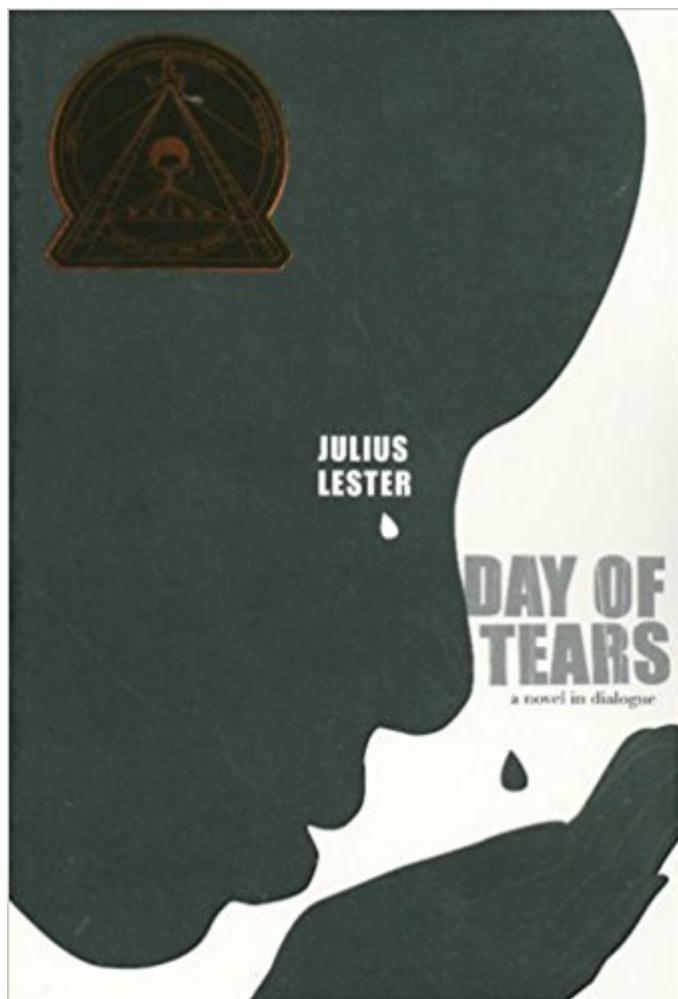


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# Day Of Tears



## **Synopsis**

On March 2 and 3, 1859, the largest auction of slaves in American history took place in Savannah, Georgia. More than 400 slaves were sold. On the first day of the auction, the skies darkened and torrential rain began falling. The rain continued throughout the two days, stopping only when the auction had ended. The simultaneity of the rain storm with the auction led to these two days being called "the weeping time." Master storyteller Julius Lester has taken this footnote of history and created the crowning achievement of his literary career. Julius Lester tells the story of several characters including Emma, a slave owned by Pierce Butler and caretaker of his two daughters, and Pierce, a man with a mounting gambling debt and household to protect. Emma wants to teach his daughters-one who opposes slavery and one who supports it-to have kind hearts. Meanwhile, in a desperate bid to survive, Pierce decides to cash in his "assets" and host the largest slave auction in American history. And on that day, the skies open up and weep endlessly on the proceedings below. Using the multiple voices of enslaved Africans and their owners, Julius Lester has taken a little-known, all-true event in American history and transformed it into a heartbreakingly powerful dramatic epic on slavery, and the struggle to affirm humanity in the midst of it.

## **Book Information**

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Grade Level: 7 and up

## **Customer Reviews**

Julian Lester's book about the "Day of Tears" should result in his being awarded another Newbery prize. One lesson we learn is that people can turn their backs on misery & injustice just as easily

today as in the early 1860s. (consider the example of the Sudan). Julian Lester has been a teacher. He knows how to draw students toward the discovery of Truths. "Day of Tears" gives many opportunities for acting out the painful emotions of slavery. If Lester's writings are used this way in classrooms, there is the chance for growth, for eyes to be opened, for questioning. Emma is a fictional character but becomes so very real through her musings, misery and the anger that darkens her skin & makes her clench her teeth. Oh, the rankling of always being treated as an object without feelings! Through decades anger was hidden by the practiced arrangement of facial muscles, the subservient tone of voice. The book's format is unusual, dramatic - - provocative & effective. The story begins with a true event: Plantation owner Pierce Butler (near Savannah, Georgia), divorced from the well-known British actress/author Fanny Kemble, is driven by his weakness for gambling to sell most of his (approx.430) slaves in what would be known as the largest slave-auction in history. The two-day sale netted \$303,850. Stark notes about many slaves are given in Lester's text, including the price paid for each. The Author's Note & excellent references (mainly online) give even more information. The publisher's 'blurb' describes Pierce Butler as a slave owner who cashes in his "assets" - thereby losing his humanity. This truth is symbolized by the weeping skies. Soon after the last slave was sold on March 3rd of 1859, the rain stopped.

I have a big ole head. A big, swelled, I-know-more-children's-books-than-Leonard-S-Marcus type head. I think I'm pretty hot stuff when it comes to kiddie lit and I defy anyone to tell me different. Problem is, I'm not that hot. More lukewarm really. And I remember this fact when I read books like "Day of Tears". For all my boasts and brags, I had never read a Julius Lester novel until now. Oh I'd read plenty of his picture books and his folktales as well. And he's certainly written enough novellas in his time. There was "When Dad Killed Mom" and "To Be a Slave" and something called "The Autobiography of God". After hearing a variety of different people squawking over the brilliance of his "Day of Tears", however, I finally got around to reading him. With the same clear concise voice used to such advantage in tales like "The Old African", Lester turns his sights on a little remarked historical moment in time and the repercussions that have reverberated ever since. Says the Author's Note of this story, "On March 2 and 3, 1859, the largest auction of slaves in American history took place in Savannah, Georgia". This is their story. The owner of these slaves, one Pierce Butler, has been brought low by his own addiction to gambling. He and his wife divorced many years ago (a rarity but based on the truth) and he has the custody of both of his daughters. Amongst his slaves he counts the family of Will, Mattie, and their daughter Emma. Emma is only twelve but she's always been beloved of Mr. Butler's girls and they look upon her as a kind of replacement

guardian. On the first day of the auction families are broken up, lives destroyed, and the rain falls in torrents. "This ain't rain", says Mattie. "This is God's tears". On the second day, Mr.

Throughout his writing career, Julius Lester has made numerous contributions to African American Children's Literature. His latest book, DAY OF TEARS is no exception. The book, presented in dialogue, is a fictional account of a real historical event, the largest slave auction in American history. The auction took place after Pierce Butler, a wealthy plantation owner with a gambling problem, was forced to sell off over 400 slaves in order to pay his debts. The auction took place on March 2nd and 3rd, 1859 in Georgia. The principal characters in the novel include slaves from the Butler plantation, as well as from one of the plantations some of the slaves were sold to, members of the Butler family, the auctioneer, and other businessmen. As the story unfolds, the consequences of slavery, not only for the slaves, but also for their owners, become apparent. DAY OF TEARS looks at the history of slavery in the United States in a way that depicts the human casualties of the institution. Whether it was the broken families and friendships that were destroyed when slaves were callously sold away like material possessions or the moral and spiritual consequences of being responsible for such sales, Lester captures it all. He highlights the mentality of the slave-owner and vividly depicts the reasoning used to justify their acts and assuage their guilt. He also shows the mindset of some of those who were enslaved and presents slaves who were seemingly satisfied in their position, as well as those who aspired for freedom. Finally, through his characters he reminds readers that not all whites supported slavery and that some even helped facilitate their escape to freedom. The dialogue format of this book made the story come alive.

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