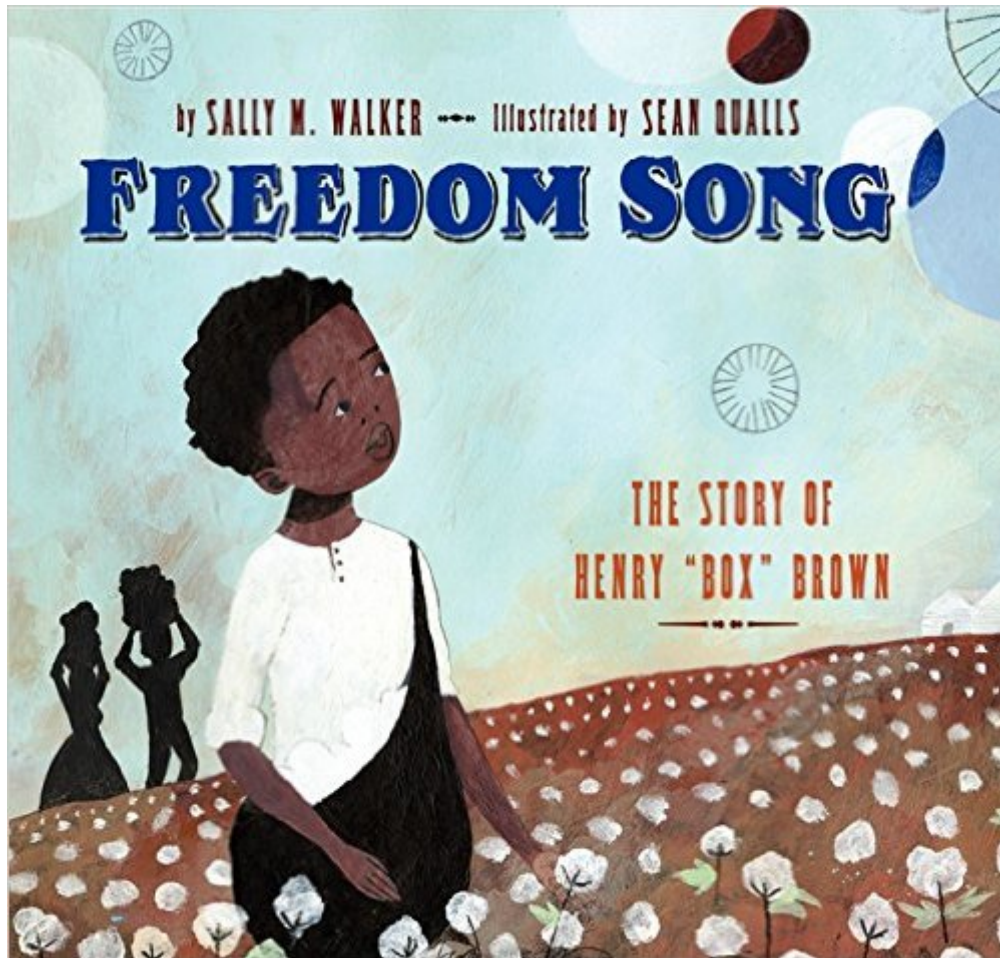


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# Freedom Song: The Story Of Henry "Box" Brown



## Synopsis

Henry's ingenious escape from slavery is celebrated for its daring and originality. Throughout his life, Henry was fortified by music, family, and a dream of freedom. When he seemed to lose everything, he forged these elements into the song that sustained him through the careful planning and execution of his perilous journey to the North. Honoring Henry's determination and courage, Sibert Medal-winning author Sally M. Walker weaves a lyrical, moving story of the human spirit. And in nuanced illustrations, Sean Qualls captures the moments of strength, despair, and gratitude that highlight the remarkable story of a man determined to be free.

## Book Information

Lexile Measure: 570L (What's this?)

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Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars See all reviews (6 customer reviews)

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Age Range: 4 - 8 years

Grade Level: Preschool - 3

## Customer Reviews

The story is very well done, emphasizing Henry's adult life without losing its appeal for young readers. We hear the joy of songs in young Henry's life, the happiness with his wife and kids, and the devastation when his family was sold away from him. The full page, full color, yet sedate illustrations complement the tone of the story to engage readers to appreciate the hardship of Henry's journey. An Author's Note (mostly for adults) is quite interesting, and references a letter written by James McKim, the man who received Henry's box at the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Office. This letter still survives in the New York Historical Society's Slavery Collection, and is reprinted

here.

