



# The People Could Fly

by Virginia Hamilton

Teacher's Guide

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## Synopsis

### He Lion, Bruh Bear, and Bruh Rabbit

He Lion, Bruh Bear, and Bruh Rabbit Lion disturbs all the other animals with his roar: "ME AND MYSELF, ME AND MYSELF." Rabbit and some of the other animals ask him to stop, but he refuses. Rabbit tells Lion that Man is the real king of the forest. Together, the animals see three men. The first is a child, about nine years old. He is not yet a man, Rabbit explains. Then they see an elderly man, who Was Once a man. Finally, they come upon a man in the prime of his life. The man shoots Lion with his gun. Lion spins around and realizes that he is not king of the jungle. He no longer scares everyone with his roaring.

### Doc Rabbit, Bruh Fox, and Tar Baby

Rabbit and Fox are building a house. Since it is difficult, hot work, Rabbit fakes some calls so he can sneak off and drink the cream cooling in the brook. Finally, he drinks it all up. Realizing what Rabbit has done, Fox decides to trick his friend by making a Tar Baby. Fox wants to keep the house for himself because Rabbit hadn't worked much at all. Rabbit is indeed fooled, taking the Tar Baby for a real child. Rabbit butts the Tar Baby and gets stuck in it. To punish Rabbit for his laziness and greed, Fox throws him in a briar patch. To Fox's astonishment, Rabbit is delighted, because the briar patch is his home.

### Tappin, the Land Turtle

During a famine, Tappin the turtle convinces Eagle to help him fly to get food for his family. Tappin falls into the ocean, where he meets the king of the underworld. The king gives Tappin a dipper and a magic incantation, which Tappin uses to feed his family in great abundance. When the dipper loses its power, Tappin returns to the king of the underworld, who gives the turtle a

magic cowhide and another incantation. The cowhide beats children, not helps them. The cowhide beats Tappin as well, which is why all turtles' shells have marks all over them.

### Bruh Alligator and Bruh Deer

Deer has many enemies, including Alligator and the hunters. Chased by hunters, Deer manages to elude Alligator by sending the hounds into the water. Alligator tells Deer that he really enjoys eating the hounds, so they agree to help each other. It has been that way ever since.

### Bruh Lizard and Bruh Rabbit

Rabbit steals Lizard's magic sword, which he uses to destroy all the bush. Rabbit begs Lizard to stop the sword, which he does. Lizard takes the sword home. This is a magic-hoe story, one of the few tales in which wily Rabbit does not come out on top.

### Bruh Alligator Meets Trouble

Sis Alligator goes with Gator and Rabbit to find Trouble. The kids sneak along with them. Rabbit makes Trouble by lighting a fire. Gator and Sis Alligator think the fire is pretty, not realizing the danger it poses. Rabbit finds this highly amusing. He yells at the Gators to go back to the muddy river where they belong, now that they have seen Trouble. When the Gators are injured on their trip back to their river, they threaten to harm Rabbit if they ever see him again. This is why rabbits are afraid of alligators. The fire caused all alligators to have horny hides.

### Wolf and Birds and the Fish-Horse

Wanting to fool Wolf, his nephew tells him the dance is going to be a feast. Furious to find there is no food, Wolf demands feathers from the guests: Crow, Vulture, Hawk, and Guinea Hen. At the end of the dance, the famished Wolf starts crying. He sees Aunt Fish-Horse. Wolf asks her to take him home and offers to pay her. She agrees, but Wolf steals her milk. To retaliate, she drowns him.



## **The Beautiful Girl of the Moon Tower**

Anton dreams of a girl. His mother interprets the dreams to mean that Anton is in love with an enchanted girl who lives with her father in the tower of the moon. On his journey to find the girl, Anton meets an eagle, ant, lion, and dove who all offer to come to his aid when he is in trouble. Anton calls on each creature several times and is able to transform into that creature. Thanks to their help, Anton marries the girl of his dreams and becomes king of the inhabitants of the moon.

## **The Wolf and Little Daughter**

A little girl disobeys her father and picks flowers outside the gate. A wolf accosts her and tries to entrap her. She manages to slip back inside the gate, which she slams in the wolf's face.

## **Manuel Had a Riddle**

A king tells his kingdom that he will give a fortune in gold to anyone who can guess the riddle of the princess. Clever Manuel, the son of a poor widow, tells his mother that he intends to give the princess a riddle to solve and get the gold. His mother begs him not to go. She makes three loaves of bread and three cakes. She poisons the cakes. Manuel feeds the cakes to his donkeys, who die. Vultures eat the donkeys and die. Robbers buy the vultures, eat them, and die. Manuel makes a riddle from these events. The princess cannot solve the riddle. Unwilling to lose his fortune, the King gives Manuel three rabbits and tells him to set them free. They must be returned to the king in 30 days, fattened up. With a witch's help, Manuel outwits the king, the queen, and the princess and gets the fortune. He and his mother live happily ever after.

## **Papa John's Tall Tale**

In this traditional tall tale, Papa John tells about a huge turnip that he grew. It was so big that Jake has been eating it his entire life; in fact, he just ate the last piece for his dinner that day!

## **The Two Johns**

In an outrageously grisly tale, Big John kills Little John's horse. Little John sells the magic horsehide for two bushels of money. Little John steps on the hide and the devil appears. Back home, Big John kills two horses and tries to sell their hides to make money as Little John had done. When no one buys them, Big John kills Little John's grandmother. Little John tricks a storekeeper into buying the body. Little John says that every bad thing Big John does turns into something good for Little

John. Big John kills his grandmother but when he gets no money for her, he decides to kill Little John. Little John tricks a herdsman into getting killed in his stead. Little John throws Big John into the sea.

## **Wiley, His Mama, and the Hairy Man**

Wiley's mother tells him that the Hairy Man, a monster, killed his father and is going to kill him. With his mother's help, Wiley tricks the Hairy Man three times. As a result, the Hairy Man will leave them alone from now on.

## **John and the Devil's Daughter**

John de Conquer was hunting for the Devil. The Devil's daughter and John fall in love so she helps him fulfill two labors. First, John clears some land. Second, John plows sixty acres, plants, and grows corn for dinner that evening. John transforms into a fox and the Devil's daughter into a pond. Then they trap the Devil in some thorns and get away safely.

## **The Peculiar Such Thing**

In this scary ghost story, an unnamed fellow sees a strange creature and cooks and eats its tail. That night, he hears a voice asking for its "tailypo" back. The creature eventually falls on the man and devours him. The creature gets its tailypo back.

