



Spy on History: Mary Bowser and the Civil War Spy Ring

Enigma Alberti , Tony Cliff

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The true story of Mary Bowser, a former slave-turned-spy who delivered key intelligence secrets during the Civil War. Readers uncover secrets using codes hidden in the book and spycraft materials included.

Spy on History: Mary Bowser and the Civil War Spy Ring Details

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Author : Enigma Alberti , Tony Cliff

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From Reader Review Spy on History: Mary Bowser and the Civil War Spy Ring for online ebook

nicole says

My 3rd grade TAG class does a unit on codes & ciphers. This is a great mentor text and I look forward to the rest of the series!

Tonya Collins says

I loved this book. When I was a young girl, I was a Nancy Drew bluff. This book had me interacting with the book and discovering clues. The book was just pure fun.

Carolyn Woods says

Spy on History: Mary Bowser and the Civil War Spy Ring tells a story about Mary Bowser, a slave working in the Confederate White House during the Civil War. As part of her duties, Mary sees coded documents on the president's desk. She can read (unusual for a slave) and has a photographic memory, and over time begins decoding the messages she sees and sending information back to the Union. This is based on the true story of Mary Bowser, a former slave who delivered intelligence information to the Union during the war.

This is both a reader and an activity book. While you read, you also have the chance to decode the messages Mary finds and solve a mystery yourself! The story is engaging, and there are illustrations and document pictures throughout as well that add to the story. I particularly liked a cutaway of the Confederate White House, showing the layout of the building.

This would be an excellent addition to a study of the Civil War, and I hope there will be additional volumes relating to other parts of history - after all we can definitely trace spies back to the Trojan War, and likely there were many well before that! I'd say it's an upper elementary reading level, so use as a read-aloud through about 3rd grade, independent thereafter.

The book itself is hard cover, and includes an envelope of spy materials in the front, and has a seal on the final pages which give the solution to the mystery.

Disclosure: I received a review copy from NetGalley. All opinions are my own.

Lisa Kizer says

Both my son and myself rated this as a 3. He lost interest after a while with the story but loved the spy/code sheets that came with the book. I read further into the book but also felt like it lost a lot of its appeal the further into the story. Its as if you start out thinking the story/book is going to be more in a cartoon format with lots of pictures or short blurbs on what was going on and instead it is all prose. The story about Mary Bowser itself was interesting just not this format - somehow missed its mark with both a 9 yo reader and his

parent.

Heidi says

I'm excited about this new Spy on History series. I not only enjoyed reading the story of Mary Bowser, but the interactive element is fabulous as well. As the reader digs into the adventures of Mary Bowser as she spies on the Confederate President Jefferson Davis during the Civil War, the book is full of clues and codes for the reader to try to figure out. Materials are even included to help the reader figure things out. And this isn't an easy task. I'm eager to go back and give the clues my full attention now that I've finished reading the book. The answers are included in a sealed section at the back of the book. I am especially appreciative of the fact that this book looks at the efforts of an African American woman whose work was not fully appreciated at the time. I'm eager to read the adventures of the other people highlighted in this developing series. This book may not work well in a library because of the interactive elements but it would make a great gift for young mystery/spy enthusiasts. Because so little is known about Mary Bowser the book is of necessity, historical fiction. The author's note at the end explains what information is accurate and what had to be surmised.

Sarah Sammis says

If I were still in the target age range, I would find these clues amazingly fun and I'd probably want to collect the entire series (or at least check them all out). As an adult, I found the book rather gimmicky.

<http://pussreboots.com/blog/2018/comm...>

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

Mary Bowser and the Civil War Spy Ring is the first book in the new series Spy on History that combines an exciting story with interactive materials that invite the reader to solve a mystery.

Mary is a freed slave who has been asked to work in the home of the Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Mary had been freed as a very young girl by Bet Van Lew, a Quaker, who had taken a special interest in her, making sure Mary learned to read and write. Now, Bet was building a network of spies and when she heard there was a job available in the Davis house, she implored the recently married Mary to get the job and work as a spy masquerading as an illiterate young woman. Mary was ideal for the job, because not only could she read and write, but she had a photographic memory. All she had to do was study one of Davis' maps or important papers for a short time and she could reproduce it later for Bet.

But spying is a tricky business for Mary. She misses her husband and she is always being watched by the suspicious servant O'Melia. As Mary finds information that will help the Union win the Civil War, she has to be clever about delivering it to Bet. Luckily, the baker who brings the morning bread is also part of Bet's spy ring. Meanwhile, who has been going through Mary's room when she isn't there and will they find her incriminating diary? Will Mary's cover as an illiterate girl be blown by the nosy O'Melia? And as things heat up, will Mary be able to safely escape if she has to?

Mary Bowser and the Civil War Spy Ring is a novel based on real events. All the main characters, Mary, Bet, O'Melia, and even the baker Thomas Niven, were real people involved in spying on the Confederate President Davis. Mary is such a strong character, but spying is always a dangerous business and no less so for her. Mary's courage is one of the features that makes this such an exciting novel.

Included in the book is an envelope containing four tools to help the reader find clues to solve the mystery of where Mary hid her diary at the end of the book, including a Caesar cipher wheel just like the kind that was actually used during the war.

Sharp readers will also find a sheet with Morse code and scattered clues throughout to decipher. There is even a Vigenère cipher, one of my favorites from childhood when my best friend and I would leave each other messages using it. It looks confusing, but isn't that the idea. It's based on a keyword(s) that lets the receiver decode the message. And, yes, readers will also learn how to use it.

