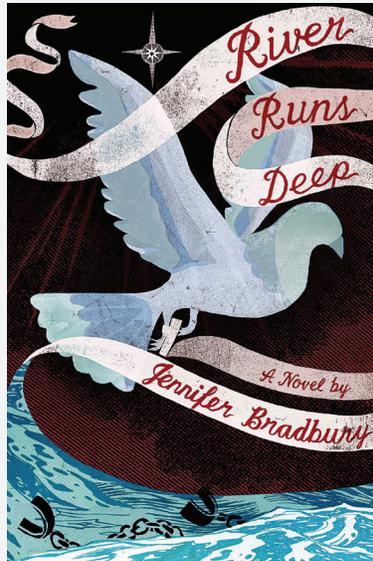


## Second Reaction: Consumed by Mystery in the Mammoth Cave

Bradbury, Jennifer. *River Runs Deep*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2016.

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Jennifer Bradbury's *River Runs Deep* is a pre-Civil War mystery that envelops the reader in the story of Elias Harrigan, a twelve-year-old boy who is ill with consumption (tuberculosis). Unfortunately for Elias, he lives in an era that predates modern medicine. In a last-ditch effort to save his life, Elias is sent to Kentucky to be treated by Dr. John Croghan. Though Dr. Croghan employs several unusual treatments, he primarily believes that the Mammoth Cave, in which his practice is housed, will prove beneficial for his patients. Elias is the youngest of Dr. Croghan's patients and soon becomes restless and perhaps even a little stir-crazy as he begins to believe that someone is speaking to him from outside his hut. Luckily for Elias, the doctor prescribes some exercise, and he is allowed to venture around the Mammoth Cave with a few of the doctor's most trusted slaves. Yet Elias's association with the slaves begins to draw suspicion. Ultimately, Elias's health, trustworthiness, and loyalty are tested as the novel unfolds.

*River Runs Deep* is well suited for usage in a literature circle or book club with upper elementary or middle grade students. An English language arts and reading teacher could include this novel as one choice for literature circles organized by genre (either historical fiction or mystery), plot (i.e., a protagonist forced to make difficult, potentially life-changing decisions), or protagonist characteristics (i.e., a preadolescent boy). In the social studies classroom, *River Runs Deep* might be one choice for literature circles alongside other novels set in the pre-Civil War era and/or focused upon the issue of slavery.

I recommend *River Runs Deep* for utilization in a literature circle or book club for several reasons. First, the novel is somewhat of a slow start, so the book may not readily engage reluctant readers who are hesitant to read. However, *River Runs Deep* is a page-turner once the mystery begins to unfold. Thus, this book is more appropriate for perseverant readers who are undeterred by an initially slow-developing plot and/or students who enjoy reading mysteries. Secondly, *River Runs Deep* lends itself to literature-based discussions. In a literature circle, students can discuss the complexities of the characters and their evolving relationships. As it is a mystery novel, literature circle members can make and discuss their predictions regarding the characters and plot. Finally, though *River Runs Deep* is an enjoyable novel, it may not appeal to all students. For example, the story is told through the eyes of Elias, a white preadolescent boy living prior to the Civil War. Some students may prefer to read a novel told from an alternate perspective such as that of Elijah Freeman, the first free child born in a settlement populated by runaway slaves, in *Elijah of Buxton* by Christopher Paul Curtis. Nevertheless, English language arts and reading and social studies teachers would do well to include *River Runs Deep* as a basis for classroom discussions.

The teacher who elects to conduct a novel study of *River Runs Deep* will have no shortage of activities through which to extend the text and more deeply engage his or her students. As previously mentioned, the novel is historical fiction, and Bradbury was inspired to write the book after visiting the Mammoth Cave herself. The story is partly based in reality, as the real-life Dr. John Croghan based his experimental tuberculosis hospital in the Mammoth Cave. As in *River Runs Deep*, Dr. Croghan's slaves (Stephen Bishop, Mat Bransford, and Nick Bransford) explored and forged paths in the Mammoth Cave. As the author of a mystery, Bradford excels in leaving it up to the reader to uncover what is fiction and what is based upon the real-life experiences of Dr. Croghan, Stephen, Mat, and Nick. Lovers of mysteries will relish the opportunity to do some of their own investigating into the history of Mammoth Cave and the men upon whom many of the novel's characters are based. Teachers can capitalize upon the real-life mystery introduced by Bradbury through *River Runs Deep* by engaging their students in doing just that.

In sum, *River Runs Deep* is both a historical fiction and mystery novel perfect for intermediate and middle grade readers. The book would work well in a literature circle based in both English language arts and reading or social studies classrooms. Teachers could easily forge cross-curricular connections between the two content areas throughout the novel. As a whole class novel study, *River Runs Deep* presents an opportunity for students to engage in research in an effort to learn more about the Mammoth Cave and the lives of Dr. Croghan and the men who conducted in-depth explorations of the cave—Stephen, Mat, and Nick.

## Works Cited

Curtis, Christopher Paul. *Elijah of Buxton*. Scholastic Paperbacks, 2009.

### **About the Author**

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