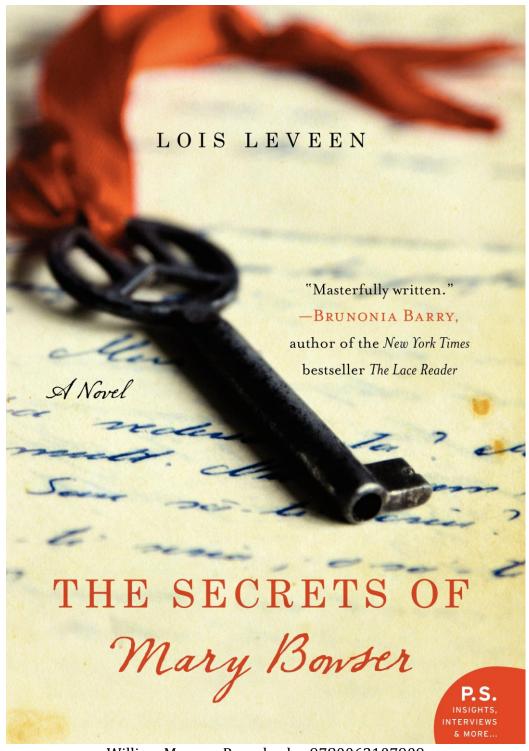
Instructor's Guide to



William Morrow Paperbacks: 9780062107909 These materials were written by Lois Leveen, et al.

Teaching Guide

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A Note to Teachers:

This novel is based on the true story of a former slave who was freed and sent North to be educated. However, she soon returned to the South to become a Union spy, posing as a slave in the Confederate White House. The content offers college and high school classes a means to explore topics and themes across many subject areas. The multicultural content opens up discussions about race, gender, class, and ethnicity/immigration. Because much of the book focuses on Mary's experience leaving her community to seize an education, it's especially relevant for First-Year Experience courses, among other class settings. *The Secrets of Mary Bowser* is an excellent resource for helping students successfully transition into a new school, or to prepare students to think about how to apply aspects of their education outside of school.

This guide builds on the discussion questions included in the novel by providing examples of assignments and activities teachers are using with *The Secrets of Mary Bowser*. It is organized by type of assignment—those focusing on "soft skills" that encourage reflection and prepare students for school success, those that tie themes in the novel to contemporary issues, and those that develop skills or approaches from a specific discipline. Each assignment is included in only one category, although you might find that many of them can be used across multiple subject areas. Some of the assignments are more challenging than others, and any of them can be adapted to meet your course goals and your students' level of expertise and ability.

The <u>web-based</u>¹ version of this guide will continue to be expanded, so please share what works in your courses by emailing teaching@loisleveen.com.

Key Themes and Issues:

- 1. The power of education to change a life: Mary's education leads her to the anti-slavery movement, giving her the opportunity to make history. Because white southerners in this era didn't expect blacks to be educated, Mary makes an ideal intelligence agent. Her success disproves the belief that, as a black woman, she is incapable of intelligence.
- 2. <u>Overcoming stereotypes:</u> Throughout the book, African Americans challenge the stereotypes whites have of them, and women of both races challenge the roles and behaviors expected of them. However, Mary, Bet Van Lew, Thomas McNiven (an immigrant), and Wilson Bowser also take advantage of stereotypes that keep anyone from suspecting them.
- 3. <u>Developing a commitment to doing what's best for the larger community:</u> Mary—and students—see her espionage as a heroic contribution to ending slavery. But making that contribution requires personal sacrifice; she must give up her freedom and her friends to return to the South. During the war, she decides to remain in Richmond rather than bring her own father to freedom. Her husband leaves Richmond to join a black Union regiment, putting himself at considerable physical risk.
- 4. <u>Dealing with parental expectations and determining your own path:</u> Throughout her life, Mary's mother and father insist she is special. In some ways, their certainty helps her seize opportunities, but ultimately she has to trust her own judgment and not second-guess her choices, even when the results are upsetting (such as her father's illness, or her own violent encounter with a Confederate soldier).

- 5. <u>Learning to work with those who are different from you:</u> In both her antislavery work in Philadelphia and her spying in Richmond, Mary interacts with people who are very different from her. She learns to trust Zinnie Moore, Thomas McNiven, and, ultimately, Bet Van Lew. Conversely, each of these white allies learns from her. Mary also grows to understand that even among the African Americans who are active in the anti-slavery movement, there are disagreements about tactics and approaches, despite the shared goal of ending slavery.
- 6. How class, opportunity, and values can divide members of a community: Students are especially interested in Mary's experience as part of the free black community in Philadelphia. Many African Americans there are much poorer than she expected. Some of the more financially secure African Americans in Philadelphia believe economic advancement should be a higher priority than social/political activism, while others are deeply involved in social justice efforts.
- 7. <u>Understanding how women and people of color shaped American history:</u> Mary Bowser was a real person. Studying her story and exploring why her amazing achievements remained relatively unknown can open up discussions about what an "American hero" is.

School Success Strategies and Personal Reflection

- 1. The novel is divided into three sections: Mary's childhood in Richmond, her adolescence and education in Philadelphia, and her return to Virginia during the Civil War. At what points in each of these sections does she experience self-doubt? When is she the most certain about herself and her path? What factors cause an individual to feel doubt and what factors support self-assurance? Do these factors still apply today?
- 2. What foreseen obstacles does she face in each section of the novel? What unforeseen obstacles does she face? How does she overcome them? What lessons can we draw about how to approach anticipated obstacles and how to approach unforeseen obstacles?
- 3. Mary resents that because of Mistress Van Lew she must hide the fact that Mama taught her how to read. Looking back on Mistress Van Lew's prohibition, however, Mary realizes that now she is "grown enough to realize the lesson she taught me was as valuable as any of Mama's" (p. 23) because it teaches her the prudence she needs to survive, first as a slave and later as a spy. What lessons about life have you learned from unexpected sources?

