

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl

by
Joyce Hansen

Book Information

Joyce Hansen, I Thought My Soul Would Rise and Fly: The Diary of Patsy, a Freed Girl

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The young, former slave Patsy keeps a diary of the confusing time following the end of the Civil War.

Award: Coretta Scott King Award/Honors

Topics: Family Life, Growing Up; Historical Fiction, Historical Fiction (All); History, Slavery; People, African American; Popular Groupings, Historical Fiction; Read Now with Power Up Recommended Lists, Cherish Freedom; Recommended Reading, Children's Literature Choice; Recommended Reading, IRA/CBC Choice; Series, Dear America; Wars, American Civil War

Main Characters

Brother Solomon the respected leader of prayer and the head of the field workers living on the Davis Hall Plantation

Cook (Susan) the no-nonsense cook at The House who, despite her gruff manner, has a good heart; she leaves the Davis Hall Plantation in order to feel free

Douglass an outspoken young man whom Patsy admires and secretly likes

Father Holmes the minister at St. Philip's Church, where the Davis family worships

James Master's personal valet, who leaves without a word to the Davis family after the Civil War; the other servants know he is going to North Carolina to look for his brothers and sisters

John Ruth's husband, who, as a free black man, serves in the Union Army; he comes back for Ruth and Luke after the war

Luke Ruth and John's son; a pupil of Patsy

Mary Ella Nancy's mother; Nancy refuses to reunite with her after the war

Master Davis (later Sir) the owner of the Davis Hall Plantation; he resents the changes that the Civil War and Reconstruction have brought to his lifestyle

Miriam the laundress at The House who leaves when her uncle arrives after the war

Mister Joe a free black man who does odd jobs around the various plantations in order to support his daughter's education

Mistress Davis (later Ma'am) the fussy and whiny wife of Mr. Davis

Nancy the Mistress's personal attendant; a spoiled and haughty former slave who flaunts her position

Patsy (Phillis Frederick) the principal character of the story; a lame and stuttering twelve or thirteen-year-old girl who, having learned to read and write, teaches other freed slaves to do the same when a school at the plantation fails to open as promised

Regulators returning Confederate soldiers who blame the black people for the results of the Civil War; they hide in the woods and attack black travelers

Ruth a kind woman and Patsy's confidante who starts out as the cleaning woman at The House; she later serves in various other capacities as other former slaves leave; she is a strong advocate for education

Sarah Mistress Davis's cousin, who moves into Davis Hall after the war

The Reverend Chaplain Henry McNeal the first black chaplain in the U.S. Army; he works with the Freedmen's Bureau and is a leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore; he visits plantations during Reconstruction and inspires freed blacks both spiritually and politically

Thomas (the Wild One) and Nellie Sarah's children

Violet the outspoken and loving wife of Brother Solomon

Vocabulary

amnesty a general pardon

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gallery the loft or upper section in back of the church
pallet a hard narrow bed or straw-filled mattress
passel a group or large quantity
uncouth crude
vagrancy wandering from place to place without a permanent home or means of support
vulgar lacking good breeding, common

Synopsis

Patsy is a twelve or thirteen-year-old freed slave who has been considered dimwitted all her life because of her stuttering speech and slow, limping gait. She carries the secret that she can actually read and write. She illegally learned these skills while playing school with Master's niece and nephew. When the niece and nephew leave the plantation at the conclusion of the Civil War in 1865, they give Patsy a diary as a joke, but she faithfully writes her impressions and observations of the events that occur at Davis Hall Plantation during the early months of Reconstruction. Patsy moves from a cottage with other house servants to a storeroom inside the kitchen shed in order to keep her writing secret.

The house servants who remain in the cottage are Cook, Ruth, Ruth's son Luke, and Miriam. Nancy is a young girl like Patsy but is a personal maid to Mistress Davis and lives in the main house. Nancy's mother comes to reunite with her daughter after the war, but Nancy sends her away in order to stay with Mistress. James serves as Master Davis's personal attendant and also lives in the house.

