MEET THE ILLUSTRATOR

An Interview with Henry Cole

Henry Cole grew up in Virginia on a dairy farm. He studied forestry in college, and has been a science teacher for fifteen years. He now lives in Washington, D.C.

Q. How did where you grew up influence you?
A. I grew up on a farm, so things were in the pond, in the creek, in the woods, in the field. I always liked identifying things. Now I teach science for first to fifth graders. I'm really into natural history sciences. Kids love it. They love animals and insects and that kind of stuff.

Q. How did you become an illustrator?
A. I always liked to draw. I never took formal art training, but scientific illustration was good practice. If you’re doing scientific illustration, it really has to be right. You can’t put the wrong number of dots on a ladybug . . . . Kids often ask me how I learned to draw so well. I say, “Do you like to draw? What do you like to do? How do you get better at it?” Just by practicing and doing things over and over. It’s so nice when it’s something you really like to do.

Q. How did you and Pam come up with the idea for Barefoot?
A. One year not too long ago I took a group of eighth graders on a field trip to the eastern shore of the Chesapeake Bay. We spent a week doing ecological activities: bird watching, digging for things in the muck. During the trip I saw a silver historical marker indicating that the area was part of the Underground Railroad. It was a marsh area, with pine trees off in the distance. I wondered what this place had seen; what the wildlife must have seen. When I got back to school, I talked about it with Pam. She tossed the idea around and wrote the text and then I enjoyed illustrating it.
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In the black of night two bare feet race desperately through the woods while heavy boots tramp close behind them. This is an amazing animal’s-eye view of a young boy trying to escape from slavery and his pursuers. From the perspective of a rabbit, a heron, a squirrel, and other woodland animals, readers watch as “the Barefoot” tries to elude “the Heavy Boots” and reach a place of safety on the Underground Railroad. Following the signs of animals, the Barefoot is able to escape and survive. With this dramatic tale of courage, author Pamela Duncan Edwards and illustrator Henry Cole bring a unique perspective to a heartrending era in American history, while lending a magic and mystery to the benevolent interrelationship between humankind and nature.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Tell children that Barefoot takes place shortly before the Civil War, at a time when African-Americans in the South were still enslaved. As slaves, they often had to work long and difficult hours, didn’t have any control over where they lived or what would happen to their families, and had to endure cruel punishments if they displeased their owners. Many slaves knew that even though the risks were great, they would be free if they could escape to the North or to Canada. But if runaway slaves were caught, they faced terrible punishment. Nonetheless, many attempted the journey, often with the help of the Underground Railroad.

Explain that the Underground Railroad was not literally a railroad but instead a secret network that helped people trying to escape from slavery. The people who aided the fugitives were called “conductors,” and the homes and other shelters used as hiding places were called “stations.” Conductors were both white and black, including former slaves who returned to help others escape. Exactly how many people escaped on the Underground Railroad is not known. Estimates vary from 40,000 to 100,000 people. Whatever the final number, it was made up of thousands of individual acts of courage. Barefoot imagines one of these acts. The story focuses on what the first night of the journey to freedom might have been like for one young person. An author’s note in the back of the book provides more information about the Underground Railroad.
READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

RECOGNIZE POINTS OF VIEW
- As students examine each full-spread illustration, ask: Who do you think is looking? What else would we probably see? If we were there at the scene, what would we see? Focusing on the text, ask: Why is the boy called the Barefoot? Who are the Heavy Boots? How might the story be different if it were told from the boy’s point of view?

INTERPRET ILLUSTRATIONS
- In addition to asking what each picture shows and whose point of view it portrays, you might ask: What colors does the illustrator use in this picture? Are they light or dark? Why do you think the artist chose to use these colors? As you look at the picture for a while, do you see anything that you didn’t notice right away?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST
- Have children compare and contrast the way the Barefoot and the Heavy Boots act in the woods. Also have them consider the consequences of this behavior. For example, while the Barefoot is very observant, the Heavy Boots do not pay much attention to their environment. Ask the children why they think the Barefoot followed nature’s signals and the Heavy Boots didn’t? As a result the Barefoot finds food and water, while the Heavy Boots mistakenly chase a deer. You might wish to have children make a chart to record their comparisons.

MAKE PREDICTIONS
- Focusing children’s attention on the last page, ask: What do you think happens in the woods just after the story ends? How do you know? In addition, point out that this is just the first night of the boy’s journey to freedom. Ask them to imagine what the rest of the journey might be like for him.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION
Ask students these questions to deepen their understanding of the book and its themes:
- What do you think the Barefoot was running from? What was he running to?
- What do you think it was like traveling on the underground railroad? What do you think it was like being a conductor?
- How does the boy show courage?
- How do you think the boy knew so much about the sounds of the animals?
- What does the boy learn about the woods from observing the animals? In what ways do his observations help him to survive?
- Do you think the animals know they are helping the Barefoot? What makes you think they do or don’t know?
- Do you think it was difficult for the boy to decide to escape? What are some good and bad things about the life he left behind?
- What does the quilt hanging in front of the house mean to the Barefoot? How does he feel when he sees it? What other signs might be used to show a house was safe?
- What does the author mean when she writes that to the Barefoot, the animal noises were “a salute to courage”?
- Why do you think the illustrator waited until the end to show the boy?