Have you ever pretended to know less than you do? Why? What were the intended and unintended consequences?

- 4. What does this book tell us about the ways people learn? Mary's learning is most concretely defined in terms of first learning to read and do math, and then studying history, Latin, and other school subjects. What else does she need to learn—things outside of a school curriculum? What do other characters in the book learn? What do students at our school need to learn besides course content?
- 5. What advice do Mary's father and mother give her before she leaves to go to school? What advice does she get from Bet? What's the value of the advice she receives, and what are the limitations of that advice? Who gave you advice about college or school? Was it useful? If

you could go back in time and give yourself advice based on what you've learned, what would it be?

- 6. When Mary starts school, her teacher Sarah Mapps Douglass tells her, "memorizing is not the same as true comprehension" (p. 68). What is "true comprehension"? What should a student do besides—or instead of—memorizing to achieve "true comprehension"?
- 7. Seizing the opportunity to go to school makes Mary feel cut off from her parents, and even from other blacks in Philadelphia, particularly Dulcey Upshaw and Mrs. Upshaw. What opportunities have you been offered that single you out from the rest of your family or other members of your community? In what ways was your experience similar to Mary's? In what ways was it different?

When Mary returns to Richmond, she observes, "I felt as far apart from Papa as I had all those years I was away in Philadelphia. The half mile that separated us now widened into the chasm between slave and free, age and youth, despair and determination." (p. 224) What "separations," other than geographical ones, have you faced?

- 8. When Mary spends time at the homes of Theodore and his wealthy relatives, she misses the places blacks lived in Richmond. This is not something she would have expected when she was in slavery. When have you missed something that surprised you? What does that "missing" tell you about yourself?
- 9. What does the novel demonstrate about the differences between values, goals, and strategies? When Mary returns to Virginia, she knows that war will be dangerous. However, she believes the danger is worth the potential for emancipation: "for folks with nothing to call their own, not even themselves and their children, a gamble with long odds and high stakes was the only possible way to win," (p. 229). Wilson initially disagrees, because secession disrupts the Underground Railroad, and the war seems to be more about preserving the Union than liberating slaves (pp. 274-5, pp. 323-24). Do Wilson and Mary differ on values, on goals, or on strategies? Which do they have in common? Identify two other characters from the novel who agree with Mary on at least one of these things (values, goals, or strategies) but disagree on at least one other, and explain your choice.
- 10. For African Americans in the period depicted in the novel, education is equated with freedom. It was illegal to teach enslaved blacks (although some were taught surreptitiously). Conversely, Mary uses her freedom to go North and obtain an education. What is education equated with today? Is it the same for everyone? Or is education equated with different things depending on your race/ethnicity, immigration status, socioeconomic background, gender, etc.?

Watch the film <u>Up Heartbreak Hill</u>². How does Mary's experience compare to the experiences of Thomas Martinez and Tamara Hardy, the Native American teens featured in the documentary?

11. This is a work of fiction. Does it matter that it was based on a real person? How does knowing that Mary and Bet really provided intelligence to the Union shape your experience of the novel?

- 12. Although Mary is excited about moving to Philadelphia to go to school, just before leaving Richmond, she tells her mother, "Don't make me go" (p. 54). Why does she say that? If you were in her position, do you think your feelings would be similar or different to hers? If you were her mother, how would you respond?
- 13. When Mary arrives in Philadelphia, postal letters are her only means of communicating with her parents. Today, even students who move away from home to go to college have far more means of keeping in touch with their families, and with friends. What are the advantages of using Facebook, Twitter, email, texting, and phone calls to stay connected now that you're here at school? What are the disadvantages?
- 14. Compare the letters Mary and Mama send each other when Mary first arrives in Philadelphia (pp. 77-78 and 97-102) with some of the communications you've had with family or friends since starting school. How similar or different are the topics? At the end of chapter 5, Mary reflects on what she doesn't include in her letters home, giving examples of the racism she encounters in Philadelphia. How do you choose to share what is painful or disappointing as you adjust to being in a new place?
- 15. Experts in teaching math say that students need to learn to be comfortable with "persistent struggle"—a willingness to struggle as they try something new (rather than master a subject easily)—in order to succeed in school. At what points in the novel does Mary exhibit "persistent struggle"? Are there times when she gives up rather than struggling on? When have you faced a challenge in school, and were you able to be persistent, even as you struggled? What factors affected your persistence?
- 16. Mary is an only child, while her friend Hattie is the youngest of six sisters. How does this shape each of them? How does it affect their friendship and how they perform in school? In what ways has your family size and type shaped you?
- 17. In her essay, "The Achievement (K)not," Linda C. Powell demonstrated how schools and individuals place students into either "discourses of potential" or "discourses of deficit." A discourse of potential emphasizes the likelihood that a particular student will be successful. A discourse of deficit emphasizes a particular student's need for specific supports. What are the advantages and disadvantages of being placed in a discourse of potential? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being placed in a discourse of deficit? Who places Mary into which discourse? How? Why?

Do students today face challenges that are similar to the ones Mary faces in the novel? Have you been placed you into a discourse of potential or a discourse of deficit? By whom? How did it affect you?

18. Mary must leave her parents to get an education. How does the separation from them affect her? Are there ways in which it is easier for her to be away, even though she misses them? Drawing on your own experience, what advice could you give to Mary as she prepares to leave her family to go to school?