## **Little Eight John**

In this cautionary, moralistic tale, Little Eight John is a mean child who does terrible things to bring ill fortune to his family. Eventually, Old Bloody Bones rises up, catches him, and reduces him to a greasy-looking spot—which his mother cleans off the table. This is what happens to children who do not obey their parents.

## **Jack and the Devil**

The Devil comes to take Jack, a wicked and cruel man. Jack first tricks the Devil into turning himself into a dime. In exchange for his freedom, the Devil gives Jack a year to repent. At the end of the year when Jack still hasn't repented, he trees the Devil. This time Jack forces the Devil to agree to leave him alone forever. When Jack dies, both heaven and hell refuse to admit him, so he is forced to wander for eternity.

## **Better Wait Till Martin Comes**

In this comic scary tale, John ends up in a haunted house. Three huge cats appear, one at a time. The cats say, "We'd better wait till Martin comes." As the suspense builds to its climax, John runs out of the house in terror.

## Carrying the Running Away

The speaker explains how he rows runaway slaves to freedom across the river to a place called Ripley. At Ripley, the speaker meets a man named Mr. Rankins, a member of the Underground Railroad. The speaker almost got caught in 1863. In the essay after the story, the narrator explains that this is a true slave narrative, related by Arnold Gragston, a slave in Kentucky.

## How Nehemiah Got Free

Nehemiah, a smart slave, got his freedom by making Mister Warton, a cruel slaveowner, laugh.

## The Talking Cooter

Jim, a slave who was a dreamer, hears a raccoon talk to him. Jim tells his owner about the talking creature, and his owner promises Jim his freedom if his wild tale is true. The raccoon does talk to the slave owner, and Jim is granted his freedom.

## The Riddle Tale of Freedom

A slave challenges his owner to figure out a riddle or grant the slave his freedom. The riddle concerns "Love," the slave's dog. The slave stumps his owner and gets his freedom.

## The Most Useful Slave

John was the most useful slave on the plantation. John knew how to foretell the future, but he is stumped when confronted by a box. Ready to give up, John guesses that the box contains a raccoon—which it does! John doesn't get his freedom, but he retains his special value as a prophet.

## The People Could Fly

Laboring in the cotton field, Sarah and her baby are whipped by the cruel overseer. Elderly Toby helps them escape by using the ancient magic words to fly to freedom, joining hands together in the sky. The slaves who could not fly told their children about it when they were free. And so the story has been passed down through generations.

## Timeline of the Underground Railroad and Slavery

- 1526** A Spanish explorer brings a group of Africans to South Carolina to create a settlement. They escape and settle with Native Americans.
- 1565** African slaves are brought to Spanish colony of St. Augustine, Florida.
- 1619** The first recorded Africans in the colony of Virginia arrive at Jamestown on a Dutch ship. Colonial Williamsburg historians believe these Africans were indentured servants.
- 1639** Blacks in Virginia are not required to bear arms although white settlers must.
- 1640** First recorded case of slavery prescribed by law in the colony of Virginia.
- 1641** Massachusetts Bay Colony legalizes slavery.
- 1642** Black women are counted as tithables-taxable property. Virginia passes a law making it illegal to help runaway slaves.
- 1660** Virginia legalizes slavery.
- 1661** Children born to enslaved mothers are considered slaves as well, regardless of their fathers' status. Children of enslaved fathers and free mothers are not considered slaves.
- 1669** Accidentally killing a slave during correction is not considered a crime.
- 1670** Blacks and Native Americans are not permitted to own servants of another race. All non-Christians arriving in the colony by water are hereafter considered slaves.
- 1672** Runaway slaves resisting capture may be killed.
- 1680** Blacks are forbidden to possess any type of weapon.
- 1682** A court is convened to try all slaves accused of crimes. The court's decision cannot be appealed. Blacks are required to give up ownership of cattle, horses, and sheep.
- 1688** Mennonite Quakers in Pennsylvania sign an anti-slavery resolution.

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- 1739** Stono Rebellion in South Carolina. A group of fugitives escape, killing 21 whites along the way. After their capture, 43 slaves are executed.
- 1740** North Carolina law prosecutes people helping slaves to escape.
- 1769** Matthew Ashby, a free black man living in Williamsburg, Virginia, obtains the freedom of his wife, Ann, and his two children, John and Mary. Ashby may have been the first to have successfully petitioned the court to eliminate the tax on free black women.
- 1773** George Lile and Andres Bryan organize the first African American Baptist Church at Savannah, Georgia. Members of this church helped escaping slaves.
- 1775** First abolitionist society formed in Philadelphia.
- 1787** Northwest Ordinance: slavery is prohibited in any of this new territory.  
The Free African society is organized in Philadelphia. They form the African Methodist Episcopal Church, which assisted escaped slaves.
- 1792** Eli Whitney invents the cotton gin.
- 1793** The Fugitive Slave Act protects the rights of slave owners to retrieve runaway slaves from free states and territories.
- 1803** Haitians win independence from France and abolish slavery.
- 1804** Nearly all Northern states have abolished slavery by this time.
- 1808** Federal law ends the importation of African slaves.
- 1820** The Missouri Compromise admits Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state. All territory north of latitude 36-30' is declared free, all territory south of the line is slaveholding.
- 1822** A slave revolt led by Denmark Vesey is suppressed in Charleston, South Carolina, 36 collaborators are hanged.
- 1830** Lewis Tappan forms the American Anti-Slavery Society.
- 1831** William Lloyd Garrison publishes *The Liberator*.
- 1833** Nat Turner's insurrection.  
Oberlin College in Ohio is founded; becomes a center of abolitionist and underground railroad activity.
- All slavery is abolished in the British Empire, including Canada.
- 1840** New York, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, Vermont and Ohio pass a series of "personal liberty laws."  
Enslaved African revolt on the Spanish ship *Amistad* off the coast of Cuba.
- 1843** Prigg vs. Pennsylvania challenging the constitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793.
- 1847** Frederick Douglass begins publication of the newspaper, *The North Star*.
- 1848** First Women's Rights Convention held in Seneca Falls, New York
- 1849** Harriet Tubman escapes from slavery, begins helping others to escape.
- 1850** The Fugitive Slave Law is passed by Congress, strengthening the 1793 Act.
- 1852** Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.
- 1857** U.S. Supreme Court decides in the Dred Scott decision that slaves do not become free when taken into free territory.
- 1859** John Brown and others attack the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, to prepare to free slaves. Ten of his men are killed; he and seven others are hanged after trial.
- 1860** Abraham Lincoln is elected president. South Carolina is the first state to secede from the Union.
- 1861** March First Conscription Act for Union.  
May General B. F. Butler, in command of Fortress Monroe, Va., rules that slaves escaping to his lines were "contraband of war" which he would not return to their masters.
- 1863** The Emancipation Proclamation frees slaves in the seceding states.
- 1865** The Thirteenth Amendment makes slavery illegal and extends civil rights to former slaves.  
The Civil War ends with Union victory.
- 1866** The Fourteenth Amendment extends civil rights to former slaves.
- 1869** The Fifteenth Amendment permits men to vote without regard to race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

## Author Sketch

The African American writer Virginia Hamilton was born in 1936 in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Her sense of place and heritage infuse her writing. Her mother's side of the family was descended from a fugitive slave, Levi Perry, who had settled in Yellow Springs. The Perry family grew and prospered by farming. Many of her relatives were storytellers and Hamilton drew from this oral tradition as she forged her own career.