BUILDING VOCABULARY

Barefoot introduces challenging words in a dramatic context. Have children try to infer the meaning of new words from their context. Then go over these definitions with them. Afterward, you might ask the class to use these words in sentences of their own.

eluded—escaped • felled—chopped down
frantic—wild, desperate • furtively—secretly
greenbrier—prickly vine • heron—long-necked bird
loblolly pine—pine tree • marsh—wetland
plantation—large farm • prey—hunted one
salute—praise • sentinel—guard
ACTIVITIES ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

LANGUAGE ARTS
- Have children write or dictate to you the story of Barefoot from the perspective of the title character. Children can retell the whole story, or individuals can each take a page, so that the class as a whole writes the story. Some children might want to write the boy's thoughts in the form of a poem. They can accompany their stories and poems with illustrations showing what the boy himself sees. Display the artwork on a bulletin board as a Barefoot story quilt.

SOCIAL STUDIES
- Create a mural or bulletin board about the Underground Railroad. Divide the class into smaller groups and have each group contribute a drawing or report. One group might read and report on a biography about the famous "conductor" Harriet Tubman, or others involved in the Underground Railroad. Another group might draw a map showing routes of the Underground Railroad. A third group might make a list of different roles people played on the Underground Railroad, or draw pictures of various methods that people used to escape. Still another group might make a diagram with words and pictures showing the life that enslaved African-Americans were running from and the new life they hoped to find. Have each group present its project to the rest of the class.

SCIENCE
- Ask children to list the animals and insects that appear in Barefoot. Have them describe what they know about each of them. Ask the class: How many have seen a mouse? A heron? A firefly? Invite children to choose an animal in Barefoot that they would like to learn more about. Plan a field trip to a local park or wooded area and ask the children to identify the wildlife and plant life around them. Discuss how the woods or park might look from the perspective of a squirrel or bird. Encourage the children to collect samples of leaves from different plants to take back to school. After the outing, organize groups of "frog researchers," "tree researchers" and so on, according to children's choices. Then have each group research their animals and plants. After children pool their knowledge with their study groups, have each group present a report to the class.

The author and illustrator of Barefoot were very careful to include the kinds of plants and animals that really exist along an Underground Railroad route. Ask children: If you were going to write and illustrate a book about your area, what kinds of plants and animals would you include? You might have children closely observe local grasses or plants in order to draw them.

MUSIC
- A song called "Follow the Drinkin' Gourd" helped escaped slaves find their way to freedom in the North. The Drinking Gourd is a constellation that points to the Little Dipper, which contains the North Star. Teach the class the song and explain its meaning. Children can also make up songs that they might sing on a dangerous journey.

DRAMA
- Ask children to imagine what happens to the Barefoot once he enters the safe house. Who else might be there? What might they talk about? Children could form small groups and take roles and act out their versions of this scene. Host an assembly to showcase all the finished projects relating to Barefoot. Children can report on the local wildlife and plants from their field trip, perform their poetry version of Barefoot, and sing "Follow the Drinking Gourd" and other songs like "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot", and "Got Shoes".
Pamela Duncan Edwards grew up in northern England and moved to the United States about twenty years ago with her husband and two sons. She has lived in the Washington, D.C. area ever since, and has worked as a children’s librarian in Virginia. She now writes full-time.

Q. Did you always want to write?
A. Yes. Once I started, there was no stopping me. In truth I had a lifetime of children’s stories in me that were dying to get out. I’ve always written in some guise, be it in long, copious letters to home or observations of things I saw around me. I just always had a pencil in my hand, scribbling. Not necessarily with the idea of publishing, really for my own enjoyment. I think I wrote my first children’s story when I was eight years old. I’ve always been fascinated by language. I love having a problem finding the right word and having to solve that problem, because by doing that I’m introduced to other words.

Q. Barefoot also introduces new words to children. Is it important to you to challenge your readers?
A. I do believe that children need to be challenged slightly when reading—not that we should give them things that are too advanced, but we also shouldn’t patronize them. They can use their intelligence to figure out words in context.

Q. Did working as a librarian help with your writing?
A. Absolutely. I think a privilege I’ve had is being with children all my life. In England, when I was in my twenties, I ran a nursery school. I’ve been with children forever, it seems. Even now I go in and volunteer in the school library so I can keep connected with children and won’t lose sight of what they are or how they think. Sometimes they surprise you. They have a different logic, and I want to keep in touch with that.
Underground Railroad summary: The Underground Railroad was the term used to describe a network of meeting places, secret routes, passageways and safe houses used by slaves in the U.S. to escape slave holding states to northern states and Canada. Established in the early 1800s and aided by people involved in the Abolitionist Movement, the underground railroad helped thousands of slaves escape bondage. By one estimate, 100,000 slaves escaped from bondage in the South between 1810 and 1850. The Underground Railroad was a network of secret routes and safe houses established in the United States during the early to mid-19th century, and used by enslaved African-Americans to escape into free states and Canada. The scheme was assisted by abolitionists and others sympathetic to the cause of the escapees. Not literally but metaphorically a railroad, the enslaved who risked escape and those who aided them are also collectively referred to as the "Underground Railroad". Various other routes led The Underground Railroad is a network of disparate historical routes used by African-American slaves to escape the United States and slavery by reaching freedom in Canada or other foreign territories. Today many of the stations along the "railroads" serve as museums and memorials to the former slaves' journey north. See also: Early history of the United States.