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- 19. One thing Mary has to adjust to in Philadelphia is sharing a room with Dulcey Upshaw. What assumptions do they make about each other? How do they move past these initial assumptions? Describe a similar experience you had when you first came to campus and encountered someone who made assumptions about you, or about whom you made assumptions. How did you learn whether your initial impression was accurate?
- 20. Early in the novel, Mary describes her mother Minerva's insistence that Jesus has a plan for Mary (pp. 22-23)—although at points in the book, Mary feels as if the plan is Minerva's and her mother only invokes Jesus to give the plan more authority. Who has a "plan" for you? How do you know? In what ways has it helped you? Have there been downsides for you as well? In what ways have you made your own plan?
- 21. Mary is only 12 years old when she leaves Richmond. At what point does she become an adult? What do you think marks her transition to adulthood?
- 22. The novel is written in the first-person point-of-view. Does it feel like Mary is speaking to you? Why or why not?
- 23. The novel uses some words that may be unfamiliar to readers. In what way does language serve to include or exclude readers, in this text and in other things you've been assigned to read for school? What does Mary's use of words like "humidor" or "funebrial" tell us about her as a character?
- 24. What are Mary's hopes at the end of the first section of the novel? What are her strengths? What are her fears? How do her hopes, strengths, and fears change during the time she is in Philadelphia? How do they change after she returns to Virginia? Identify times in your own life when your hopes, strengths, and fears changed. What caused the changes? Do you expect your hopes, strengths, and fears to change while you're in school? What about after you graduate?
- 25. Read "A Black Spy in the Confederate White House³," a short article by author Lois Leveen about the public persona that the real Mary maintained after the war. What is Leveen's argument about why Mary was so careful about shaping how she was perceived? To what extent do students at our school create "public personas" for themselves? Why would students do this, and what effects does it have?

Connecting to Contemporary Issues

- 1. Using the "Memory, History, and Memorials⁴" unit developed by Facing History and Ourselves, design a memorial to Mary Bowser or another of the anti-slavery activists in the novel. What purpose should a memorial serve today?
- 2. Sometimes it can feel that the conflicts at the heart of the novel still divide Americans. Can the concept of "<u>Transitional Justice</u>⁵" be used today to address some of the wrenching effects of slavery and the Civil War?

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- 3. Slavery is illegal in the United States, yet human trafficking continues today, in our country and around the world. The following organizations provide information about and teaching materials related to modern slavery:
 - The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center⁶
 - Historians Against Slavery⁷
 - The Frederick Douglass Family Foundation⁸

You can also find a list of readings on modern slavery here⁹.

How do the conditions of modern slavery differ from slavery as it was practiced in antebellum America? How has the legacy of the nineteenth-century abolitionist movement spurred action against twenty-first century slavery? What is fundamentally different about fighting illegal trafficking today? What role can students play in ending modern slavery?

- 4. Read "The North of the South¹⁰," a short article about the black community in Richmond. How did the black community shape the city of Richmond overall? How have racial or ethnic communities shaped the cities in which you've lived? Are you more likely to notice the influence of a community you are part of, or the influence of one that is different from your own?
- 5. Mary's espionage is presented in the novel as morally right—but from the Confederate point of view, it would have been considered treason. How does her spying compare to contemporary acts of espionage, such as Wikileaks?
- 6. The novel illustrates the differences that arose among anti-slavery activists, who were often divided about the most efficacious or morally correct means to end slavery. How do contemporary activists, such as participants in the Occupy movement or the Arab spring uprisings, deal with their internal differences?
- 7. How does Thomas McNiven's status as an immigrant shape the way others perceive him? Why would someone from Scotland risk his own life to aid African American slaves? What are some historical and contemporary social issues on which immigrants have made contributions? Do you think that being new to a country would provide a perspective and motivation to contribute to that country? Why?
- 8. How does Mary's education in Philadelphia prepare her for her work during the war? What's the difference between a skills-based education (for example, learning computer programming or automotive repair) and the kind of education Mary receives? How much of your education has been skills-based? What can schools teach beyond mastery of skills?

The <u>Clemente Course</u>¹¹ is a program offered by schools throughout the country based on the idea that people living in poverty can benefit from a humanities education. What does Mary's experience in the novel suggest about this belief? What about Dulcey's perspective? Drawing on your own experience in skills-based or humanities courses, do you think the Clemente approach is valid? Or would it be better to give poor people training that relates more directly to getting a better job?

- 9. How do Aunt Minnie's and Lewis' style of parenting differ? What are their explicit statements and implicit assumptions about parenting? How does their experience of slavery shape their explicit and implicit parenting strategies? What contemporary experiences or circumstances affect parenting styles today?
- 10. Why does Phillipa single Mary out when she joins the school in Philadelphia? Is her treatment of Mary bullying, as we define it today ¹²? How would you characterize Mary's response? Is it a response that is realistic for bullied teens today?
- 11. William Lloyd Garrison, one of the most famous and influential abolitionists, publicly burned the Constitution, declaring it was a pro-slavery document. Frederick Douglass was Garrison's protégé, but he came to disagree with Garrison, declaring that the Constitution was an anti-slavery document and should be used to challenge the legality of slavery.
 - What basis in the Constitution do you see for each of these arguments? Does this debate mirror questions about Constitutionality on key issues in our own era—or is slavery in some way inherently different from contemporary issues?
- 12. During one of Judah Benjamin's visits to Varina Davis, Mary learns of Abraham Lincoln's proposal to pay slaveholders in the Border States (slaveholding states that remained in the U.S. rather than seceding) to free their slaves (p. 308-311). Benjamin compares the cost for this policy to the daily cost of the war. How can we calculate such costs? Is financial cost the only motivation for the policy? What might be analogous policies proposed or enacted during more recent U.S. wars? What other factors besides initial cost should be considered in setting military, domestic, or foreign policy?
- 13. Had you heard about Mary Bowser before reading the novel? Which of the real people or events in the novel had you learned about? What factors determine whose lives get studied in school?
- 14. The novel uses terms like "negro" and "colored" that seem dated today. Why do terms like these change over time? What other ethnic or racial groups have been called different things at different times? Why do these changes happen?
- 15. Although the greatest divide in the book might seem to be between whites and blacks, within each of those groups, people have different ethnicities, religions, and class positions. What factors seem to be the most divisive? How do people who might seem different bridge their differences? What keeps them from doing so?
- 16. How does Mary use the negative expectations others have of her to her advantage? How do other characters, such as Bet, McNiven, Wilson, or Hortense play on stereotypes as well? What are the advantages of playing on such stereotypes? What are the risks?
- 17. The Civil War still feels "close," especially in the regions of the country where the battles were fought. How close did the war feel to you, when you were growing up? What other wars felt "close"? Why? How does your experience of war in general shape your reading of a novel set during a particular war?