Hamilton knew from childhood that she wanted to continue her family's tradition of storytelling by becoming a writer. To make her dream come true, in 1952, Hamilton accepted a full scholarship to study writing at Antioch College. When one of her writing professors encouraged her to try to get her stories published, Hamilton took a summer job as a bookkeeper in New York City, the center of the publishing world. Soon, she decided to leave college and settle in New York year-round.

Shortly after arriving in New York City, Hamilton met and married poet and anthologist Arnold Adoff. The couple traveled to Africa, which had long been one of Hamilton's goals. The trip proved to be a catalyst for her writing by helping her to create her first published novel, *Zeely*. This novel set the course for all her writing with its awareness of African American history. The same threads run through *The People Could Fly*, as Hamilton retells old myths and folk tales from her own black ancestry—as well as many other cultures—in an attempt to restore pride in this diverse literary heritage.

Throughout the 1990s, Hamilton continued to create literature dealing with folklore but with a new emphasis: strong female characters. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Veronica Chambers characterized Hamilton's *Her Stories: African-American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales* as "possibly the first collection of such folk literature to focus exclusively on African-American women and girls."

Hamilton's final novel, *Time Pieces: The Book of Times*, was completed shortly before she died of breast cancer in 2002. Published after her death, the partly-autobiographical stories includes strands from her childhood.

## Illustrator Sketch

The Dillons won two Caldecott Medals for their illustrations. They illustrated five books by Virginia Hamilton, including the black-and-white illustrations in *The People Could Fly*.



Diane and Leo Dillon have collaborated on their art for over forty years. They were born eleven days apart in 1933 on opposite coasts. Leo was born in Brooklyn, New York, where he grew up, of parents who were immigrants from Trinidad. His parents encouraged and supported his intense interest in art that began in his youth and was honed at a New York City arts high school. Diane (Sorber) was born and grew up in southern California. Her parents also encouraged her early interest in art, but she received little formal training in this until after high school, at three different colleges.

Diane and Leo met at the Parsons School of Design in New York City in 1954, where they were fierce competitors, with each greatly admiring and greatly jealous of the other's work. When their romantic involvement developed, this rivalry and being a biracial couple in an unwelcoming society became disruptive. They briefly separated, but married in 1957. A few years later, the couple began working together as artists, which merged their rivalry into an immensely successful collaboration. Over the years, the Dillons have honed this team art to an output that they attribute to a "third artist"—an artistic process that blends their contributions by them continually passing a piece back and forth between themselves, resulting in a unique "third artist" creation. The Dillons have received numerous awards and are highly acclaimed for their creative, bold, and effective use of a wide variety of techniques and media. The Dillons say, "That children are our audience is at once a responsibility, an honor, and a profound joy."

## Critic's Corner

Virginia Hamilton is largely responsible for elevating the profile of African American children's literature through the high quality of her work. Critic Ethel L. Heins summarized Hamilton's achievement this way in *Horn Book*: "Few writers of fiction for young people are as daring, inventive, and challenging to read—or to review—as Virginia Hamilton. Frankly making demands on her readers, she nevertheless expresses herself in a style essentially simple and concise."

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Bonnie Verbug, writing in *Black Issues Book Review*, was equally laudatory. Verbug wrote that Hamilton's "rare ability to combine storytelling with scholarly research allowed her to rescue and retell important narratives that would otherwise have remained lost."

As a result, Hamilton is one of the most celebrated American writers: her books have won every major children's award as well as many awards previously reserved for adult novels. For example, her novel *M. C. Higgins, the Great* was the first work ever to win both the National Book Award and the Newbery Medal. She is the first African American to win a Newbery Medal and the first children's book author to be awarded a MacArthur Genius Grant.

*The People Could Fly* is among her most celebrated books. The collection of African American folk tales won a Coretta Scott King Award, and NCTE Teachers' Choice Award, and a Booklist Children's Editors' Choice award. The book was named a *School Library Journal* Best Books of the Year, a *Horn Book* Fanfare, an ALA Notable Book, and a *New York Times* Best Illustrated Children's Books of the Year.

Reviews were laudatory; *Booklist* critic Hazel Rochman wrote: "The stirring title story in the late Virginia Hamilton's 1985 collection of American black folktales is an unforgettable slave escape fantasy, retold here in terse, lyrical prose that stays true to the oral tradition Hamilton knew from her family and her scholarly research."

Margaret Bush, the *School Library Journal* reviewer, awarding the book a starred review and said: "Sadly, not all of the people could fly. But those who couldn't continued to tell the marvelous tale, even in their eventual freedom. The book is a lovely tribute to Hamilton."

### Other Works by the Author

*Zeely* (1967)  
*The House of Dies Drear* (1968)  
*The Time-Ago Tales of Jahdu* (1969)  
*The Planet of Junior Brown* (1971)  
*Time-Ago Lost: More Tales of Jahdu* (1973)  
*M. C. Higgins, the Great* (1974)  
*Arilla Sun Down* (1976)  
*Illusion and Reality* (1976)  
*Justice and Her Brothers* (1978)  
*Jahdu* (1980)  
*Dustland* (1980)

