?
3. What were some laws that supported the oppression of black people during Emily’s lifetime?
4. What were some of the stumbling blocks Emily Edmonson faced during the *Pearl* escape attempt?
5. Why did Emily not know how to read and write? How was literacy for enslaved people viewed?
6. Winifred Conkling uses both the word “slave” and the phrase “enslaved people.” Why the variation? What might it indicate about the author’s point of view?

**CHAPTERS 6-9**

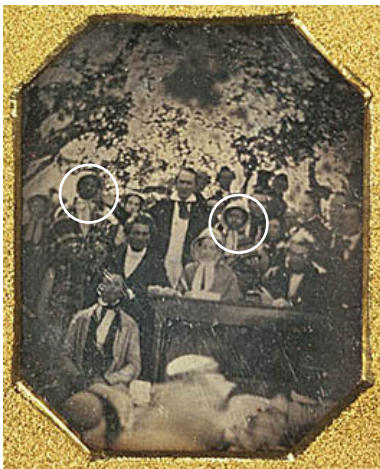
1. After their capture, Emily Edmonson and others aboard the *Pearl* returned to Washington, D.C., and immediately encountered angry mobs. What was behind this anger? How was the mob’s anger toward black captives and white captives different?
2. What role did newspapers play in how enslaved people and the free people who helped and supported them were viewed during this time period? (You may ask students to interpret the images on pp. 36-37.)
3. Page 59 describes the Second Middle Passage. Compare and contrast the original Middle Passage and the Second Middle Passage. What do the differences show us about how slavery changed between the late 1700s and the early 1800s? What systems or factors kept slavery going?
4. How were women, in particular, treated in the showroom where some slaves were presented to be sold (pp. 63-66)? What are your reactions to the author’s description of their treatment?
5. Consider the words dignity and humanity. What do they mean in the context of *Passenger on the Pearl*?

CHAPTERS 10-13

1. What does the letter the slave trader Joseph Bruin writes detailing the condition of Mary and Emily Edmonson's releases (pp. 79-80) tell us about him?
2. Emily has strong feelings about the coffle in which prisoners are chained together before and while marching. What are those feelings?
3. What was the role of music in coffles?
4. What factors helped Emily and Mary raise money for their freedom? What are the ethical issues surrounding the ransoming of enslaved people?
5. Churches and newspapers played significant roles in the anti-slavery movement. In what way do we see this happening in Conkling's text?
6. The word ecumenical is introduced on p. 88. What does it mean in general? What does it mean in the context of the passage?
7. The Rev. Henry Ward Beecher is introduced in chapter 12. What were Paul Edmonson's impressions of Rev. Beecher? Why was Rev. Beecher's approach to raising money for the Edmonsons' ransom successful? Who else in this book was like him and in what ways?



This wood engraving titled "Secrets of the prison-house" by Arthur Lumley appeared in Frank Leslie's illustrated newspaper in 1861.



During the Cazenovia Convention in 1850, a daguerreotype was commissioned from Ezra Greenleaf Weld. Frederick Douglass is seated on the left side of the table. Mary Edmonson is the tall woman standing behind him with a plaid shawl. Emily Edmonson, also in plaid, is standing to the right of the abolitionist Gerrit Smith, the central figure.

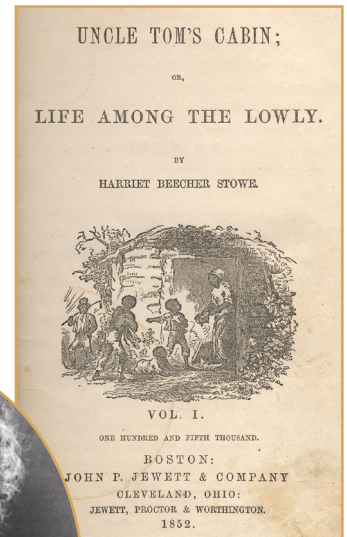
CHAPTERS 14-16

1. Explain why chapter 14 is titled "A Radical Education." [RH.6-8.4]
2. When Rev. Beecher calls for contributions to establish an education fund for Emily and Mary Edmonson, how is the response different from his call for ransom money? Why? Although Emily and Mary are legally free, in what ways might they still be considered to be in bondage?
3. What do you think of William Chaplin's decision to run away and hide out after his second bail? Compare his bail collection to the one for Emily and Mary.
4. The proposed Fugitive Slave Act is discussed on p. 110. What was it? What impact would it make in people's lives? (You may wish to draw a connection between this law and current immigration laws in the United States.)
5. Compare the release of Emily and Mary Edmonson to the release of Daniel Drayton and Edward Sayres.
6. Why were Drayton and Sayres still unsafe after they were released from incarceration? Why did some white people react so strongly to their actions?



CHAPTERS 17-19

1. What inspired the meeting between Emily Edmonson and Harriet Beecher Stowe?
2. What motivated Stowe to write *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? What impact did she hope to make? What was the public response to the book?
3. On p. 132 we learn that Stowe had trouble freeing Milly's last two children, Louisa and Josiah. Why might this have been so?
4. On p. 137 we learn that Emily forges on to become a teacher. What might be the significance of Emily's becoming a teacher, not just for her personally but for other African Americans?
5. Emily meets Myrtilla Miner, the founder of the Normal School for Colored Girls. What was Miner's mission or goal for the school? Why did some—including leading abolitionist Frederick Douglass—object to this mission?
6. What makes the homecoming described in chapter 19 bittersweet?
7. This book includes a family tree of the Edmonsons (pp. 152-153). What is the relevance of a family tree? What makes this family tree particularly significant?



