

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

Amos Fortune, Free Man

by

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Book Information

Elizabeth Yates, Amos Fortune, Free Man

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181 Pages

Book Level: 6.5

Interest Level: MG

This true story details the life of an African prince who was captured by slave traders at age fifteen and brought to America. At age sixty, he bought his freedom, then married and started his own tannery business.

Award: Newbery Medal; State Award

Topics: Biographies/Autobiographies, Biographies/Autobiographies (All); People, African American; People, Slaves; Power Lessons Vocabulary, Grades 4-6; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 6-8; U.S. States/Regions, Massachusetts

Main Characters

At-mun/Amos Fortune an African man who is captured by slave traders and sold into slavery in Boston

Ath-mun At-mun's younger sister, who has a crippled leg

Caleb Copeland a Quaker man who buys Amos when he was first auctioned in Boston in the hopes he could help out in the house and become educated

Celia Copeland Caleb's wife, who teaches Amos along with her own children

Celyndia Violet's daughter

Ichabod Richardson a tanner who buys Amos after Caleb Copeland dies

Lily the first woman Amos buys out of slavery and is married to for one year

Lydia the second woman Amos buys out of slavery and is married to for one year

Violet Baldwin the third woman Amos buys out of slavery and is married to for 22 years

Vocabulary

abeyance a condition of suspended activity

illiteracy the state of having little or no education, especially unable to read or write

manumission the formal liberation of a slave

obeisance a bow made to show respect or submission

quitclaim legal paper by which a person gives up claim to, or right in, something

Synopsis

Amos Fortune begins his life as At-mun, the prince of the At-mun-shi tribe in Africa. When he is fifteen years old, he is taken to America by slave traders who sell him at auction. He is bought by a Quaker, Caleb Copeland, who does not believe in slavery but sees that he could offer Amos a kind, Christian home in which he could develop his mind. Initially Amos does not speak except to say his African name, but eventually he adopts and uses the English language which he had learned from the Copelands. Amos comes to accept his position in the Copeland home and learns to read, write, and weave.

During his years with the Copelands, Amos searches slave ships for his sister, Ath-mun. When he was taken from Africa, Amos had left behind a crippled sister whom he dearly loved. He hopes that if she had also been captured he could find her and free her one day. He never locates her, though he continues to look for her for nearly forty years.

After Mr. Copeland dies, Amos is sold to Mr. Richardson who teaches him the trade of leather tanning. Amos becomes quite good, and when he is given his freedom by Mrs. Richardson, he sets up his own very successful business. With the money he earns as a tanner, Amos is able to buy the freedom of two women, Lily and Lydia, each of whom he marries and cares for for a short time. Years later he also buys the freedom of Violet Baldwin and her daughter, Celyndia.

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Amos eventually relocates his family to the town of Jaffrey, New Hampshire where he establishes himself as a reputable tanner. Over the years his business thrives and he becomes a well-respected member of the community and church. There comes an occasion, however, when he and Violet have a disagreement. Amos wants to give money to a poor widowed woman who has hungry children to feed. Violet feels the woman is lazy and that Amos should use his money to buy land and build his own home. Eventually, Amos sees the wisdom in Violet's words, and he builds a house for his family. He tries to help the poor woman by taking her daughter into his house and caring for her. The weak girl lives less than a year, but Amos feels he has allowed her to die peacefully and free.

Amos and Violet share twenty-two years together and do very well in Jaffrey. Before Amos died he stipulated that the extra money he had saved be given to the church and the school.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

What did Amos purchase from the cobbler in Keene that he knew would make Violet proud of him? Why was he so happy to have the items?

He bought the man's "go-to-Meeting hat" and a broadcloth coat. Amos felt they visibly gave him respect and status in the world.

Literary Analysis

Why didn't Amos take part in any discussions his slave friends had about escaping from their masters?

He felt he still had much to learn from his master and that life would be too hard because as a black man he would lack status in the white man's world.

Inferential Comprehension

What would probably have happened if At-mun had tried to free himself and the other At-mun-shi people from the slavers in the canoes?

Many people would have died, and those At-mun-shi that lived would likely have been attacked in their village by surviving slavers at a later time.

Constructing Meaning

In this story, the author represents the mountain in human-like terms. Find examples of how he personifies the mountain and makes it seem to be a friend to Amos.

There are numerous examples of how Amos views the mountain as a friend. He once said the mountain spoke. Another time, Amos spoke to the mountain and said he would soon be talking to the mountain every day. Other times, Amos would say that the mountain told him what the weather was going to be.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Characterization The last page of the book lists the words that are written on the headstones of Amos and Violet. They are lasting reminders of who they were and what significance they had to their world while they lived. Have the students think about their own lives and what they hope to accomplish and/or strive for during their lifetimes. Now have them write an epitaph that they hope would fittingly represent what they did while they lived.

Comparing and Contrasting In the story, the old process of leather tanning is explained. The process is sometimes very lengthy and physically demanding. Review the pages that describe the process Amos used. Have the students investigate the more modern process of leather tanning. Have them compare the two to see how the process has changed much over the years.

Extending Meaning Near the end of Amos's life he realizes that a man's life, would have meaning if he had made the way better for those who

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followed him. With this idea in mind, he stipulates that some of the money that would be left at the time of his death was to be used to purchase a chalice for the church. Have the students discuss and/or explain how that would better the way for his fellow blacks.

Understanding the Main Idea After their capture, Amos and the other At-mun-shi are kept in the pit for many weeks. Food is thrown down, and more people are added along the way. By the time the slavers are ready to set sail they are happy to see how this treatment had changed the people. Amos also notices the change in his own people in particular. Have the class discuss how the people had changed and how that worked to the advantage of the slavers. In addition students could discuss the validity of Amos's belief that because of their experiences, etc. his people were not ready for freedom in America.