*The Gathering* (1981)  
*Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* (1982)  
*The Magical Adventures of Pretty Pearl* (1983)  
*Willie Bea and the Time the Martians Landed* (1983)  
*A Little Love* (1984)  
*Junius over Far* (1985)  
*The Mystery of Drear House: The Conclusion of the Dies Drear Chronicle* (1987)  
*A White Romance* (1987)  
*In the Beginning: Creation Stories from around the World* (1988)  
*Anthony Burns: The Defeat and Triumph of a Fugitive Slave* (1988)  
*Bells of Christmas* (1989)  
*The Dark Way: Stories from the Spirit World* (1990)  
*Cousins* (1990)  
*The All-Jahdu Storybook* (1991)  
*Drylongso* (1992)  
*Many Thousand Gone: African Americans from Slavery to Freedom*, (1992)  
*Plain City* (1993)  
*Her Stories: African-American Folktales, Fairy Tales, and True Tales* (1995)  
*Jaguarundi* (1995)  
*When Birds Could Talk and Bats Could Sing: The Adventures of Bruh Sparrow, Sis Wren, and Their Friends* (1995)  
*A Ring of Tricksters: Animal Tales from America, the West Indies, and Africa* (1997)  
*Second Cousins* (1998)  
*Bluish: A Novel* (1999)  
*The Girl Who Spun Gold* (2000)  
*Wee Winnie Witch's Skinny: An Original Scare Tale for Halloween*, (2001)  
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## General Objectives

1. To understand the title
2. To appreciate folk tales
3. To understand the arrangement of tales
4. To explore slavery
5. To read about a trickster character
6. To appreciate aspects of African and African American culture
7. To understand the dialect
8. To appreciate the beautiful artwork
9. To analyze how the art and text work together to tell the story
10. To determine the importance of folk tales

## Specific Objectives

1. To analyze how "flying" is a metaphor for using your imagination to escape from slavery and other untenable situations
2. To explore the oral tradition of folk tales from different, related cultures
3. To grasp that the first group of stories are animal tales
4. To understand that second group of stories are fanciful and exaggerated
5. To see how the third group of stories are tales of the supernatural
6. To realize that the fourth group of stories are slave tales of freedom
7. To appreciate why the tales are arranged this way: to build from the light and humorous to the serious and significant
8. To investigate Rabbit, the traditional trickster character
9. To "translate" the dialect as necessary into Standard Written English to facilitate comprehension
10. To analyze how folk tales transmit culture and values

## Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Virginia Hamilton's style, present the following terms and applications to the story book:

**Dialect** the way people speak in a certain region or area. In a dialect, certain words are spelled and pronounced differently. This is evident in the following line from the first story, for instance: "Say that he Lion would get up each and every mornin." In Standard Written English, "he Lion" would be written "Lion" and "mornin" would be written "morning." Hamilton added an extra pronoun and clipped the final "g" from "morning." Writers use dialects to describe their characters and setting more fully. Here, dialect helps us visualize the people and their way of living.

**Humor** parts of a story that are funny. Humor can be created through sarcasm, word play, irony, and exaggeration. Hamilton uses exaggeration to make some of her stories amusing. This is evident in "Better Wait Till Martin Comes," a wildly exaggerated tale. She also weaves humor into otherwise more serious stories, such as having the sweaty rabbit remove his wet coat, wring it out, and put it back on in "Doc Rabbit, Bruh Fox, and Tar Baby."

**Theme** the main idea of a literary work, a general statement about life. The theme can be stated outright in the work, or readers will have to infer it from details about plot, characters, and setting. Although all the stories in *The People Could Fly* seem at first glance to be disconnected, they are united by the theme of freedom. Hamilton builds to this theme, making it fully evident in the final, title story.

## The Importance of Setting

Setting is a critical factor in *The People Could Fly* because the folk tales must be set before the slaves were emancipated (after the Civil War). Otherwise, the stories would not make sense. This is because many of the folk tales describe the slaves' overriding concern: freedom. On January 1, 1863, Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation declaring the freedom of all slaves in Confederate territory not already under Union control. Its immediate impact was to free only some runaway slaves, but thousands more slaves were liberated as the Union armies advanced. The border states freed their own slaves, except Kentucky. Legally, their emancipation was permanently effected by the Thirteenth Amendment ratified in December 1865.



## Cross-Curricular Sources

William Armstrong, *Souder*  
Sharon Draper, *Tears of a Tiger*  
Sharon Draper, *Forged By Fire*  
Christopher Paul Curtis, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*  
Christopher Paul Curtis, *Bud, Not Buddy*  
Sharon G. Flake, *The Skin I'm In*  
Jack Ezra Keats, *The Snowy Day*  
Robert Lipsyte, *The Contender*  
William Dean Myers, *Me, Mop, and the Moondance Kid*  
Jeanette Winter, *Follow the Drinking Gourd*  
Jacqueline Woodson, *Coming on Home Soon*

### Nonfiction

Chrisanne Beckner, *100 African Americans Who Shaped History*  
Louis Haber, *Black Pioneers of Science and Invention*  
Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*  
Cal Massey, *Famous African American Women*  
Diane Patrick, *The New York Public Library Amazing African American History: A Book of Answers for Kids*  
Nancy I. Sanders, *A Kid's Guide to African American History*  
Jeffrey Stewart, *1001 Things Kids Should Know About African American History*  
Otha Richard Sullivan, *African American Inventors*

### DVDs, Videos

*African Americans* (1993)  
*Harlem Renaissance: Fats Waller, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Nat King Cole* (DVD)  
*A Legacy of Patriotism and Valor: African Americans in WW II* (1998)  
*Lullaby of Harlem* (DVD)  
*Story of a People: Black Youth* (1998)