In addition to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) wrote more than twenty books, including several under the pen name Christopher Crowfield.

Group Activities:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY\*

Performance objectives met through an activity may include:

COMMON CORE STANDARD GRADE	ELA-LITERACY
6-8	SL.6-8.1 (as well as A-D), SL.6-8.3, SL.7.3, SL.6-8.4
9-10	SL.9-10.1 (as well as A-D), SL.9-10.3, SL.9-10.4

\*Primary performance objectives are available at the end of the guide.

During or After Discussion of Chapters 6-9

Split the room into two groups: Have one group gather information about slavery in the South and have the other group gather information about slavery in the North. Ask students to focus on general opinions about slavery, treatment of enslaved people, and jobs enslaved people were forced to do. Ask each group to present its findings.

During or After Discussion of Chapters 10-13

Organize a debate over the question: Was it ethical to ransom enslaved people?

Use the debate to discuss how the practice of ransoming described in the book compares to current events and various governments' approaches when their citizens are kidnapped.



The only known photograph featuring the Edmonson sisters alone. Mary is standing with her hand on Emily's shoulder.

**During or After Discussion of Chapters 14–16**

Emily Edmonson's life, although difficult, is described as unique for an enslaved woman. Break the classroom into groups and ask them to research and discuss what happened to most enslaved people who ran away and then got caught. You might assign each group a different populations of enslaved people (i.e., women, men, children) and ask them to present their findings to the classroom.

**Essay prompts:**

Students are asked to utilize a wide range of Writing Standards in addition to History/Social Studies Standards and Reading: Informational Text Standards when responding to the following essay prompts.

1. Discuss a time when you saw a need for change but couldn't do or say anything. Why couldn't you or wouldn't you? What were the forces that influenced you? How are those forces similar to and different from the forces that affected enslaved people during the Edmonsons' time? How did you eventually address your situation? What did Emily Edmonson achieve despite her circumstances?
2. Even at the best of times, Emily Edmonson's life was affected by her gender, race, class, and education level. Which of these factors—or what combination of factors—had the greatest impact on her life as an enslaved person? On her education at Oberlin College? On her options as a trained teacher?
3. Find images of slave pens used in the United States during this time period. Describe what they looked like from the outside. Describe what they looked like on the inside. How do you explain this discrepancy? Be sure to discuss points of view of people included in *Passenger on the Pearl* when making your argument.
4. Slavery transforms people in concrete ways and less visible ways. Choose a person from *Passenger on the Pearl* and describe the transformation he or she went through over the course of the story.

**Keywords:**

- Freedom
- Enslaved
- Radical
- Dignity
- Humanity
- Ecumenical
- Ransom

**Resources:**

Drayton, Daniel. *Personal Memoir of Daniel Drayton, for Four Years and Four Months a Prisoner (for Charity's Sake) in Washington Jail*. Boston: B. Marsh, 1853 (e-book release December 8, 2003, Project Gutenberg; www.gutenberg.net; e-book #10401-8).

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon Which the Story Is Founded Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*. Boston: John P. Jewett & Co., 1853; replica: Elibron Classics; elibron.com, Adamant Media Corp.

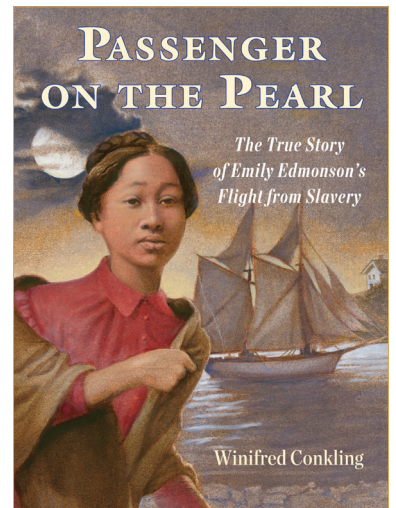
Aronson, Marc. *Sugar Changed the World: A Story of Magic, Spice, Slavery, Freedom, and Science*. New York: Clarion, 2010.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1845. (Free downloads available.)

Truth, Sojourner. *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 1850.

Additional reading recommendations and a guide to supplemental resources available in *Passenger in the Pearl*.

This guide was written by Evi Rivera-Williams and Emily Parlman.



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## Discussion Questions:

**Primary performance objectives met through these discussion questions:**

*Grades 6–8*

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1**

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2**

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8**

Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9**

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-8.1**

Cite the textual evidence that most strongly supports an analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.6-8.3**

Analyze how a text makes connections among and distinctions between individuals, ideas, or events (e.g., through comparisons, analogies, or categories).

*Grades 9–10*

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1**

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2**

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4**

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary describing political, social, or economic aspects of history/social science.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.7**

Integrate quantitative or technical analysis (e.g., charts, research data) with qualitative analysis in print or digital text.

### **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.3**

Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

## Group Activities:

Performance objectives met through an activity may include:

*Grades 6–8*

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.1 (as well as A-D)**

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade’s topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.3**

Delineate a speaker’s argument and specific claims, distinguishing claims that are supported by reasons and evidence from claims that are not.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.3**

Delineate a speaker’s argument and specific claims, evaluating the soundness of the reasoning and the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.3**

Delineate a speaker’s argument and specific claims, evaluating the soundness of the reasoning and relevance and sufficiency of the evidence and identifying when irrelevant evidence is introduced.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.6-8.4**

Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with pertinent descriptions, facts, details, and examples; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

*Grades 9–10*

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1 (as well as A-D)**

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.3**

Evaluate a speaker’s point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, identifying any fallacious reasoning or exaggerated or distorted evidence.

**CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.4**

Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.