Literary Studies and Critical Reading

1. What does the title mean? From whom does Mary keep secrets, as a child in Richmond, during her time in Philadelphia, and when she returns to Richmond? How do secrets shape her relationships with her father, Bet, Hattie, Zinnie, Theodore, and Wilson?

How did the title shape your experience as a reader? What title would you give the novel?

2. The novel is told in first-person point-of-view. The reader "sees" what happens through Mary's eyes. The reader hears, tastes, and smells what Mary hears, tastes, and smells, and knows what Mary is thinking. What effect does this have on how we respond to what's happening?

Select one of the following scenes (or another short scene), and write it from the point-of-view of another character. The dialogue should be the same, but you'll be able to imagine the thoughts of the character you choose as narrator, and you won't be able to use Mary's thoughts.

- When Mary recites a newspaper story Miss Bet read aloud, and Mistress Van Lew thinks she knows how to read,(pp. 20-23)
- Mary's first meeting with Dulcey, (pp. 64-66)
- The scene in which Thomas McNiven, David Bustill Bowser, and Mr. Jones discuss the idea of McNiven traveling to Richmond to free John Brown, (pp. 189-191)
- Henry Watson's arrival at Lewis and Mary's home, (pp. 360-363)

What did you learn from writing in that character's voice? Does changing the point-of-view affect how much sympathy the reader feels for each character? Trade scenes with one of your classmates. What do you notice when you read someone else's reinterpretation of the same scene?

- 3. The novel is told in Mary's voice, but the reader has to imagine what that voice sounds like in her/his head. Read the opening scene of chapter one, and write a paragraph describing the voices you hear for Mary, and for each of her parents. What parts of a voice are determined by what the author writes, versus what the reader interprets?
 - Listen to the same section from the <u>audio version</u>¹³ of the book. How do the voices compare with what you imagined? What does the person reading the audio version do to add "character" to Mary's narration? How does she differentiate between Mary, Mama, and Papa?
- 4. In the first section of chapter one, Lewis slaps Mary. Why does he do it? How does he feel at the moment he hits her, and then later when he and Minerva argue? What does he feel when Mary interrupts their argument? Write an internal monologue from Lewis' point-of-view exploring what he is feeling.

Read the first six paragraphs of "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow 14," an essay by Richard Wright about his experience growing up under segregation in the first half of the twentieth-

century. Wright describes being slapped by his mother. What does she say are her reasons for hitting him? Do you think there are other reasons she doesn't say? How does Lewis' action compare to that of Wright's mother? Given the harsh realities of slavery in the novel and of segregation in the essay, what responses would be better in each case?

- 5. One of the novel's epigraphs comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "History¹⁵." What is Emerson's thesis in that essay? Do you think *The Secrets of Mary Bowser* supports that thesis, or does it deviate from it? What do you think Emerson meant when he wrote, "The Sphinx must solve her own riddle" (note that this passage is used to encode the first message Mary smuggles from the Confederate prison)? Does Mary solve her own riddle?
- 6. One of Mary's favorite poets is Phillis Wheatley (pp. 132 and 180). Wheatley was born in Africa, kidnapped as a child, and brought to Boston, where she was bought by a white family. She published her first poem in a newspaper when she was in her early teens, and published a book of poetry while still enslaved. Read "To His Excellency General Washington"," "To the University of Cambridge in New England¹⁷, "and "On Being Brought from Africa to America¹⁸." Does Wheatley's style of writing surprise you? How does she establish her authority as a writer? What do you think about who she chose to address? What do you think Mary would have liked most in Wheatley's writing? What might Mary have disagreed with?
- 7. Mary is deeply influenced by Frederick Douglass. In his first autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (published in 1845), education and violence are both important themes. How similar or dissimilar are Douglass' attitude toward education in his narrative and Mary's attitude toward education in this novel? How similar or dissimilar are Douglass' attitude toward the use of violence in his narrative and Mary's attitude toward violence in this novel? How do factors such as gender, geographical location, or family relationships shape each of their experiences of slavery?

How does the figure of Sophia Auld in Douglass' narrative compare to Bet or Mistress Van Lew? In what ways are these white women narrative foils for Douglass and Mary as protagonists?

8. Mary is both moved by and frustrated by Harriet Beecher Stowe's depiction of slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. What elements of Stowe's novel are most effective in engaging readers emotionally? What aspects of the novel are frustrating to readers today? Are those the same elements that Mary objects to?

How does *The Secrets of Mary Bowser* engage readers emotionally? How do the strategies of emotional engagement in this twenty-first-century novel compare to the strategies Stowe used in the 1850s?

One of the black authors Mary reads, Frances Watkins (later known as Frances Watkins Harper), wrote a poem about <u>Eliza Harris</u>¹⁹, one of the characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. How does her depiction of Harris compare to Stowe's depiction of Harris?