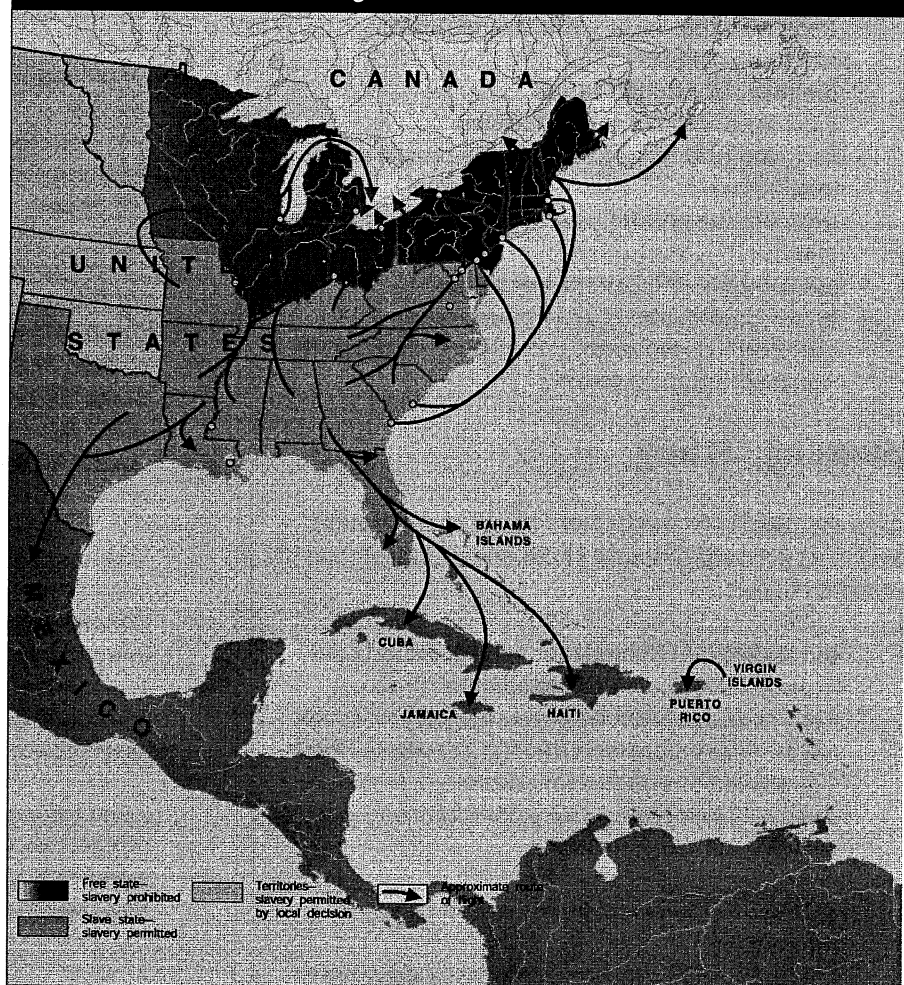
### Media

*The People Could Fly* was adapted for the Reading Rainbow TV series.  
*The House of Dies Drear* was adapted for the PBS series *Wonderworks* and released on videocassette and on audiocassette.  
*M. C. Higgins, the Great* was released on audiodisc  
*The Planet of Junior Brown* was adapted as the film *Junior's Groove*, PIX Entertainment, 1999.

### Internet

Virginia Hamilton (Official site)  
[www.virginiahamilton.com](http://www.virginiahamilton.com)  
Descriptive Writing with Virginia Hamilton.  
[teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/diary/index.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/diary/index.htm)  
The Virginia Hamilton Conference  
[dept.kent.edu/virginiahiltonconf](http://dept.kent.edu/virginiahiltonconf)  
Meet Virginia Hamilton  
[www.eduplace.com/kids/hmr/mtai/hamilton.html](http://www.eduplace.com/kids/hmr/mtai/hamilton.html)  
Virginia Hamilton  
[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia\\_Hamilton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_Hamilton)

Selected Routes of the Underground Railroad



# The People Could Fly Virginia Hamilton

## Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly* should include these aspects:

### Themes

- animals
- artwork
- dialect
- discrimination
- flying
- humor
- love
- poverty
- slavery
- the supernatural

### Motifs

- appreciating animal trickster tales
- evaluating the effect of the artwork on the text
- understanding various African and African American dialects
- dreaming of a better future
- experiencing the horrors of slavery
- escaping from slavery through the power of the imagination
- grasping the author's use of humor to lighten her tales
- assessing the effect of horror stories
- understanding the morals in some tales
- analyzing the importance of culture and its transmission through literature

## Meaning Study

Below are words, phrases, sentences, or thought units that have particular meaning in the novel. Explain the meaning of each.

1. But no amount of hard labor and suffering could suppress their powers of imagination. (p. x)  
*(In her Introduction, Hamilton provides a scholarly yet readable background for her traditional stories from the African, African American, and slavery heritage. The collection's primary theme is introduced here: the power of the imagination to free people from slavery, in a figurative sense.)*
2. Say that he Lion would get up each and every mornin. (p. 5)  
*(The first line in the first story shows Hamilton's use of dialect. As she*

*explains in many of the brief essays that follow the stories, she combined various sources to regularize the speech patterns of specific regional dialects. Students are apt to find the dialect difficult to read at first. Explain that dialect, like any dialogue, is meant to be read aloud. Model this for students by reading the stories aloud. As students get more comfortable with the dialect, invite volunteers to read selected passages aloud to the class.)*

3. As himself, Anton married the girl. He became king of the inhabitants of the moon. (p. 59)  
*(This folk tale, as with many in the collection, involves transformation. Anton transforms himself into many different creatures to triumph. This builds to the title story, when the slaves fly away, transformed by the ability to fly. In both cases, we see the power of the imagination to reshape reality.)*
4. "The cake kills Paul,/Paul kills three,/And three kills seven." (p. 67)  
*(This story, as with several others in the collection, shows the importance of riddles. Telling riddles was a favorite slave pastime, second only to telling animal tales. It became a wish about freedom: when a slave solved a riddle, the slave would be free.)*
5. What happens to all little chil'ren who never mind. (p. 125)  
*(This cautionary message is firmly in the tradition of tales from the oral tradition that instruct, such as Aesop's Fables. Many—like this one—are grisly, while others are less frightening.)*
6. So he agreed to leave Jack alone forever, too. (p. 131)  
*(American literature features many traditional tales about humans grappling with the Devil. For instance, Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" is a classic in this genre. In many instances (such as "The Devil and Dan'l Webster," the human manages to outwit the Devil, but that isn't the case here.)*
7. Well, we did get there. We pulled up there and went on to freedom. (p. 145)  
*(The stories in the last section are deeply emotional because they are based on true slave narratives rather than being imaginative works of the oral tradition. The story from which this quote comes, for instance, is part of Hamilton's own family heritage as slaves.)*
8. And Nehemiah got his freedom. (p. 150)  
*(In this story, the main character gets his freedom by making his master laugh. This story shows how some slaves used great ingenuity to attain their freedom.)*

9. And they too rose on the air. (p.170)  
*(In this deeply emotional story, the slaves use the magic words to fly away from slavery. The Master tries to kill Toby, the slave who taught his fellow slaves the magic words, but Toby just laughs. He has the power to escape through magic.)*
10. They say that the children of the ones who could not fly told their children. And now, me. I have told it to you. (p. 172)  
*(Hamilton explains that stories about slaves flying away might be a way to explain that slaves had run away. It might also have been the code words used to plan an escape. Clearly, it is also an expression of wish fulfillment. The story shows the tremendous importance of the oral tradition, of literature, of story telling to preserve and pass down culture.)*

## Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers by referring to passages in the book.

