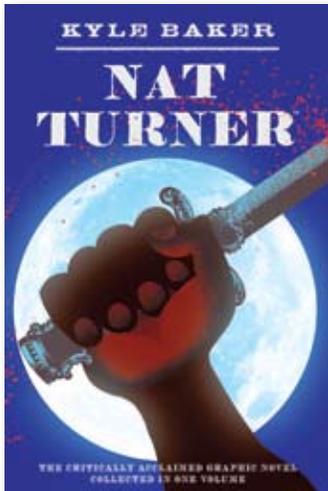


NAT TURNER • Teacher's Guide



Kyle Baker's *Nat Turner* details the life story of the famous insurrectionist who led an attack on white slave masters and their families on August 21, 1831, in Southampton County, Virginia. The unique narrative format of Baker's graphic novel presents many opportunities for students to gain a deeper understanding of slavery's horrors and how everyone, both the enslaved and enslavers, suffered under its weight.

The following questions can be used as essay-writing implements for students or to facilitate classroom discussions about Nat Turner and the issue of American slavery in general. (Note to teachers: In the case of essay-writing, please provide instructions to your students about how long their essays should be.)

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CLASSROOM QUESTIONS

- In part II of the graphic novel, titled "Education," much attention is given to the great lengths the enslaved went to have their own forms of secret communication, whether through learning to read and write, African drumming, or singing songs that contained undercover messages. Why was there a continual desire to have these forms of communication? What was the power seen in learning how to read and write, for example? (See author's introduction for some of his ideas on this subject.)
- In the text of his confession, Nat Turner says that he was an agent of God who had dwelled upon spiritual matters from his youth and who felt he "was ordained for some great purpose in the hands of the Almighty." Nat Turner led his rebellion after he reported experiencing signs from heaven about fulfilling his earthly purpose. What do you think motivated Turner to plan his uprising? Do you think the author and illustrator, Kyle Baker, has his own ideas about what might have motivated Turner to take action? Explain and support your answers with examples from the book.
- In the graphic novel, are there any depictions of the atrocities of slavery that come as a surprise to you, particularly in terms of the violence? What acts were particularly disturbing to you? Why?
- Compare your reaction to seeing slavery depicted primarily in illustrations as opposed to reading about it in other texts that rely mostly on words. Do you prefer seeing the story unfold through visual art, or would you have preferred more words? Explain your preference.
- During the attack on whites, some of the enslaved are seen aiding their masters (pp. 130–32 and 136–37) while others are shown attacking Turner's followers (pp. 162, 165, and 168). Why do you think that some of the enslaved chose to help whites or take up arms against Turner rather than take their freedom or join the attack?
- With the heavy reliance on illustrations, were there any parts of the story that weren't clear to you? Which ones? (Note to teachers: This question in particular can be used as an opportunity to encourage student participation in class discussion. If a student points out that there's a certain part of the book that he or she didn't fully understand, allow other students to raise their hands and respond with their own ideas about what's happening.)
- At his execution, Nat Turner appears to be serene and calm. Give your opinion on why.

ACTIVITY FOR STUDENTS

- Depending on the classroom size, break up the class into groups of four or five students each. Each group will need two markers and at least two sheets per group from a large easel pad. Present this question to students:

Keeping in mind his background, his environment, and the historical times in general, how justified do you feel Nat Turner was in his actions?

Each group should prepare a list of pros and cons, listing on one sheet of paper the reasons why members of the group might see Turner's actions as justified and then, on another sheet of paper, listing how Turner's actions might be seen as wrong. Group members should also be sure to discuss the reasons why they are listing certain actions as justified or unjustified.

After completing their lists, each group should choose a spokesperson to briefly present their lists to the rest of the class, making sure to articulate if there was a general consensus among group members about Nat Turner's actions or if there was disagreement.

MULTIMEDIA

- To add another dimension to students' understanding of Nat Turner and his legacy, teachers can acquire the DVD of the documentary *Nat Turner: A Troublesome Property*, for viewing in the classroom. The film is innovative in its scope as it relies on historical footage while also presenting three different actors playing Nat Turner; each actor's story in fact represents a different version of the Nat Turner rebellion, showcasing that there's not only one view on Turner's life and the fateful events of the day of his attack.

After viewing the film, students can compare and contrast the versions of the story presented in the film to Kyle Baker's version of the story. Which feels more authentic? Explain.

(To inquire about purchasing or renting the film, educators can contact California Newsreel at (877) 811-7495 or www.newsreel.org)

OUT-OF-CLASS ASSIGNMENTS (HOMEWORK)

Here are some writing projects that students can do on their own time outside of class, perhaps as extra credit assignments. Teachers should feel free to give a minimum and maximum page length for each project, while also providing helpful hints to their students about the best way to focus their research on a topic as wide-reaching as American slavery.

- There are countless other literary works that detail the horrors of slavery. Some of them include:

Fiction

Kindred by Octavia Butler

Family by J. California Cooper

The Known World by Edward P. Jones

Beloved by Toni Morrison

Uncle Tom's Cabin by Harriet Beecher Stowe

My Jim by Nancy Rawles

Nonfiction (Slave Narratives)

From Fugitive Slave to Free Man: The Autobiographies of William Wells Brown by William Wells Brown

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave by Frederick Douglass

The Life of Olaudah Equiano by Olaudah Equiano

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Ann Jacobs

The History of Mary Prince: A West Indian Slave Narrative by Mary Prince

Choose one of these works or another one of your choice not listed here. Write a report on the book, comparing and contrasting your selection to various elements found in the *Nat Turner* graphic novel.

- Nat Turner's mother is depicted as an observant, strong, courageous, and loving woman. The last we see of her in the graphic novel is on p. 101, where she is in distress over her grandchildren and daughter-in-law being sold away from her and her son.
What do you think happened to Turner's mother after the rebellion? You can go to the library, do research, and prepare a report detailing any information you can find about her whereabouts. (This report can also be presented orally to the class, as other students might be very interested in this information.) Or you can use your imagination and make up a short story about what happened to her. You can create your short story through words or, if you like to draw like Kyle Baker, create a short graphic novel that details her story.
- Slavery was a brutal, oppressive system that fueled the American economy for nearly three hundred years and destroyed or damaged millions of lives. Do a research project that explores the justification used to support treating human beings so cruelly, particularly looking at the economic rationale enslavers relied upon. Also take into account the social, political, philosophical, and religious customs of the time that would have allowed such a system to prosper.