- 9. After the Civil War, Frances Watkins Harper wrote several poems using the persona of "Aunt Chloe." Analyze the use of dialect in those poems. How does it compare to the use of dialect in *The Secrets of Mary Bowser*?
- 10. After Mary reads Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Evangeline* with Theodore Hinton (pp. 132-134), Theodore engages her in a conversation about the American Romantics. What were the characteristics of American Romanticism? Based on their actions in the novel, who do you think is more aligned with the Romantic movement, Theodore or Mary?
- 11. Compare the rhetorical strategies used in the novel to the strategies used in non-fiction writing about slavery (Frederick Douglass' speeches and autobiographies, Harriet Jacobs' slave narrative, Maria Stewart's speeches, Sojourner Truth's "Ar'n't I a Woman? ²⁰"speech, David Walker's <u>Appeal</u>²¹). What are the most striking differences between fiction and nonfiction? Between pieces written during slavery and this fictional look back at slavery? What similar rhetorical strategies do you find across the texts?
- 12. The Civil War had a tremendous effect on nineteenth-century American writers. Watch "Emily Dickinson: The Poet's Civil War²²." How does the novel's depiction of the devastation caused by the war shape your reading of Dickinson's poetry? How does Dickinson's poetry shape your reading of Leveen's novel?
- 13. Read "Whitman's *Drum Taps* and Washington's Civil War Hospitals²³." To what extent is Whitman's experience in Washington similar to the experience Mary has of war-time hospitals in Richmond? How does the novel's depiction of the devastation caused by the war shape your reading of Whitman's *Drum Taps* poems and his entries about the war in his prose memoir *Specimen Days*? How do Whitman's writings shape your reading of Leveen's novel?
- 14. Why does Bet name her horse after Frances Burney?
- 15. Is it surprising that Mary enjoys reading Chaucer, Ovid, and Pliny the Elder, writers whose experience is so far different from her own? What does her interest in these authors reveal about her as a reader and about them as writers?
- 16. Use the <u>text-to-text</u>, <u>text-to-self</u>, <u>text-to-world strategy</u>²⁴ to guide students to connect the novel to other literature they have read. What are the differences between *thematic* connections (e.g. this book reminds me about that story because they are both about doing what's morally right), *subject* connections (e.g. this book reminds me about that story because they are both about the Civil War), and *stylistic* connections (e.g. this book reminds me about that story because they are both first-person retrospective narration)?

Understanding Historical Issues

1. Describe the black community in Philadelphia as it is depicted in the novel. How is it similar to the black community in Richmond? How is it different? What sources can you find to learn more about these communities?

Read "The North of the South," an article about race in antebellum Richmond that Lois Leveen wrote for *The New York Times*. Compare this nonfiction account of the black community with the novel's fictional representation. How does a newspaper article educate and persuade? How does a work of fiction educate and persuade?

- 2. An enormous number of Americans, both soldiers and civilians, died because of the Civil War. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust argues that as the death toll rose during the war, "death was no longer encountered individually; death's threat, its proximity, and its actuality became the most widely shared of the war's experiences." For which characters in the novel is this true? For which characters does death and mourning remain more an individual rather than a shared experience? What are the reasons for the differences? Does the war change mourning and ideas about death, as they exist in the novel before the war starts? (You can read more of Faust's argument here²⁵).
- 3. We still don't know how many people were killed in the war. Read about new efforts to estimate the number of war dead²⁶. What techniques have been used to count the dead? Why hasn't an accurate account been achieved? Why does it matter now, 150 years later, how many people were killed in the war?
 - To what other topics—genocide, environmental changes, etc.—can the statistical approach that has recently been used to reassess the number of Civil War dead also be applied?
- 4. The novel incorporates several primary sources, including excerpts from <u>letters written by Harriet Newby to her husband Dangerfield Newby</u> (p. 200), the Richmond *Examiner* article "<u>Southern Women With Northern Sympathies</u> (pp. 273-274), and <u>an April 29</u>, <u>1864 letter from General Robert E. Lee to President Jefferson Davis</u> (pp. 397). How do historians use primary sources to learn about the past? What other types of primary sources can help us understand the historical eras and movements in the novel?

What are the limits of primary source documents? For example, author Lois Leveen consulted *Mary Chesnut's Civil War*, Chesnut's private diaries as edited and published by C. Vann Woodward in 1981; *Jefferson Davis: A Memoir by His Wife*, published by Varina Davis in 1890; and *The Underground Railroad, A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives*, *Letters & c.* ³⁰published by William Still in 1870. What is the difference between these kinds of sources? How can historians best use them?

For more information on using primary sources in the classroom, see <u>Reading Like a Historian</u>³¹, a resource created by the Stanford University History Education Group.

- 5. When we think of slavery, we usually think about plantations. How is the form of slavery depicted in the novel different from plantation slavery? How is it similar? Do historians use different sources to learn about urban slavery than when they study plantation slavery?
- 6. The novel's second epigraph, "Who shall go forward, and take off the reproach that is cast upon the people of color? Shall it be a woman?" is from a lecture given by the abolitionist Maria Stewart in Boston in 1832. Think about the American blacks you've studied who worked to end slavery—Mary Bowser, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and many others. Do you think gender shaped the roles they forged in the abolition movement?

- 7. Read a section of *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson (you can find an excerpt online here)³². How does Mary's journey North in 1851 compare to the examples from the twentieth-century Great Migration that Wilkerson describes?
- 8. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs wrote (using the pseudonym Linda Brent) about her escape from slavery in North Carolina. Even after making it to the North, she knew she could be claimed by her "owners" and brought back to slavery. Read <u>Chapter 41 of *Incidents*</u>, entitled "Free At Last," ³³ in which Jacobs describes her response to learning that her white friends have purchased her freedom. Does her response surprise you? Why do you think she was upset her about the news? On pp. 194-196 of *Secrets*, Mary argues with other members of the Female Anti-Slavery Society about whether slaves should be bought and freed. What is her reasoning for the position she takes? What is the reasoning of those who disagree with her? Write a scene in which Mary and Harriet Jacobs share their perspectives with each other.
- 9. Consider Cheryl Harris' argument in "Whiteness as Property"³⁴ (shorter excerpts from the article can also be found online). What scenes in the novel support her thesis? What scenes challenge it? When Theodore Hinton responds to racism by exerting his family's privilege as holders of real property (i.e. as the landlord for the confectioner's shop), does the result confirm Harris' thesis or challenge it?
- 10. List the state and national laws restricting free blacks and slaves that are referenced in the novel. Why would laws be directed at both of these groups, despite the significant differences in their legal status? How did laws enacted after the Civil War replicate or depart from these earlier codes? What were the legal bases for implementing race-based laws, and what were the legal bases on which they were challenged?
- 11. Mary gives the Upshaws a subscription to <u>Godey's Lady's Book</u>³⁵, one of the most popular magazines of the period. What type of magazine was this? What technological advances made the printing and distribution of the magazine possible? What changing aspects of American culture are reflected in the magazine? What effects did the magazine have on American culture in this period?
- 12. The Civil War is perhaps the most extreme example of the continuing conflict between states' rights and federal authority. What other historical issues and periods have involved a tension between states' rights and federal authority?
- 13. The website <u>Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Culture</u>³⁶ offers insight into many elements of literary and material culture that shaped and were shaped by Stowe's novel and the larger anti-slavery movement. Write an analysis of one or more of <u>the Tomitudes</u>³⁷, from the point-of-view of Mary or another character from *The Secrets of Mary Bowser*.

