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Sally Hemings

By Barbara Chase-Riboud



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WINNER OF THE KAFKA PRIZE FOR BEST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN WOMAN

"One of the great American stories . . . Gives new luster to the words 'historical novel' . . . Vastly enjoyable." -- The New York Times

"Exquisitely crafted . . . A sensitive life study of a truly exceptional woman: complex, courageous, irresistibly attractive, . . . elegantly self-possessed." -- Cosmopolitan

One of the greatest love stories in American history is also one of the least known -- and most controversial. Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States and author of the Declaration of Independence, had a mistress for thirty-eight years, whom he loved and lived with until he died -- the beautiful and elusive quadroon slave, Sally Hemings.

In this brilliant novel, spanning two continents, sixty years, and seven presidencies, Barbara Chase-Riboud re-creates a love story based on the documents and the evidence of the day, but gives free rein to the novelist's imagination. Incredibly written and beautifully evoked, Barbara Chase-Riboud explores the complex blend of love and hate, tenderness and cruelty, freedom and bondage, that made the lifelong liaison between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson one of the most poignant, tragic, and unforgettable chapters in the history of the races, and of the sexes, in America.



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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

When this stirring work by Philadelphia-born Paris-based sculptress and historical-fiction writer Barbara Chase-Riboud first appeared in 1979, it was dismissed by many mainstream historians as "hogwash." But with DNA evidence proving that Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States, did indeed father at least one child by his black slave mistress, Sally Hemings, Chase-Riboud's book deserves a new read. With her painstaking eye for research, Chase-Riboud unfolds a complex 19th-century quilt of miscegenation, denial, hypocrisy, slavery and, yes, love in Virginia. She brings to life Heming's relationship with Martha, her half-sister and the President's wife on his Monticello estate; Jefferson's seduction of Hemings in Paris after Martha's death; and his lifelong concubinage of Hemings until his own death, when she and her offspring were freed. Chase-Riboud avoids the sentimental "tragic-mulatto trap" that other writers have fallen into when they deal with slave relations by making Hemings not only multidimensional and believable, but, given late-20th-century political scandals, chillingly contemporary. Along with the novel's other sub-themes, including black disenfranchisement and the fear of reenslavement, Riboud intimates that Jefferson-- despite his racist rantings in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which Chase-Riboud uses as epigraphs--may have actually loved this black woman, and that the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings was perhaps the clearest example of the American imperative of "seeking a more perfect union," a controversial portrayal that Chase-Riboud makes plausible with skillfully written prose. --*Eugene Holley Jr.*

Review

"Unforgettable...Extremely affecting and poetic." --*The New Republic*

"An act of great daring...Deeply moving." --*Chicago Sun-Times*

"Exquisitely crafted...A sensitive life study of a truly exceptional woman: complex, courageous, irresistibly attractive...elegantly self-possessed." --*Cosmopolitan*

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From the Publisher

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