### Questions 1-5 (Literal Level)

1. What lesson does Lion learn in "He Lion, Bruh Bear, and Bruh Rabbit"?  
*(He learns through experience to fear man. Man, not lion, is king of the jungle.)*
2. How does Fox punish rabbit in "Doc Rabbit, Bruh Fox, and Tar Baby"?  
*(He throws Rabbit into a briar patch.)*
3. What deal do Alligator and Deer make?  
*(Deer leads the hounds to the water for Alligator to eat. In return, Alligator does not eat Deer.)*
4. How did alligators get horny hides?  
*(Their hides were injured in a fire set by Rabbit, who was intent on showing them Trouble.)*
5. Who helps Manuel outwit the king?  
*(A witch helps him, so he succeeds through magic.)*

### Questions 6-8 (Interpretative Level)

6. How are the first set of stories, "He Lion, Bruh Bear, and Bruh Rabbit and Other Animal Tales," similar? Why were they grouped together?  
*(Obviously, they all concern animals. Further, they nearly all explain origins, such as the origin of the turtles' striated shell and the alligators' horny hide. In addition, all but one story shows Rabbit as the traditional "trickster" character.)*

7. Why were all the stories in "The Beautiful Girl of the Moon Tower" grouped together?  
*(All these stories are fanciful and concern flights of the imagination. These are similar to traditional fairy tales rather than animal stories or origin myths.)*
8. What does Anton symbolize or stand for?  
*(He stands for the poor and the weak who triumph with help from animals and magic. He attains the beautiful young woman as his reward, a traditional fairy tale ending.)*

### Questions 9 and 10 (Critical Level)

9. Did the Wolf in "Wolf and the Birds and the Fish-Horse" deserve to die? Why or why not?  
*(Yes, because he stole the Fish-Horse's milk when she was busy helping him; No; the offense was too minor and she should have just dunked him in the ocean once or twice.)*
9. Do you think the pictures should be in color rather than in black and white? Why or why not?  
*(Possible answers: The black and white motif fits the stories because it shows the sharp dichotomy between the black and white cultures before slavery was abolished in 1863.)*
10. Which stories did you like the best? Why?  
*(Students are apt to like the animals trickster tales the best because they are amusing.)*

### Questions 11-12 (Creative Level)

11. Imagine that you were a griot, a traditional African storyteller. You can only preserve one story. Which story would you chose to pass down and why?
12. Write an email to a friend explaining what you learned from this book.

## Across the Curriculum

### Language Arts

1. *The People Could Fly* is a collection of African American folk tales. Retell a folk tale from your heritage.
2. Imagine that people really could fly, that you could fly! Tell a story about how you would use your powers.
3. One of the critics wrote: "The large paintings are magic realism at its finest, with clear portraits showing individuals and the enduring connections between them." Explain what "magic realism" is. Find another literary work that uses magic realism, such as the novels of Laura Esquivel.

# The People Could Fly Virginia Hamilton

4. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is one of the most famous novels about slavery. Indeed, President Abraham Lincoln credits its author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, with starting the Civil War through the power of her prose. Read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and explain what new information you learn about slavery.
5. Anton dreams of the moon and a beautiful girl who lives there in a tower. Compile a pamphlet of other famous myths about the moon, such as the man in the moon and the moon having a strange effect on people's moods.

## Art/Music

1. Research some slave spirituals such as "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Explain what messages were enclosed in the songs.
2. Write a song about flying. Share it with your classmates.
3. Create a new picture for this book. Illustrate a scene that you especially liked, one that the Dillons did not draw.
4. Work with some friends to make a mural that shows the major events in the book.
5. The illustrations for the collection are black and white. Choose one of the Dillons' illustrations and render it in color. Which version do you like best? Why?

## History/Social Studies

1. In 1619, the first recorded Africans in the colony of Virginia arrived at Jamestown on a Dutch ship. Colonial Williamsburg historians believe these Africans were indentured servants. Explain what "indentured servants" were and why someone would choose this option to come to the colonies.
2. The Quakers were the first group in the colonies to renounce slavery. Report on the Quakers. What are their beliefs? How do they worship? How many people in America today identify themselves as Quakers?
3. Explain what the "peculiar institution" was and how it got this name.
4. In 1792, Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin. Explain what effect this invention had on the

expansion of slavery in the South. Theorize how the course of American history might have changed had Whitney not invented the cotton gin.

5. In 1840, enslaved African revolted on the Spanish ship *Amistad* off the coast of Cuba. Find out more about this important event in American history. Check some online resources on the topic.
6. Read the Emancipation Proclamation and explain what it means. How was the document important in a symbolic sense?

## Speech/Drama

1. Hamilton tells these folk tales in dialect. Working with a friend, improvise a conversation in the dialect that you and friends use everyday.
2. Tappin uses the magic dipper to alleviate a famine. In a roundtable discussion, explore some of the major problems facing the world today, including famine. How can they be alleviated?
3. Manuel tells some riddles to win riches and security. Tell some riddles to amuse your classmates. See if you can stump them!
4. Tall tales such as "Papa John's Tall Tale" were traditionally told around campfires, as cowhands, pioneers, and others tried to top each other with outrageous stories. Working with a small group of classmates, create a tall tale. Make it outrageously unbelievable.
5. Remember that folk tales are part of the oral tradition, so they are intended to be shared aloud. Choose any one of these folk tales and present it as a reader's theater. Include sound effects as appropriate.

## Mathematics/Science

1. People can fly, safely inside of airplanes. Explain how airplanes fly. Create a diagram or poster to make the science of aeronautics clear.
2. In "He Lion, Bruh Bear, and Bruh Rabbit," Possum "plays dead." Find out how the possums do this and why.
3. Anton dreams of the moon and a beautiful girl who lives there. Report on what we know of the moon.

4. Some of these stories concern frogs and toads. How are they the same? How are they different? Report on frogs and toads.

### Alternate Assessment

1. Anton transforms into an eagle, ant, lion, and dove. Imagine that you could transform into any creature that you wished. Who would it be and why?
2. Some of these stories concern good luck and bad luck. What are some traditional good luck symbols in our culture? Draw a group of them and then create a new good luck symbol that you can carry around or make to share with friends.
3. Hold a Juneteenth celebration. See page 150 of *The People Could Fly* for some background on this celebration.

### Teacher's Notes

# The People Could Fly Virginia Hamilton

## Vocabulary

Complete the crossword puzzle with the following words from *The People Could Fly*.