After a visit by members of a Yankee regiment who outline the freed slaves' rights, the former slave field hands sign contracts to work for their former master. In exchange for their contracts, Master Davis agrees to give five acres of land to each field hand, a cabin to live in, one tenth of the cotton crop, and a school for their children. He offers wages to the adult house servants. Soon, many of these former slaves choose new names for themselves, and couples go to the magistrate to get their marriages legalized. Beyond this, many still feel their lives have not

changed much. Some begin to leave the plantation in the hopes of reuniting with their families. When James and then Cook leave, the former master and mistress become bitter. The remaining servants must take up the slack. The servants now address Master and Mistress as Sir and Ma'am. Ma'am's cousin Sarah and Sarah's two young children move in since they lost their home when Columbia was burned.

One Sunday, Patsy goes to the area of the plantation known as the bush arbor. This area is designated for church services for the field hands, and Patsy goes to worship with them instead of accompanying Sir and Ma'am to St. Philip's Church. She prefers the arbor, which is filled with song and spontaneous joyous preaching led by the head field hand, Brother Solomon, to listening to a catechism of bondage at the other church. On another Sunday, a visiting minister, Reverend Henry McNeal, brings the freed slaves a message of hope and encourages them to get involved politically. Patsy is attracted to Douglass, a young field hand who sings well and speaks out about rights. Many of the field hands are inspired by the minister's message and begin to meet on Tuesdays for a Union League meeting. Reverend McNeal often attends these meetings and reads a freedman's newspaper that helps the hands see how they might improve their situation. The paper, the *Colored American*, also contains articles from people seeking lost relatives. Ruth attends these meetings and is very concerned about education for Luke and the other children. The group becomes inspired to set up a classroom in the spinning house in anticipation of the arrival of the schoolteacher they have been promised.

Meanwhile, Mister Joe, a black man who was free even during slavery, begins to work at The House on Davis Hall Plantation, doing some of James's duties. He is a widower who uses his salary to pay for his daughter's schooling. He is kind, and Patsy enjoys his presence in the household. Patsy continues to do her chores but sneaks into Sir's library to read at every opportunity. One day in the library, she finally reveals her literacy to Ruth. Ruth is astounded, for Patsy does not stutter when she reads. Ruth asks

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Patsy to teach her and Luke their letters, which Patsy gladly does in the minutes she can spare. At the bush arbor the next Sunday, Ruth announces Patsy's literacy, and the field hands fuss over her. Patsy begins teaching other children their letters in the arbor. When Reverend McNeal does not come to the Union League meeting one Tuesday, Ruth asks Patsy to read the newspaper to all those gathered.

After returning from a trip, Sir becomes ill with fever and is confined to the house. Shortly thereafter, Reverend McNeal announces to the hands that the teacher who was promised will not be coming. Because of threats, no one is willing to board her. Patsy now begins teaching the children in the spinning house. Reverend McNeal does not show up for a few Union Meetings. Mister Joe discovers that the Reverend had been beaten by Regulators, groups of bitter Confederate soldiers. Ruth's husband returns from the war, and Ruth and Luke leave Davis Hall to follow him to his regiment. Shortly afterwards, Sir dies, creating chaos in the house. Brother Solomon's wife, Violet, organizes the funeral.

Mister Joe now becomes the cook, but he leaves for a short while to attend a black convention and to see his daughter in Charleston. While he is away, a box of books arrives for the school from Reverend McNeal's church. Patsy promptly distributes and uses them. Inspired by what she reads, Patsy takes a new name for herself, Phillis Frederick, after the poet Phillis Wheatly and the abolitionist Frederick Douglass.

When the new year comes, it is time for the field hands of the land to sign a new contract. Ma'am announces she has no intention of giving up any of the land her husband had promised to the field hands. Brother Solomon responds by saying the hands will not be signing a contract since they feel cheated out of the land and the school they had been promised. The field hands leave the plantation the next day, and Patsy is invited to accompany the Solomons.

The epilogue relates that Phillis goes on to receive an education, Douglass becomes a minister, and Brother Solomon and other former slaves buy land and establish the village of Libertyville. Eventually, Phillis and Douglass come back to Libertyville to teach and to minister. They marry in 1878 and remain in Libertyville.