Spy on History - Mary Bowser and the Civil War Spy Ring is an excellent and fun way to discover this courageous lady and the part she played in bringing about the end of the Civil War. She is actually one of many African Americans who were spies during the war. The Brave Black Women Who Were Civil War Spies by Theresa McDevitt is a short but excellent article about three African American spies, including Mary Bowser with links to more in-depth biographies of these brave women.

Kristi Bernard says

Mary Bowser was born into slavery but was set free by the Van Lew family of Quakers. Bet Van Lew taught her to read and even sent her to school in Philadelphia. She worked for a few years as a teacher in Liberia. During this time, the state of Virginia claimed themselves as their very own country. They were called The Confederate States of America. Taking action, Bet Van Lew began to create a network of spies in Richmond. When Bet discovered that Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy and his wife were looking for a maid, Mary was asked to be the spy.

Everything Mary overheard she reported back. When she discovered that some papers appeared to have code hidden in them she set out to decipher the hidden messages. Meanwhile, with President Lincoln preparing the Emancipation Proclamation slave owners worried about the millions they had spent on slaves and what would happen if there were no more slaves to work the lands. As General Lee planned to bring Virginia back from the Confederacy talk was spreading that there was a spy within the walls. What would happen to Mary if she were found out? You'll have to read the story to see.

The story of Mary Bowser is intriguing for any mystery buff. Readers are equipped with the necessary tools to discover and decode a mystery within the pages. Parents and teachers can use this guide for a read-a-loud project or to get readers involved with learning about history.

Erin says

The story of Mary is very interesting. The interactive ciphers and codes were extremely difficult. It's unlikely that a reader of the books intended audience could actually solve it.

Zoe says

Mary Bowser and the Civil War Ring is the first book in the Spy on History Series by Enigma Alberti & Toni Cliff. It tells the real-life story of Mary Bowser, an African American spy for the Union. She used her cover as a maid in Jefferson Davis' house to gain access to top secret documents, which she scanned with her photographic memory and passed on to her connections.

While readers learn about Mary's covert activities, they're given their own mission: find where Mary hid her (fictional) secret diary. Clues are woven into the text and two-tone illustrations, and the emerging sleuths are provided with codebreaking tools, including a replica Civil War cipher wheel.

There are multiple ways to crack the case. Ultimately it's a two-step process of finding the code phrase, then using it to decrypt Mary's message by Vigenere cipher. (The story explains how to do this.) Readers can discover the code phrase using a variety of encryption techniques, including: Morse code, the language of flowers, substitution ciphers, and a book cipher. And if that fails, there are enough clues for readers to get fairly close using process of elimination.

This variety of methods means that readers are likely to find at least one approach that works well for them. For example, visual learners can lean on the flower language while more methodical minds might gravitate towards the book cipher and its riddle.

Mary Bowser and the Civil War Ring is marketed for grade 4 and up, which may be a bit ambitious for some 10-year-olds. While the individual codes are straightforward enough, there are numerous components to keep track of. Finding the clues requires focus, patience, and attention to detail. And readers are presented with a goal and no instructions or specific steps on how to get there. For those unused to such an open-ended structure, this could become frustrating. But for others, the wide open sense of mystery and discovery is a thrill.

The effort is well worth it! Mary Bowser and the Civil War Ring provides a unique interactive experience that complements this historical figure's remarkable life.

Amanda Walz says

This book is AWESOME! I feel like a need to share it with everyone. :)

Not only does it share about Mary Bowser and how she was a Civil War spy, there is a mystery in the book that you have to figure out. They even give you tools to help. So very cool!

Beyond the Pages says

What a brilliant book! This would be a wonderful resource for anyone. Not only did this work tell the story of a brave and fearless woman of color, but it also showed the strength of character and conviction of an individual who saw the need for more. The additional aspects of the book related to espionage and coding were bonuses. The real treasure, however, was the story itself, which featured this courageous soul.

Stories like this always appeal to me because they highlight the positive contributions that African-Americans made to this country. Sadly, this side of history doesn't get discussed or recognized as it should.

Indeed, there are countless other stories, such as this, that need to be and should be told. I hope the author will continue to do so.

Rating: 5/5

Recommend: Yes

Re-read: Yes

Keeper: Yes

Series Potential: Yes

Note: I would be all in to read more books like this one.

NetGalley

Esther Filbrun says

I admit: I spent way, WAY too long reading this book. It's not only a fascinating historical story, but a very well-done mystery. I think I spent about three hours yesterday working on figuring out the mystery--and I did get it, which was fun, even though I didn't decipher all the clues! All around, very worthwhile book.

BiblioBickie says

Good story; DIY code-cracking might be challenging for younger readers. Not really suitable for library use due to the envelope of several code-cracking tools (red plastic, code wheel, vellum with cut-outs, etc). I am sure the pieces will be easily lost and that the envelope holding them will not stand up to repeated use.

Jane says

Excellent narrative about the life of Mary Bowser, servant to Jefferson Davis who risked her life to supply Confederate secrets to the Union. The book does an excellent job of sticking to what is known about Mary (very little!) yet crafting an exciting tale. The book is compelling enough on its own, but the author has also added clues, codes, and other puzzles to solve throughout its pages--an effective way to get children interested in the codes involved in the espionage described in the book!