This is the second children's book I've read about Henry "Box" Brown in the last couple years. The first, "Henry's Freedom Box" by Kadir Nelson, was a disappointment, especially from such a notable African-American children's author and illustrator. I didn't feel that the book did a very good job of capturing the range of emotions of Henry's life or of describing the physical and emotional anguish of Henry's ordeal in the box. Ms. Walker's contribution seems a lot closer to the mark in this regard. In an author's note, Ms. Walker tells us how her own experience with music, and the historical fact that Henry was also in a church choir, inspired her to use music as the central theme and emotional vehicle of the story. From imagining the song his family sang when he was born, to the working songs Henry might have sung to help him through his days, to the secret "Freedom Song" he sang in his head, music, in this story, is the voice in which Henry speaks and the crutch he leans on to make it through the difficult times. Henry Brown was, of course, born into slavery and worked in the fields from a young age. As a young man he was sent to work in a tobacco factory far from his family. Eventually, however, he met Nancy and, when their masters both agreed, they married and formed their own family and were happy. At least, as happy as slaves can be, anyway. But their masters still had the right to sell them, which Nancy's master did, along with their children. At this point, Ms. Walker imagines that all of Henry's songs must have died in his heart. All except one, that is. With his Freedom Song ringing in his ears, Henry began to plan his daring escape to freedom and to find his family. With the help of Samuel Smith, a white conductor on the Underground Railroad, and a free black friend, Henry decided to ship himself to freedom. Although he designed a special box with soft cloth padding, air holes and a supply of water, Henry's journey was still excruciating, including and especially the wound he inflicted on himself so that he would have an excuse not to go to work. Henry was sealed in a box roughly three feet by two and a half feet by two feet. The box was carefully labeled "This Side Up With Care", but unfortunately, such instructions went unheeded. Twice Henry ended up on his head, blood pounding in his ears, unable to shift for fear of discovery by the men right next to his box. Even with the air holes the box was suffocatingly hot. Would Henry make it? Unfortunately, or, perhaps fortunately, Henry lost consciousness when his box slid and crashed in the bed of a wagon. The rest, of course, is history. When Henry regained consciousness he was close to his release and freedom. Unfortunately, we don't know if Henry was ever able to reunite with Nancy or his children. Personally, I suspect not, as he had to flee further to England to avoid the Fugitive Slave Act. But at the same time, I like to hope that somehow he did meet back up with his family. This book does a good job balancing the intensity

of the horrors and struggles of Henry's life with the needs of its young audience. It doesn't shy away from the harsh realities, but it does present them in a way that four to eight year olds can understand without being overwhelmed. My own five year old daughter was rather sad and contemplative after reading this book. The victorious ending does help to reassure that even the worst obstacles can be overcome with perseverance and, perhaps, a song in your heart. Sean Qualls' illustrations also nicely complement the story. He uses a very muted palette and the illustrations have a rough, almost unfinished quality, but there's also a sense of hopefulness in the subtle use of light and the expressions on the characters' faces. All-in-all this book is a worthy effort to capture a heart-rending yet uplifting story of bondage, escape and redemption for young readers.

Henry Brown was born to slave parents on a plantation in Virginia. He worked in the cotton fields as a child and he was allowed to grow-up with his parents. Music was an important part of Henry's childhood and he always had a song in his heart and on his lips. He was afraid to voice his "freedom song", but it was always in his heart and mind. When Henry was almost grown, he was sent to work in a tobacco factory in Richmond. He met a young slave woman named Nancy and they were allowed to get married. Henry and Nancy had children and they lived together in a slave cabin. Henry was very happy and continued to sing songs to his wife and children. One day Henry learned that his family had been sold and would be sent far away. He was desperate to save them but he couldn't keep the family together. Henry was determined to escape to the North where he would be free. With the help of several men who "knew the way of the Underground Railroad", Henry planned his escape. He built a wooden box that was just large enough to hold him. He got in the box and his friend shipped him to Pennsylvania. His journey was very difficult and he almost died along the way. When he arrived at his destination, he was released from the box and lived as a free man for the rest of his life. No one knows whether he was ever reunited with Nancy or their children. Henry "Box" Brown was a real person who escaped slavery very much like it was described in this story. The story is documented by a letter that was written in 1849 by the man who received the box and set Henry free. This letter is now housed in a special collection at the New York Historical Society. This is an excellent resource to supplement social studies and history curriculum in the elementary grades. The subject of slavery is not always easy to explain to children, but this book provides an excellent way to show children how slaves lived, worked and were treated by their owners. The illustrations are excellent and add a great deal of value to the story. I highly recommend this book as an honest look at the American culture and history during the 1800s.

Can you imagine wanting to escape your old life and wanting to start a new one? What if you thought the easiest way to do that was to mail yourself to a new place! Henry Box Brown did just that! He was a slave and wanted to be free. He mailed himself to Pennsylvania, a free state. This is perfect book to use when learning about slavery. Henry was a brave man that put his trust in God and was able to break free and make a new life for himself and his family.

A lyrical take on the fascinating true story of Henry "Box" Brown, who made his escape from slavery by sending himself in the mail to Philadelphia. I loved this line: "Henry was papa proud when his first child was born." The book is appended with a bit of historical information, as well as the text from a letter from an abolitionist detailing the remarkable escape.

Love this book

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