Assignments from Across the Disciplines

Social Sciences

- 1. In the essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack³⁸," Peggy McIntosh explores the "invisible" benefits she enjoys as a white person. These are not advantages she sought or chose; they occur simply because of her race. Think about the white characters in the book, and what they carry in their "invisible knapsacks." In what ways do Bet Van Lew, Zinnie Moore, and Thomas McNiven experience white privilege? Do they become aware, as McIntosh does, of how that invisible privilege shapes their lives, and especially their interactions with Mary?
- 2. Thomas McNiven is a Scottish immigrant. What percentage of the American population were immigrants in 1850? What proportion of these immigrants were from Scotland? Sociologists and historians describe "push-pull" factors for immigration: there are things that "push" people to leave the place where they live, and "pull" factors that attract them to a specific new place. What push and pull factors drove Scottish immigration in this period?
 - Where can you find data on the rates of immigration from different countries for the decades from 1800 to 1870? If you graph the data to show rates of immigration from different countries, what patterns emerge? How much did patterns of immigration shape the U.S. in the decades leading up to the Civil War? How did immigration affect the war itself?
- 3. Choose two different theories from the field of psychology about the development of individuals. How does Mary's growth over the course of the novel support or challenge each theory? Does one seem more applicable to her experience? Why? Do you see ways that her experience can help add useful corollaries or exceptions to either or both theories? How might these theories account for the development of other characters—such as Bet, Papa, or Mistress Van Lew—who are adults when the story begins but still change over the course of the novel?
- 4. Choose two different theories from the field of sociology or anthropology about the structure of families. How do the families in the novel—Mary and her parents, the Van Lews, the Davises, the Upshaws, Hattie and her family—support or challenge each theory? Does one seem more applicable to all the families, or are there differences from one family to another? Why? Do you see ways that analyzing the families in the novel can help add useful corollaries or exceptions to either or both theories?
- 5. Throughout the novel, the cost of everything from a newspaper subscription to foodstuff to compensated emancipation (paying slaveowners to give up their slaves) is mentioned. How can you calculate what those prices are equivalent to in 2012 dollars?
- 6. The novel depicts the immense inflation in Confederate currencies during the war. What causes such inflation? What policies and strategies are used today to curb inflation? Would they have been feasible in the Confederate States of America during the Civil War?

7. Confederate states printed their own currency. When and why did the United States move from state-issued currency to federal-issued currency? What are the arguments in favor of state-based, nation-based, or international units of currency? What different policies are required to regulate commerce and support economic growth under each system?

Humanities

- 8. Mary attends services in several different churches over the course of the novel: St. John's, an Episcopal church in Richmond; "Mother Bethel," the founding African Methodist Episcopal church; the Arch Street Meeting House of the Society of Friends; and Shiloh Baptist Church in Philadelphia. What are the religious tenets of each of these churches? How different would the services she attends be in each? How important are the distinctions between these different Protestant denominations? In what ways would each of them seem similar to or different from the non-denominational—and surreptitious—prayer meetings that Henry Banks leads for slaves like Mary and her parents?
- 9. On p. 233, as Mary passes the slave auction houses and whipping posts in Richmond, she recalls a passage from the Stoic philosopher Seneca that she studied while she was in school in Philadelphia. Read the text of Seneca's Letter 47, from which the passage comes³⁹. What is the basis for Seneca's argument? How is this a "Stoic" position? In what ways is it relevant to slavery as it was practiced in the U.S.? In what ways is it irrelevant? To what extent would Seneca as a Stoic approve or disapprove of the actions Mary takes against slavery, in Philadelphia and after her return to Richmond?
- 10. In Plato's *Crito*, Socrates argues that it would be wrong to break the law even though doing so would save him from immediate death. Which of his arguments would apply to the anti-slavery activities, espionage, educating slaves, or other illegal activities depicted in the novel? Which would not?
- 11. How would utilitarian and Kantian theories of morality differ in their assessment of the events and characters in the novel?
- 12. What passages from the novel could be used to assess the morality of the Civil War according to just war theory 40?
- 13. Mary repeatedly breaks laws: She learns to read despite Virginia law (and Mistress Van Lew's express wishes). She aids slaves who are escaping via the Underground Railroad. She commits treason against the Confederate States of America by spying for the Union. Are these actions morally justifiable? Choose three philosophers, two you can use to support the argument that these actions are moral, and you think can be used to support the argument that the actions are not moral. Explain your choices.
 - On pp. 321-322, Mary chooses to withhold information that she could pass onto the Union command, because she wants to prolong the war in the hopes that Lincoln will address the issue of slavery. Would this action also be considered justifiable or unjustifiable according to the three philosophers you chose?

14. After Lewis dies, Mary wonders whether she was wrong to remain in Richmond to spy rather than bringing her father to freedom (pp. 344-46). Write a letter to Mary answering her question. Cite works by two philosophers, psychologists, religious thinkers, or other "experts" to support your argument.

