

***Secret Along the St. Mary's*** by Virginia B. Troeger is set in southern Maryland in the year 1664. Twelve-year-old Susannah Clark lives on a small tobacco farm with her older brother, her father, and her father's servant. Although they have a servant, the Clarks are not a rich family. (The widespread use of servants in early Maryland is discussed below.) As the story begins, we learn that Susannah's mother had died from fever several months earlier. Her death leaves the grieving family with one less pair of hands to farm, do housework, and raise Susannah's younger brothers. Unable to cope with the demands of both farming and raising the young twins, Susannah's father has a neighbor family tend the babies. It is decided that once cousin Ellinore arrives from England and settles herself into life as an indentured servant in the household, the boys will come back to the Clark family under her care.

Why all the servants? Voluntary servitude was common at this time. Many, including Susannah's own parents, were able to pay their passage from England and later buy fields of their own by first "renting" themselves out as servants at established plantations. The average term of servitude was four years, with those younger than sixteen serving longer terms. For Susannah's family, the system works well. Unfortunately, as with any system, there are those who abuse it. A servant on a nearby plantation, Benjamin Duckett, takes it upon himself to flee from one such abuser, his cruel overseer. Shortly after his escape, Benjamin runs into Susannah, whom he implores not to tell anyone of his departure. An understandable request, it is also a weighty one, for as they both know, running away from servitude is against the law. Susannah struggles with her decision on how to handle Benjamin's secret, especially when she discovers that her family canoe has gone missing . . . the very day that Benjamin left.

## BACKGROUND

Europeans settled in Maryland soon after New England was settled by the so-called Pilgrims, but life was very different for the two groups. The families in Plymouth, Massachusetts, grew and flourished much sooner than those in the south, where stability was not achieved until much later. Why the difference? Marylanders farmed tobacco, a demanding crop, one that was exported to England in exchange for goods. The vast majority of immigrants who came to work the land in Maryland were men, most of them indentured or bonded servants. The labor was hard, diseases merciless, and women scarce. The land may have been fertile for growing tobacco, but not for growing families. The New Englanders, not dependant on a labor-intensive export crop, were peopled by immigrants (the Pilgrims) who came over to the New World as *families*. Extended families, including living grandparents, were common there. By contrast, in Maryland, most 17th century children didn't have both parents living by the time they themselves were old enough to have children. They certainly never knew their grandparents.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

– Before reading *Secret Along the St. Mary's*, discuss with your class what they already know about 17th century America, particularly 17th century Maryland. After sharing responses, read the title and tell them that *Secret Along the St. Mary's* focuses on plantation life along the St. Mary's River. Show them the location in the

book's map, then on a larger map of Maryland and the surrounding area.

- This story takes place in 1664. What else was happening in America around that time? Were there colonies or states at this time? Other settlements in North America? Name them and give a brief description of each.
- Have students do a timeline of major events in America beginning in 1620 and ending in 1720.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS – Literature • Social Studies • Arts • Writing • Math

1. After reading a few chapters of the book, discuss historical fiction as a type of literature, one that interweaves real and made-up characters and events. Discuss with students aspects of historical fiction that make it so exciting and interesting to read. Help students realize that this type of novel brings readers closer to another time period through the experiences of the characters. Instead of just reading about an event, readers can "live" it with the characters.
2. Point out that authors of historical fiction often let readers know in an introduction or postscript which events and characters are real and which are fictional. After students finish the story, be sure they read the postscript to learn about the actual events of this time period.
3. Engage the students in a discussion about how a reader can discern fact from fiction. Be sure the students understand that facts can be checked in reference books, newspapers, magazines, historical documents, and other official public records, as well as individual accounts such as journals, diaries, sketches, plans, and charts. Official reference sites on the internet are also a good resource for the researcher.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The farmers in *Secret Along the St. Mary's* grew tobacco. As noted in this study guide's Background section summarizing Maryland's early history, tobacco was a demanding crop to grow. What was the other major crop grown in the south that kept that part of the country deeply agricultural? What did the popularity of and high demand for this crop mean for plantation owners? What did it mean for laborers?
2. Where we live and what we do can have a profound effect on how we see the world. Have students think about their world today. In what ways do landscape, climate, and source of family income shape their lives, thinking, political views, and general outlook on life? After they discuss their own circumstances, ask them if they think farmers in the south might feel more kinship with farmers in another part of the world as opposed to kinship with fellow Americans who make their living in the north as, say, computer software designers. When would Americans tend to band together, no matter what their surroundings, jobs, and political affiliations? Now have them travel back in time again, this time to the Civil War in the late 1800s. Have students suggest how landscape and source of income helped divide the agrarian south and the industrial north.
3. Voluntary servitude was part of everyday life in Susannah's world. Break up into groups and discuss freedom. What is it? How is it granted? Should freedom be earned, or is it something you are born with? If it is something you are born with, is it then yours to choose to give up? What is the earliest age at which that decision could reasonably be made? Students may wish to make a collage of what freedom means to them.

