



Harriet Jacobs' blunt biography

By Stephanie McCurry

True confession

Jacobs' story exposed abuses enslaved women were expected to endure.

This winter thousands of American moviegoers have been introduced to Solomon Northup, a free black man kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana. His life narrative provides the subject of Steve McQueen's brutally painful new film, *12 Years a Slave*. The movie is difficult to watch and, while it uncritically deploys elements of the standard abolitionist narrative, it in no way exaggerates the horrors of American slavery. So let me introduce you to someone else you should know: Harriet Jacobs.

In 1861 this woman, who had escaped slavery in North Carolina and was working as a nanny for a family in New York City, finally gave up on finding a publisher and paid for the printing of her own painstakingly authored autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*. The last part of that title is particularly important. Antislavery narratives were rare enough in the years before emancipation and Northup's joined a small group, including the best seller written by Frederick Douglass. But narratives recounting the lives of women in slavery pretty much were nonexistent—except for Jacobs'. She knew its authenticity would be questioned.

Jacobs was clear about why the public needed to know her story: "Slavery is terrible for men," she wrote, "but it is far more terrible for women. Super added to the burden common to

all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own." The abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, who wrote a brief introduction to Jacobs' narrative, added that this part of slavery was usually veiled, but "the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features."

Admitting how painful it was to describe her own degradation, Jacobs promised to offer "a true and just account of my life in slavery." And she did, chronicling her attempts to escape a relentless campaign of sexual assault at the hands of her master by voluntarily entering a sexual relationship with a different white man to secure his protection for her and the two children she subsequently had with him.

Needless to say this was not an easy story to tell, especially to an abolitionist audience made up disproportionately of women—respectable white women for

whom, Jacobs knew, moral virtue was the essence of Christian womanhood.

But Jacobs had two children outside of wedlock, which, if admitted, would seem to confirm proslavery stereotypes of slaves as immoral people and slave women as sexually licentious.

To make matters worse, she had voluntarily separated herself from the children as part of her plan to escape from slavery. How to explain that? "I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master; for it was not so." The difficulties of telling this part of her story were so overwhelming she was reduced to begging for understanding: "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave....I know I did wrong."

But looking back, she says, she had come to the conclusion that "the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others."

For years people didn't believe her and questioned the authenticity of her narrative. She had expected that. But in 1981 the historian Jean Fagan Yellin validated key parts in the North Carolina archives and the Jacobs story could finally be heard.

And what a life story it is. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Jacobs describes her experience as a child, how she was taught to read and write by her first mistress, how she was raised in the Christian faith by her grandmother—a free black woman—



■ **Survivor** After escaping, Jacobs, pictured here in 1894, immediately joined the abolitionist cause—then aided freedmen for the rest of her life. She died in 1897.

and how that life of slavery fell apart when she was 15 years old and “my master began to whisper foul words in my ear.” Therein ensued a battle of wills, as Dr. Flint, a man 40 years her senior, sexually pursued the teenager, forcing her into a premature adulthood and a set of difficult choices. For reasons difficult to explain, Flint wanted her to submit voluntarily. He did not rape her but threatened her with rough plantation labor, with sale, etc. But

Jacobs refused to submit, propelling a struggle of wills with her owner and, predictably enough, with his wife, who made the adolescent a victim of her revenge. Jacobs describes this experience and how she escaped it by having a relationship with the white man with whom she had the children: “It seems less degrading to give one’s self than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in it.”

Jacobs’ is a Gothic tale, and it is

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easy to see why it was not believed. To escape she hid for seven years in a small crawl space above a storeroom in her grandmother’s house. Sounds unbelievable, but Yellin discovered a plan of the house and verified the account. Eventually she escaped to the North alone, but finally reconnected with her daughter and her son.

Jacobs aims at racism as well as slavery. Unlike *12 Years a Slave*, she does not cast the free North as a haven for African Americans. As was the case with so many slaves, her master pursued her in New York as he was entitled to do by American law. There is no free North, Jacobs says, as she offers a powerful indictment of a United States that accepted the Fugitive Slave Act.

You should read Harriet Jacobs’ autobiography. It is a rare and powerful narrative that invalidates pro-slavery claims—about slavery as a Christian institution, about African Americans as people who hold their family ties lightly, about slaves deserving their enslavement by virtue of their inferiority, and accepting it, by virtue of the gentle paternalist care of their owners. In her telling, slavery was a brutal, cruel, immoral, unchristian institution, terrible for all of the 4 million people forced to live under it—but doubly terrible for the women. □

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