Fine, Creative, and Performing Arts

- 1. Although Mary participates in abolitionist gift fairs, she's disturbed by the iconography circulated at these fairs, which she feels overemphasizes the helplessness of slaves (pp. 125-126). What do you think of the depiction of slaves in the common antislavery images, "Am I not a man and a brother? 41" and "Am I not a woman and a sister?" 42
- 2. Analyze the use of typography, imagery, color, and perspective on the cover of *The Secrets of Mary Bowser*. Compare the cover of the US edition with the cover of the UK edition and the Norwegian edition 44.
 - To whom do you think these covers **most** appeal? To whom do they not appeal as strongly? Create your own US cover for the novel, designing it to strengthen the appeal to that audience.
- 3. Watch <u>the book trailer</u>⁴⁵ for *The Secrets of Mary Bowser*. How does the use of each of the following elements shape how a viewer responds to the video: music, text, still images, video footage, crosscuts, zoom, fades?
 - To whom do you think this trailer **most** appeals? To whom does it not appeal as strongly? Create your own trailer for the novel, designing it to strengthen the appeal to that audience.
- 4. Choose a scene from the novel, and stage it like a play. Use the dialogue as it is written in the novel. Add whatever props, costumes, stage directions, music etc. you want. How do these "theatrical" elements add to the scene? What's easier to convey in a play than a novel? What's harder to convey?
- 5. There are several references to music throughout the book, from gospel hymns and spirituals ("Amazing Grace," p.37; "We Will March Through the Valley," p. 38; "Walk Together Children," p. 82; "I Want to Go Home," p. 386 and "Do You Think I'll Make a Soldier," p. 389) to a mazurka (p. 141). How did music circulate in this period before electric amplification and broadcasting? What vocal styles were popular in the 1850s and 1860s, and how do we know? What instruments were used?
 - Play/sing the songs from the novel in the style of the period, then try them in the style of a later period. What do you change, and why?
- 6. On pp. 387-388 of the novel, Mary describes a *cart de visite* with an image of the UCST battle flag, which was painted by David Bustill Bowser. You can see a reproduction of the flag here 46. Analyze the use of realism and pageantry on the flag. How does the USCT 22d flag compare to other Civil War battle flags? What other art by David Bustill Bowser can you find through research on the internet or in your campus library? What themes do you see across his artwork?

7. In 1941, Jacob Lawrence created a series of painting about John Brown. You can see screenprints made from those images in 1977 here ⁴⁷. What story do Lawrence's images tell? How do they convey information? How do they convey (or evoke) emotion? Does the style of the images surprise you?

How does Lawrence's depiction of Brown compare to the depiction of him in the novel? How does Lawrence's depiction compare to <u>David Bustill Bowser's portrait of John Brown</u>⁴⁸?

Create an additional piece (or several) focusing on Dangerfield Newby, to supplement Lawrence's series.

STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math)

- 1. McNiven and his allies conspire to blow up a Confederate ordnance lab (p. 351-353). What are the scientific principles they rely on for the explosion? What are the moral arguments for and against such an act?
- 2. Read "Route Ciphers in the Civil War⁴⁹." The PS section at the end of the novel includes a copy of the cipher believed to have been used by Bet Van Lew and Mary Bowser. Does it rely on the same mathematical principles as the ciphers discussed in the article? Can mathematical principles be used to predict how difficult it would be for the enemy to crack a particular alpha-numeric code?

Does encryption of digitized information differ from encryption of codes written on paper? How has mathematics developed to support encryption of the types of data that are transferred today?

- 3. At several points in the novel (pp. 175, 196) Mary refers to stars and constellations used for navigation. Chart what the night sky looked like over Philadelphia in late autumn and early winter. How can you use that information to navigate? What would you need to know to navigate in the same geographic area at a different time of year? What about the same time of year, but a different geographic area?
- 4. On p. 317, Mary and Bet discuss one of the scientific breakthroughs the Union made over the Confederacy: the development of "hot air" reconnaissance balloons. What is the chemistry behind this development? How would you determine what gasses are useful and safe? What conditions are needed for balloon flight?
- 5. Race-based slavery was predicated on the belief that there were inherent differences among the races. What are the biological bases of skin pigmentation and eye color? How do genes that determine physical characteristics get distributed in populations?

How does a contemporary understanding of genetics differ from the "science" that was used to justify race-based slavery?

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- 6. The novel mentions epidemics (cholera, yellow fever, smallpox, dysentery) that struck the United States from the late eighteenth-century on. Why did the Civil War accelerate the rate of epidemics? What are the differences—biological and epidemiological—between these epidemics? What are the vectors for each? During the 1850s and 1860s, would it be harder or easier to contain epidemics that depend on animal vectors? How does population size/density of hosts affect the spread of parasites?
 - Listen to the first two segments of the <u>RadioLab podcast</u>, "<u>Patient Zero</u>." The first segment is about the spread of typhus in early twentieth-century New York, and the second is about the global spread of H.I.V. How does the work of epidemiologists around these outbreaks compare to how nineteenth-century authorities responded to epidemics?
- 7. Yellow fever (pp. 89-90, 342), transmitted by mosquito, was once common in the U.S. but is now rare. The same Aeges genus of mosquito also spreads malaria and Dengue fever. Has the prevalence of all three diseases ebbed and flowed concurrently? What factors lead to the changing prevalence of each disease over time?
- 8. What is the molecular mechanism by which cholera causes diarrhea and dehydration? Why do these conditions prove so deadly during cholera outbreaks?
- 9. Mary, her mother, and the Van Lew family have been vaccinated against smallpox. What is the difference between vaccination and inoculation? What role did smallpox have in the development of vaccination practices?
- 10. The PS section of the book includes examples of nineteenth-century home remedies taken from the 1837 publication *The Family Nurse*. What does the title of that book suggest about medical care in the period? How can you assess the biological or chemical effects of these remedies (or others from *The Family Nurse*⁵¹)?
 - Some remedies prescribed in the mid-nineteenth, such as arsenic and mercury, had effects physicians didn't anticipate. Compare the effect on normal biochemistry of these treatments. What approaches are used today to assess the long-term safety or danger of a particular remedy?
- 11. Read "<u>Richmond's Medical Miracle</u>⁵²," a short article about Chimborazo, the Confederate military hospital mentioned on p. 317. What was so "miraculous" about Chimborazo? Which practices there spread to other hospitals in the period, which didn't, and why? Which of those practices are still seen as useful today, and which have been debunked?
- 12. Drawing on information from the <u>emerging field of epigenetics</u>⁵³, explore what effects might war, food shortages, and slavery have on Varina Davis' and Sophronia's pregnancies.
- 13. Read this <u>Science Friday transcript</u>⁵⁴ about how resilience works in complex systems and in individual organisms. Can this science be used to understand the survival strategies used by individual slaves and slave families, as depicted in the book? Can it be used to understand why particular social movements and institutions, such as the antislavery