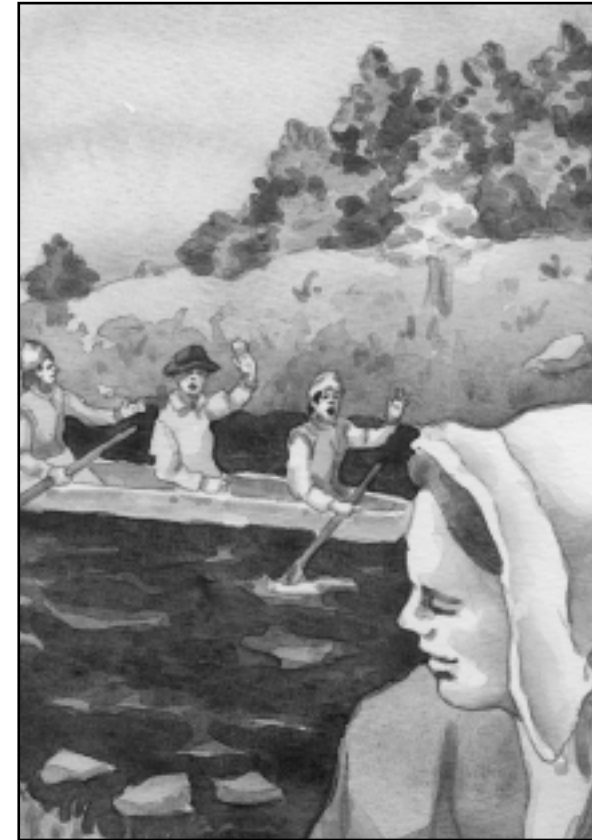
# STUDY GUIDE

## Secret Along the St. Mary's

4. The voluntary servitude of Europeans was quite different from the slavery forced upon Africans brought to our shores against their will. Why do you suppose slavery replaced servitude? Knowing what you do about Maryland's agrarian (farming) community, discuss why you think slavery took hold in that colony as opposed to one in the north.
5. What was happening in other parts of the world in 1664? Choose one other city, town, or country to focus on. How did the lifestyle there compare with the lifestyle in Maryland? What form of government existed in Maryland? What form of government existed in your chosen location?
6. What did you learn about 17th century Maryland that you didn't know before?
7. Put yourself in Susannah's place. Would you have kept Benjamin's secret? Why or why not?

### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

- A good story needs a bad guy. Assuming Jacob Hewett could write—a big assumption as he probably couldn't—write a one-page journal entry from his perspective. You may choose any point in the story to dramatize.
- Susannah uses the path down to the river as a place of wishing. Have students list other ways children (and some adults) make wishes. (A few examples: wishbones, the first star of the night, birthday candles.) What is the most unusual method of making a wish on the list? Have students guess the origin, then try researching how the custom started. (Hint: putting the phrase "wishing customs" (quotation marks included) in the online search engine ask.com or Google is a good starting point for exploration.
- Look at page 92, which lists terms and definitions. Ask pairs or small groups of students to write a short scene in which they incorporate at least half of the terms and names of address. Give them time to reread the scene and practice recreating it.
- Assuming the distance between England and Maryland is 3,000 miles, and the journey took Ellinore 90 days, how many miles on average did her ship sail in a day?
- Respond to the story. Ask the class what interests them, surprises them, or gets them angry about the book. Organize their comments on chart paper in a web format. Ask groups of students with similar interests to get together to talk more about their ideas. Assign them the task of sharing their discussion with the rest of the group in some creative way—they could write a letter, a poem, draw posters, or stage a debate or play.
- Suppose this story were made into a movie. Create a movie poster advertising it. Illustrate your poster with a scene from the story.
- By the middle of the 19th century, Susannah Clark's agricultural Maryland was long gone. Much of our country's land was once forest, desert, or farmland. (A few places, such as the southwestern edge of lower Manhattan, which was built up of landfill, didn't even exist!) Try researching your school or some other local landmark. What was it before any buildings were there? Was it farmland? Forest? How long ago?
- Want to know more about 17th century Maryland? Detailed information about life along the St. Mary's is available at [www.stmaryscity.org/](http://www.stmaryscity.org/), the website of Historic St. Mary's City, a museum where costumed interpreters in a 17th century setting recreate life in Maryland's first years.



by Virginia Troeger

SILVER MOON PRESS • (800) 874-3320



Silver Moon Press  
160 Fifth Avenue  
New York, NY 10010