Open-Ended Questions

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

Initial Understanding

Why does Cook say, "If I stay in this house where I been a slave, I'll never know I'm free"?

Though Cook has technically been free for a month, she does not feel free because her submissive relationship to Ma'am has lasted all her life. Cook realizes that this relationship will not change as quickly as her legal status and that she will continue to feel confined to the status of a slave/owner relationship until she physically leaves and gets a fresh start in life somewhere else.

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Literary Analysis

What mood hung over the South during Reconstruction? Why, for instance, did former slave owners act both confused and bitter? Why did the freed slaves not know if they were truly free?

The mood can probably best be described as one of uncertainty. Freed slaves and plantation owners alike needed to adjust to a new way of life. For the former slaves, uncertainties existed as to how to use their new-found freedom. Every aspect of their lives had to be evaluated -- from the way they addressed their former masters to embracing the fact that they could make decisions for themselves. Many, however, were still at the mercy of their former masters. The plantation owners had their way of life challenged and changed, too. The freed slaves were no longer property, and the former owners became anxious and bitter when they realized they no longer had as much control over their workers' actions. They probably also feared retribution by the people they had often treated cruelly. They were confused by the changing rules from the government and angry that life would now be harder for them.

Inferential Comprehension

Why is Patsy afraid to let anyone know that she can read and write?

Patsy realizes that the plantation owners would be upset to find out that she is literate. Her ability to read and write reduces the owners' power over her and makes her more capable of standing up for her rights. No doubt the owners' greatest fear would be that she would teach other blacks to read and write, further diminishing their authority. Faced with the fear of their potential retribution, Patsy decides it is best to keep her literacy a secret.

Constructing Meaning

Patsy treasures her education very much. To her, it is the means to having a voice in the democratic process and putting an end to oppression. How do you, as a student, feel about your education? Do you think it will help you accomplish your dreams?

Students' answers will vary. Students may not outwardly treasure their education to the same extent as Patsy, who had to hide her knowledge for fear of physical or legal retribution. Most students appreciate the opportunity to learn, even though many keep it hidden. Some students may admit that they hide their knowledge from others so that they do not appear too intelligent. Students should mention their goals and reasons they feel education is important in reaching those goals.

Teachable Skills

Describing Actions or Events In the story the freed slaves fear the Regulators when they travel. Groups that avow supremacy over other groups of people still exist in the United States and elsewhere in the world. The groups may target other people on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation. Assign the students to find articles in recent issues of magazines and newspapers about incidents involving these groups. The students should choose one article and write how they think the reported incident should be handled or prosecuted without generating more hate. The students could also be assigned to write their state or national representatives to share their views about hate crimes.

Responding to Literature Patsy uses her knowledge of reading and writing to help others learn. She does not earn a degree before she begins to teach, though. Students can gain insight into Patsy's experience by helping younger emergent readers. The students should be paired with younger children in the school as reading buddies. If possible, a regular time should be set aside every week to foster the reading relationship between the students and the new readers.

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Comparing and Contrasting In the American election of 2000, the majority of black people voted Democratic. Yet during the time of the story, many of the former slaves were aligning themselves with the Republican Party. Ask the students to investigate this shift in party affiliation from Republican to Democratic and find out the reasons it occurred. Students should research differences between the old and new Republican parties and the old and new Democratic parties. It might be helpful for the students to list on a chart the political positions of the two parties at the time of Reconstruction and in modern times. The issues that could be addressed during the Reconstruction include education, land rights, voting rights, and equality issues. Modern day issues include education, affirmative action, and health care.

Understanding the Author's Craft From Patsy's narrative, a reader can tell that Nancy has a very different perspective from Patsy about the developments at Davis Hall. Ask the students to rewrite one of the four following entries in Patsy's diary from Nancy's perspective: Nancy's mother arriving, Nancy's hearing before the magistrate, Nancy's first spanking, or Nancy's asking Patsy's opinion about Mary Ella.