



The Bondwoman's Narrative

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Now considered to be the only known novel written by an African American slave, and possibly the first to be written by a black woman, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* remained unpublished for nearly 150 years. When the manuscript appeared in an auction catalog in 2001, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., an eminent literary historian and the chair of African American Studies at Harvard University, purchased the manuscript and edited it for publication.

In his introduction to the novel, Gates traces the provenance of the manuscript and explains his attempt to discover the identity of its author, Hannah Crafts. Though his efforts remain inconclusive, numerous scholars have supported the authenticity of the manuscript as the work of an African American slave, and Gates has verified several of the family and place names within the largely autobiographical novel.

The Bondwoman's Narrative chronicles the life of its author, a young house slave named Hannah Crafts, who discovers that her new mistress is descended from slaves but is passing for white. Hannah decides to flee to the North where she and her mistress can be free. The bulk of the novel traces the hardships which Hannah experiences in her flight through the South and highlights the overwhelming physical and emotional anguish that typified life among slaves in the antebellum American South.

Written in the tradition of the nineteenth century romantic novel, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is noteworthy more for its impact on the history of nineteenth century American and African American literature than for its literary merits. Apart from the light it sheds on American slave life in the mid- nineteenth century, Crafts's novel is also the first known work in that genre to be written by an African American slave and may prove to be the first novel written by an African American female author. The appearance of Crafts's long-neglected novel provides new insight into the origins of the African American novel.

Sources for Further Study

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Booklist 98 (March 15, 2002): 1189.

Library Journal 127 (June 1, 2002): 147.

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