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movement, the pro-Union espionage ring, or the Confederacy, ultimately succeeded or failed?

- 14. At several points in the novel, smelling salts are used to revive someone who faints (pp. 185, 392). How does this remedy work? Is it a biological or a chemical response?
- 15. When Mary meets Hortense, she is using vinegar to clean the Gray House parlor windows (p. 294). Why is vinegar an effective solvent? What other solvents would have been available in this period, and how would they have worked?
- 16. Mary observes that during the war, "rumors were like dandelion puffs, they sprung up everywhere." How do dandelion puffs differ from other seed dispersal mechanisms? Why do different plants have different mechanisms for seed dispersal?
- 17. One reason the Civil War proved so deadly was the "advancements" made in weaponry. What are the differences between muskets and rifles? Explain the physics of what makes a rifle a deadlier weapon.
- 18. The phrase "when the wind blows from the South" is used as a metaphor throughout the novel. How is wind generated? What patterns does it follow? To what extent can wind patterns be predicted, and how?
- 19. Throughout the war, battles raged close to Richmond, and the proximity of the gunfire affected local weather. How did nineteenth-century weaponry affect weather?

This guide was created by Lois Leveen, Ph.D., with contributions from Steven Arkonovich, Ph.D., Noa Latham, Ph.D., Matthew Leibowitz, M.D., Ellyn Gersh Lerner, Ph.D., Catherine Olson, M.D., Robert Shapiro, Ph.D., Michael Slater, M.D., and Teresa Smith-Glaser, Ph.D. If you have teaching strategies for the novel you would like to share, please email teaching@loisleveen.com.

Helpful Links and Resources

¹ http://loisleveen.com/index.php/site/for-teachers

² http://www.pbs.org/pov/upheartbreakhill/

³ http://nyti.ms/MlWBFI

⁴ http://www2.facinghistory.org/campus/memorials.nsf/Home?OpenFrameSet

⁵ http://tj.facinghistory.org/

⁶ http://freedomcenter.org/slavery-today/

⁷ http://historiansagainstslavery.org/

⁸ http://www.fdff.org/human-trafficking.html

⁹ http://historiansagainstslavery.org/collaborate/book-reviews

¹⁰ http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/01/24/the-north-of-the-south/

¹¹ http://clementecourse.org/

¹² http://ostracism.facinghistory.org/

¹³ http://www.theaudiobookstore.com/lois-leveen/secrets-mary-bowser-novel b008392i3w.aspx

¹⁴ http://newdeal.feri.org/fwp/fwp03.htm

¹⁵ http://www.emersoncentral.com/history.htm

¹⁶ http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/22114

- ¹⁷ http://www.bartlebv.com/150/3.html 18 http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174733 19 http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/185927 ²⁰ http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/sojtruth-woman.asp ²¹ http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/walker.html ²² http://www.emilydickinsonmuseum.org/node/365 ²³ http://xroads.virginia.edu/~cap/hospital/whitman.htm ²⁴ http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/strategies/text-text-text-self-text-worl ²⁵ http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17957712 ²⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/civil-war-toll-up-by-20-percent-in-newestimate.html?pagewanted=all ²⁷ http://www.lva.virginia.gov/public/trailblazers/2009/honoree.asp?bio=1 28 http://www.mdgorman.com/Written Accounts/Examiner/1861/richmond examiner 7291861.htm ²⁹ http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/sources/recordView.cfm?Content=060/1326 30 http://www.quinnipiac.edu/other/abl/etext/ugrr/ugrr.html 31 http://sheg.stanford.edu/?q=node/45 32 http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129855900#129861264 33 http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/jacobs/jacobs.html#jac293 34 http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract id=927850 35 http://www.uvm.edu/~hag/godey/contents.html ³⁶ http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sitemap.html 37 http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/tomituds/tohp.html 38 http://ted.coe.wavne.edu/ele3600/mcintosh.html ³⁹ http://www.faculty.fairfield.edu/gruffini/cl116/seneca.epist.47.htm 40 https://www.mtholvoke.edu/acad/intrel/pol116/justwar.htm 41 http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2h67.html 42 http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6726/ 43 http://www.amazon.co.uk/Secrets-Mary-Bowser-Lois-Leveen/dp/1444736256 44 http://www.cappelendamm.no/main/Katalog.aspx?isbn=9788202364847 45 http://voutu.be/V5n3vo2voGY 46 http://loisleveen.com/index.php/site/blog-single-entry/35/ 47 http://www.arts.wa.gov/public-art/legend-of-john-brown/Artwork01.html
- 48 http://explorepahistory.com/displayimage.php?imgId=1-2-1F93
- 49 http://mathaware.org/mam/06/Sauerberg_route-essay.html
- 50 http://www.radiolab.org/2011/nov/14/
- 51 http://ia600402.us.archive.org/17/items/familynurseorcom00chilrich/familynurseorcom00chilrich.pdf
- 52 http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/22/richmonds-medical-miracle/
- 53 http://learn.genetics.utah.edu/content/epigenetics/inheritance/
- 54 http://www.npr.org/2012/07/27/157489677/-resilience-looks-at-how-things-bounce-back