

Reading

Thematic Overview

'Race to the Frozen North' – Catherine Johnson

Matthew Henson was simply an ordinary man. That was, until Commander Robert E. Peary entered his life, and offered him a chance at true adventure. Henson would become navigator, craftsman, translator, and right-hand man on a treacherous journey to the North Pole. Defying the odds and the many prejudices that faced him to become a true pioneer.

This is his remarkable and often untold story.

English

The theme of endurance and exploration in *Race to the Frozen North* allows pupils to engage deeply with the English curriculum by writing letters from the perspective of crew members, drawing on emotive language and descriptive detail to communicate experiences of hardship and hope. It also supports structured debate by encouraging pupils to consider moral and logistical dilemmas faced by Henson's team, developing skills in persuasive speaking and listening.

Technology

Pupils can explore how materials, structures and mechanisms are used to create effective equipment for survival in extreme conditions, such as insulated clothing, sled designs and shelter construction. The story also inspires creative making projects including designing and sewing Arctic-themed soft toys or mascots that reflect the animals and symbolism of the journey.

Geography

The story encourages learners to examine how explorers navigate such challenging terrains and how indigenous Arctic communities adapt to their surroundings. It also provides a springboard for discussions about global climate change, melting ice caps, and the environmental significance of polar ecosystems. Pupils can investigate the physical geography of the region, including its climate, ice landscapes seasonal daylight patterns, and the impact of polar conditions on human survival.

Science

The story also supports learning about materials and their properties – such as insulation, melting, and freezing – by examining the equipment, clothing and natural resources essential for polar expeditions. Additionally, the challenges faced on the journey offer opportunities to study forces, energy transfer, and the science behind staying warm, navigating ice, and use tools effectively in sub-zero conditions.

Art

Pupils can explore the dramatic Arctic landscape through mixed media, using colour, texture and scale to reflect the harsh environment described in the story. They can recreate key moments from the expedition – such as the icy terrain, sled teams, or shifting light of the polar sky – developing skills in composition and visual story telling.

History

Pupils can investigate the challenges, motivations, and achievements of explorers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, comparing Henson's expedition with other significant journeys of the era such as Shackleton's.

The story also prompts discussions about historical attitudes, including the racial prejudices Henson faced, helping learners understand how social values have changed over time. Through examining primary accounts, exploration equipment, and the legacy of expeditions, gaining an insight into narratives that continue to shape our World today.

