

# *The Old African*

by Julius Lester

Illustrated by Jerry Pinkney

Dial Books

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

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### **SUMMARY:**

A group of African slaves stands in a semicircle watching as one of their own is whipped mercilessly by their white master. Among the observers is the Old African, who reaches out to the boy silently, magically, to take away his pain. None of the other slaves can remember what it was like to be free in Africa, but the Old African can. He also remembers being dragged from his bed in the middle of the night, tied and chained to his neighbors, marched for days through the forest to the coast, and packed naked into the hold of a ship like so much cargo for the long journey to America. When the whipped boy regains consciousness and tells the Old African of the sight he saw when he ran away—the ocean—the Old African recognizes it as a sign to lead his people to freedom. They are joined on their long march under the sea by the spirits of their ancestors who perished there, finally emerging full of life and free again on the other side.

*The Old African* is inspired by a legend from coastal Georgia about a group of Ybo slaves who walked into the ocean one day, saying they were going back to Africa. The text, written at a 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, is accompanied by lush and expressive watercolor illustrations. Be advised, this book contains some profanity and violence.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. A common theme in books about slavery is survival in times of hardship. What are some of the ways the Old African helps the slaves cope with the suffering in their lives?
2. After Mr. Riley whips Paul, he tells the other slaves that he is "...a good man, but this is what happens when you push me too far" (p.12). Do you agree that Riley is a good man? Why or why not?
3. The author, Julius Lester, uses many similes to help the reader visualize what the Old African sees. For example, he describes his wife's skin as "...softly black as a crow's flight" (p.20). Find some other examples of similes in this book.

4. Water symbolizes several things for the African slaves in this story. What does the ocean represent to the Old African?
5. Although it is based on a true event, there are many elements of fantasy in this story. Name some of these unreal occurrences.
6. How does the style of the illustrations (including colors, textures, and shapes) enhance the mood of this story?
7. When they decide to walk across the ocean floor to Africa, Daniel the Preacher says to the slaves, "I believe I'll take a chance on what I don't know rather than to keep on livin' with what I do" (p. 65). Have you ever decided to try something new without knowing if it would work?

### **ACTIVITIES:**

1. Read *The Slave Dancer* by Paula Fox (Dell, 1973) for a comparison in point-of-view of a slave ship's journey.
2. Locate Nigeria and Georgia on a map. Calculate the distance between them, and estimate how long it would take to sail—or walk—from one place to the other.
3. Write an evaluation of *The Old African* describing the emotional response you think the author intended this story to have on its readers and how effective he was in this effort.

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Julius Lester (1939- ) has published over 2 dozen books of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry for children. His other interests include music, broadcasting, photography, and teaching - he has been an instructor at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst since 1971. Most recently he received the 2006 Coretta Scott King author award for his novel *Day of Tears*.

### **HELPFUL LINKS:**

Julius Lester's Home Page: <http://members.authorsguild.net/juliuslester/>

Glynn County, Georgia (location of Saint Simon's Island and Ebo Landing):  
[http://www.glynncounty.com/History\\_and\\_Lore/](http://www.glynncounty.com/History_and_Lore/)

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Related books written by Julius Lester:

*From Slave Ship To Freedom Road* (New York: Dial Books, 1998)

*Shining* (San Diego: Silver Whistle, 2003)

*Time's Memory* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2006)

*To Be a Slave* (New York: Dial Books, 1968)

More books written by Julius Lester and illustrated by Jerry Pinkney:

*Albidaro and the Mischievous Dream* (New York: P. Fogelman Books, 2000)

*Black Cowboy, Wild Horses: A True Story* (New York : Dial Books, 1998)

*John Henry* (New York: Dial Books, 1994)

*Sam and the Tigers: A New Telling of Little Black Sambo* (New York: Puffin Books, 2000)

*The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (New York: Dial Books, 1987)

*More Tales of Uncle Remus: Further Adventures of Brer Rabbit, His Friends, Enemies, and Others* (New York: Dial Books, 1988)

*Further Tales of Uncle Remus: The Misadventures of Brer Rabbit, Brer Fox, Brer Wolf, the Doodang* (New York: Dial Books, 1990)

*The Last Tales of Uncle Remus* (New York: Dial Books, 1994)



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