

Teachers' Notes written by Kevin Steinberger

ESCAPES!

By Laura Scandiffio

Escapes! comprises *'ten perilous escape stories from around the world'*. 'Escapes' implies salvation, a dash to a freedom of some kind. All of these stories are about desperate individuals, across time and in different locations around the world, seeking to flee repression of one kind or another. More than mere accounts, they are absorbing stories of inherent rising tension and natural climax.

Synopsis

Beginning with a prologue that discusses the psychology of escapes – the fundamental human impulse to flee when trapped and the unwillingness to be confined - these true stories range in time from ancient Rome to the recent political conflict in the Middle East. They include: the successful years-long escape attempt by two inmates of the Bastille; the audacious escape by Dutch POWs from the 'escape-proof' Colditz prison; facilitating a flight out of Iran of fugitive US embassy personnel during the 1979 revolution; the escape attempts from German POW camps by amputee Spitfire ace, Douglas Bader; the desperate effort by the daughter of King Henry to get her cousin and pretender to the throne out of her besieged castle; the freedom campaign of gladiator Spartacus and his 10,000 followers; a hot-air balloon escape from East Germany by two young families; the 1815 escape across the Sahara from Bedouins by shipwrecked Americans; the ingenious escape of a slave couple from the Confederate south through 'The Underground Railroad' to Boston; and the daring liberation of her husband from the Tower of London by Lady Nithsdale in 1716.

Characterisation

These stories are necessarily written with a very clear focus on the plight of the individuals and their great resolve to escape their confinement. Their mental anguish and steely determination to succeed is palpable as the author positions the reader in the circumstances of the escapees: shuddering with pale-complexioned Ellen Craft - disguised as a white man, her husband his accompanying slave – at every little hurdle on their journey to freedom in the north; holding your breath and wishing the balloon on far enough to cross the German border; feeling the arrogance of Spartacus towards the Romans; painstakingly scratching away mortar from the Bastille masonry. Their observations of their surroundings and assessment of their chances, their patience and forbearance, the dialogue among each other, and their methodical effort tell much about the kind of character needed to escape repression.

Discussion Points

- Why has the title of the book been given an exclamation mark?
- Escapes are interesting for two reasons: (1) the circumstances the person is escaping from and (2) the means and route of the escape. If you were an editor compiling a book about escapes, what other escapes would you consider including in a collection like this?
- Which of these escapes do you consider: the most poignant, the most harrowing, the most dangerous? Why?
- How has the author used language very effectively to help the reader vividly imagine the tense circumstances and to feel empathy with the escapees?
- Although escapes are carefully planned, a certain amount of luck determines their success. How has luck been a factor in these escapes?
- The reader is positioned to sympathise with these escapees. Consider their actions from the perspective of their oppressors/captors.
- Exhilaration is probably the first emotion successful escapees feel. But following that initial joy of accomplishment, how did the various escapees cope with their new-found freedom?
- The courage and daring of these characters astounds many readers. They are mostly ordinary folk in extraordinary circumstances. How might you behave in similar situations? Why?