



Underground by Jean Ferris

Subjects: Mammoth Cave (Ky.)—Juvenile fiction; Slavery—Juvenile fiction; Caves—Juvenile fiction; Underground railroad—Juvenile fiction

Book List: North America

Props: Apron



(Put on apron) I learned to write a long time ago, but it took me years before I could write down my story. First I was too afraid of being caught writing which was something that could have got me hanged. And then I was too sad to remember because it had been a sweet time as well as a dangerous one. But that time was long ago and now seems right for me to get it down.

It was May of 1839 when I got sold. Again. The first time I was sold my whole family got separated. Mama first, then Sally, my little sister, and then my brothers. I was sent to Tennessee. But now I'm being sold again to someone who owns Mammoth Cave Hotel in the middle of nowhere Kentucky. I am to be a maid for the visitors who come to see the cave. When I arrived the manager, took me to the kitchen where I met the cook. She was a stringy old extra-black lady named Mittie with a face like a dried-up apple, and a disposition to match. But she could cook. I also met two young black men, Mat and Nick. Then I met Stephen. He was not so black as Mittie, but not so light as me. He looked a little older than me, maybe 18-years-old. Not as good-looking as Nick, but nice-appearing. And ever so neat, which was something I liked, like he took pains about himself. But most of all, he seemed. . . well, I don't know how to tell it even now. . . like he was sure about things. That he understood things, and would know what to do, whatever it was that needed doing. All that, just by the way he was standing there.

Well, I had met all the slaves. Mittie, the cook, Mat, Nick and Stephen, guides for the cave. The days fell down into a pattern of seeing to the visitors and cleaning up after them and helping Mittie in the kitchen house. Mat and Nick and Stephen popped in and out doing chores between their

time in the cave, which, it turned out, was farther down the hill, with an opening like a giant dark mouth. Even though Stephen had only been working there one year, it seemed he knew everything there was to know about that cave and he was always exploring and looking for new things to show the visitors. One night I'd just gotten all the dishes cleared when a white man came busting in the kitchen, saying "Which one of you is Stephen Bishop?" Stephen, Mat and Nick all looked scared—I knew that look. Stephen said, "Yes, sir. That's me." The man said, "You're the one who went across Bottonless Pit today? I want to shake your hand!" Nick was looking like he'd been hit on the head with a sack of hammers. A white man wanting to shake a black boy's hand? Stephen blinked and stuck out his hand. Then he told all of us how he had shimmied across a ladder over that bottomless pit. It was amazing.

I loved to listen to Stephen tell stories about the cave. Stephen was why it was a sweet time. But then the dangerous part came. Stephen and I were walking back to our cabins one night when we heard a voice come from a bush. "Help me." It was a young black girl, just 14-years-old, and her newborn baby. They were runaways. Her owner said he was going to take her baby away from her and so she ran. What could we do? We couldn't turn her in. We had to help her. Stephen thought of the cave with all of its secret passageways. We knew what we had to do even if it meant we would be punished or hanged if we were caught.

Read this compelling novel of two young people who try to find freedom even as slaves. *(Hold up book)* Read *Underground* by Jean Ferris.