### Word Bank

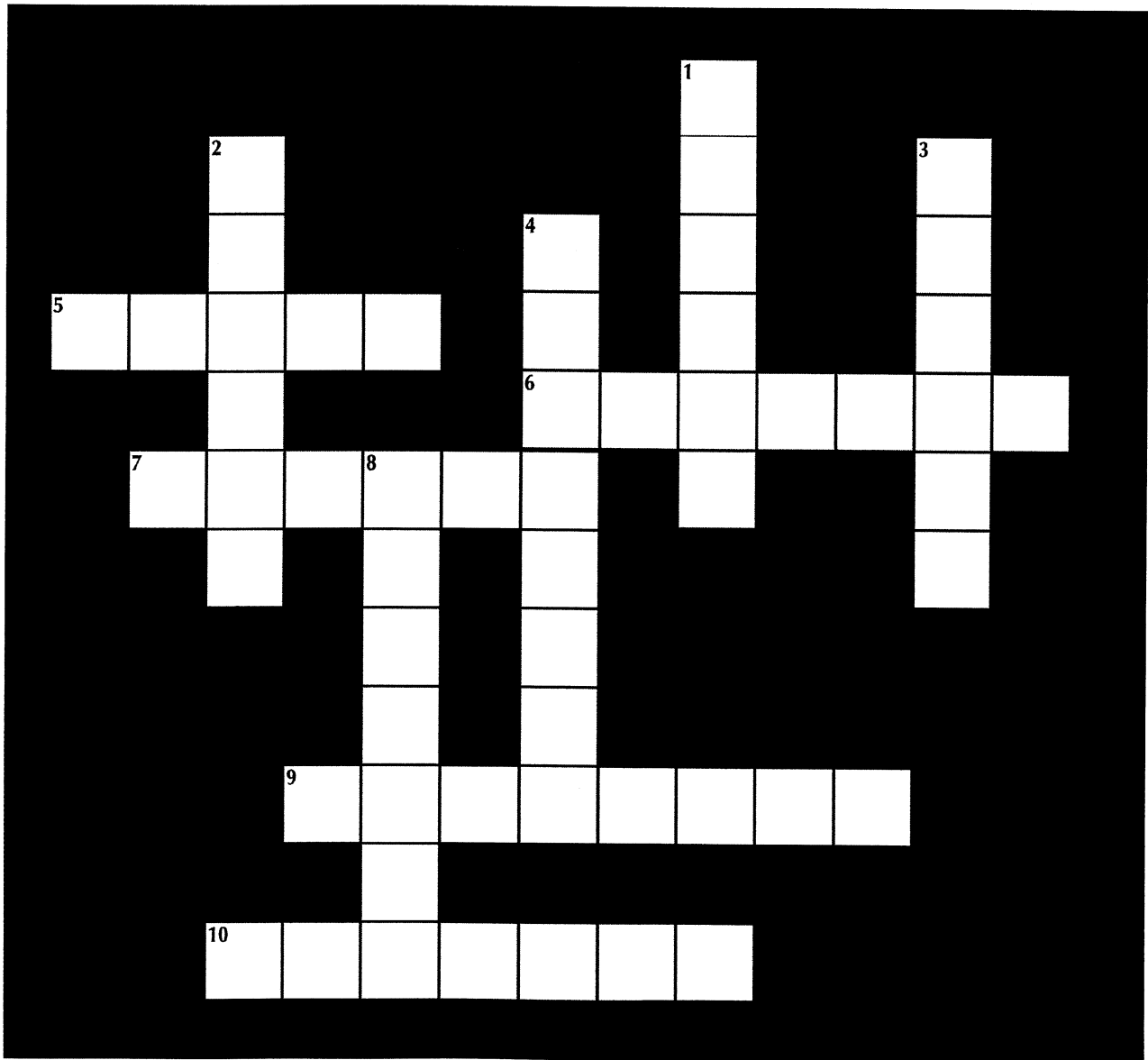
sorrow      famine      terrapin      rural      dialect  
ancestor      vittles      fiddle      conjure      turnip

### Across

5. countryside
6. make magic and enchantment
7. violin
9. turtle
10. food

### Down

1. starvation time
2. root vegetable
3. sadness
4. relative who lived in a previous generation
8. the way people speak in a certain region or area



## Comprehension Test A

### Part I: Matching (20 points)

Match each description with a name from the list. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left.

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| ___ 1. Disturbs all the other animals by roaring: "ME AND MYSELF, ME AND MYSELF." | A. Tappin                                       |
| ___ 2. A turtle   | B. Bruh Deer                                    |
| ___ 3. Anton  | C. He Lion                                      |
| ___ 4. Outsmarts the Wolf   | D. Tar Baby                                     |
| ___ 5. A trick that Bruh Fox plays on his lazy friend Doc Rabbit                  | E. Doc Rabbit                                   |
| ___ 6. A wicked and cruel man who is doomed to wander for all of eternity         | F. Little Daughter                              |
| ___ 7. A spoiled little boy who brings misfortune to his family                   | G. John de Conquer                              |
| ___ 8. Gets thrown in a briar patch by Bruh Fox                                   | H. Little Eight John                            |
| ___ 9. Falls in love with the Devil's daughter                                    | I. Jack   |
| ___ 10. Makes a pact with Bruh Alligator so Bruh Alligator doesn't eat him        | J. marries the beautiful girl in the Moon Tower |

### Part II: Identification (20 points)

Briefly describe each person, place, or thing and explain why it is important in the story.

1. rabbit
2. flying
3. riddles
4. folk tales
5. tailypo

## Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

### Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if a part is false.

- 1. Rabbit and Fox are building a house. It's difficult, hot work, so Rabbit drinks up the cream cooling in the brook.
- 2. Rabbit steals Lizard's magic sword, which he uses to destroy all the bush.
- 3. In "Bruh Alligator Meets Trouble," the Alligator gets attacked by fierce crows.
- 4. In "Wolf and Birds and the Fish-Horse," Aunt Fish-Horse drowns Manuel because he harmed the birds.
- 5. In "The Beautiful Girl of the Moon Tower," Anton meets an eagle, ant, lion, and dove who all offer to come to his aid when he is in trouble.
- 6. In "Manuel Had a Riddle," the King tries to trick Manuel by giving him three fierce dogs and telling him to set them free in 30 days.
- 7. In "Papa John's Tall Tale," Papa John tells about a huge turnip that he grew.
- 8. In "The Two Johns," Big John kills Little John's entire family, even his mother and father.
- 9. In "Wiley, His Mama, and the Hairy Man," the Hairy Man is a monster.
- 10. "The Peculiar Such Thing" is a scary monster story.

### Part IV: Essay (40 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

- 1. Explain how the stories are grouped in this anthology.
- 2. Choose any two tales and show how they are the same and different.
- 3. Describe what function folk tales such as these play in the transmission of culture.
- 4. Argue that the illustrations do or do not help your understanding of the stories. Provide specific examples to make your point.



## Comprehension Test B

### Part I: Fill in the Blank (20 points)

Choose the term that best completes each of the following statements.

1. Because Doc Rabbit drank up all the cream, Bruh Fox decides to trick his friend by making a **(huge wall, Tar Baby)**.
2. To punish Rabbit for his laziness and greed, Fox throws him in a **(deep swamp, briar patch)**.
3. During a famine, Tappin the turtle convinces **(Alligator, Eagle)** to help him fly to get food for his family.
4. Tappin returns to the king of the underworld, who gives him a magic **(cowhide, lasso)** and another set of magic words.
5. Chased by hunters in "Bruh Alligator and Bruh Deer," Deer manages to elude Alligator by sending the **(hounds, rabbits)**, into the water.
6. Rabbit steals Lizard's magic **(hat, sword)**, which he uses to destroy all the bush.
7. Wolf steals Aunt Fish-Horse's **(gold, milk)**.
8. In "Papa John's Tall Tale," Papa John tells about a huge **(pumpkin, turnip)** that he grew.
9. In "The Two Johns," Big John kills Little John's **(horse, cats)**.
10. In "Wiley, His Mama, and the Hairy Man," Wiley and his Mama trick the Hairy Man **(three, five)** times before the Hairy Man leaves them alone for good.

### Part III: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if a part is false.

- \_\_\_ 1. In "He Lion, Bruh Bear, and Bruh Rabbit," He Lion learns that Man is the real king of the forest.
- \_\_\_ 2. The King of the Underworld gives Tappin a hoe and seeds, which Tappin uses to feed his family in great abundance.
- \_\_\_ 3. The story "Tappin, the Land Turtle" explains why there is starvation in the world.
- \_\_\_ 4. In "The Beautiful Girl of the Moon Tower," Anton meets an eagle, ant, lion, and dove who all offer to come to his aid when he is in trouble.
- \_\_\_ 5. In "The Wolf and Little Daughter," a little girl disobeys her father by leading the wolf to her grandmother's house.
- \_\_\_ 6. In "Manuel Had a Riddle," the King tries to trick Manuel by giving him three rabbits and telling him to set them free in 30 days.
- \_\_\_ 7. In "John and the Devil's Daughter," John de Conquer and the Devil's daughter fall in love and escape from the Devil.
- \_\_\_ 8. "The Peculiar Such Thing" is a story about escaping from slavery through trickery and courage.
- \_\_\_ 9. In "Better Wait Till Martin Comes," Martin arrives and eats up John, the man hiding in the haunted house.
- \_\_\_ 10. In "The Most Useful Slave," John was the most useful slave on the plantation because he knows how to predict the future.

**Comprehension Test B (Page 2)**

**Part III: Matching (20 points)**

Complete each of the following descriptions with a name from the list that follows. Place the letter of your answer in the blank provided at left. Use each name only once.

- |                          |   |
|--------------------------|---|
| ___ 1. Bruh Lion         | A. slave who rowed runaways across the Ohio River             |
| ___ 2. Bruh Fox          | B. a manatee or a walrus                                      |
| ___ 3. Rabbit            | C. the bully of the jungle, always yelling about himself      |
| ___ 4. Anton             | D. another word for fire                                      |
| ___ 5. Fish-Cow          | E. a turtle with marks on its shell                           |
| ___ 6. Trouble           | F. makes a Tar Baby to punish Bruh Rabbit for laziness        |
| ___ 7. Arnold Gragston   | G. falls in love with a girl who lives in a tower on the moon |
| ___ 8. Mr. Rankins       | H. the writer who collected these tales                       |
| ___ 9. Virginia Hamilton | I. the trickster character, always playing tricks on people   |
| ___ 10. Tappin           | J. a man who had a station for runaway slaves                 |

**Part IV: Essay (40 points)**

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Hamilton said that the slaves who fly away "had only their imaginations to set them free." Explain what she meant by this.
2. Imagine you can fly. In a story, explain where you would go and why.
3. Argue that all the stories in the last section of this book, "Carrying the Running-Aways," are or are not on the same theme.
4. Describe two scary stories from this collection, showing how they are similar.

## Answer Key

### VOCABULARY

#### Across

5. rural
6. conjure
7. fiddle
9. terrapin
10. vittles

#### Down

1. famine
2. turnip
3. sorrow
4. ancestor
8. dialect

### COMPREHENSION TEST A

#### Part I. Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. I  |
| 2. A | 7. H  |
| 3. J | 8. E  |
| 4. F | 9. G  |
| 5. D | 10. B |

#### Part II. Identification (20 points)

1. Rabbit is the traditional trickster character in African American and Native American folk tales, as we see in all but one of the stories in this collection.
2. Flying is a metaphor for the power of the imagination. Through the imagination, people can escape many seemingly untenable situations.
3. Telling riddles was one of the slaves' favorite pastimes, second only to telling animal tales. Riddles became a wish telling about freedom, as we can see in the story "The Riddle Tale of Freedom," for example.
4. *The People Could Fly* is a collection of folk tales. It shows Hamilton's determination to maintain and transmit the culture of the African, African American, and Native American traditions.
5. "Tailypo" is the creature's great, big long tail in "The Peculiar Such Thing." The unnamed fellow in the story of the same name has no sense so he cuts off the monster's tail and eats it. The monster then comes after the fellow to get its tail back.

#### Part III. True/False (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. F  |
| 2. T | 7. T  |
| 3. F | 8. F  |
| 4. F | 9. T  |
| 5. T | 10. T |

#### Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.

### COMPREHENSION TEST B

#### Part I. Sentence Completion (20 points)

- |                |           |
|----------------|-----------|
| 1. Tar Baby    | 6. sword  |
| 2. briar patch | 7. milk   |
| 3. Alligator   | 8. turnip |
| 4. cowhide     | 9. horse  |
| 5. hounds      | 10. three |

#### Part II. True/False (20 points)


- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. T | 6. T  |
| 2. F | 7. T  |
| 3. F | 8. F  |
| 4. T | 9. F  |
| 5. F | 10. T |

#### Part III. Matching (20 points)

- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| 1. C | 6. D  |
| 2. F | 7. A  |
| 3. I | 8. J  |
| 4. G | 9. H  |
| 5. B | 10. E |

#### Part IV. Essay (40 points)

Answers will vary.



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