



The Bondwoman's Narrative

By Hannah Crafts



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Tells the story of Hannah Crafts, a young slave working on a wealthy North Carolina plantation, who runs away in a bid for freedom up North.



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The Bondwoman's Narrative By Hannah Crafts Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Few events are more thrilling than the discovery of a buried treasure. Some years ago, when scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. was leafing through an auction catalog, he noticed a listing for an unpublished, clothbound manuscript thought to date from the 1850s: "*The Bondwoman's Narrative*, by Hannah Crafts, a Fugitive Slave, Recently Escaped from North Carolina." Gates realized that, if genuine, this would be the first novel known to have been written by a black woman in America, as well as the only one by a fugitive slave. He bought the manuscript (there was no competing bid) and began the exhilarating task of confirming the racial identity of the author and the approximate date of composition (circa 1855-59). Gates's excited descriptions of his detective work in the introduction to *The Bondwoman's Narrative* will make you want to find promising old manuscripts of your own. He also proposes a couple candidates for authorship, assuming that Hannah Crafts was the real or assumed name of the author, and not solely a pen name.

If Gates is right (his introduction and appendix should convince just about everyone), *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is a tremendous discovery. But is it a lost masterpiece? No. The novel draws so heavily on the conventions of mid-19th-century fiction--by turns religious, gothic, and sentimental--that it does not have much flavor of its own. The beginning of chapter 13 is a close paraphrase (virtually a cribbing) of the opening of Dickens's *Bleak House*. This borrowing seems to have escaped Gates, although he does quote the assessment of one scholar, the librarian Dorothy Porter Wesley, who had owned the manuscript before he acquired it, that "the best of the writer's mind was religious and emotional and in her handling of plot the long arm of coincidence is nowhere spared." Although not a striking literary contribution, *The Bondwoman's Narrative* is well worth reading on historical grounds, especially since it was never published. As Gates argues, these pages provide our first "unedited, unaffected, unglossed, unaided" glimpse into the mind of a fugitive slave. --Regina Marler

From Publishers Weekly

Nothing intrigues quite the way an old manuscript does: there's the story told in its pages, but there's also the story of the pages. In this volume's lively, provocative introduction, Gates, Harvard chair of African-American studies, describes his discovery of a handwritten manuscript from the collection of Dorothy Porter Wesley, the famous Howard University librarian, in an auction. Identified in the auction catalogue as a "fictionalized biography... of the early life and escape of one Hannah Crafts," the manuscript, Gates thought, might be the "first novel written by a woman who had been a slave." After purchasing it, he undertook the painstaking work of authenticating it and determining its author. Though Dr. Joe Nickell (the sleuth who proved the Jack the Ripper diaries fraudulent) firmly limits the manuscript's composition to 1853 to 1861 and Gates locates a few candidates for authorship, the historical Hannah Crafts remains elusive. Whoever Hannah Crafts was--and about that there is sure to be some discussion--she was a talented storyteller. Though Crafts appears self-taught and borrows from many sources--influences include other slave narratives, 19th-century sentimental and gothic novels and, as Gates noted in a letter to the *New Yorker*, Charles Dickens--she propels her story along, vividly describing the heroes and villains she entangles in her multiple plots. A mulatto, Hannah grows up a house slave in Virginia, learning to read in secret. When her master at last marries, Hannah becomes a maid to the new mistress, a woman who seems haunted. In fact, she is hunted: someone who holds proof that her mother is a slave is blackmailing her. Knowing her mistress will be sold if exposed, Hannah encourages her to flee, and flees with her. Thus begins Hannah's journey, as she passes through the hands of prison guard, slave trader, benevolent caretaker, mean and petty masters and finally to freedom. The style is sentimental and effusive, but it is also winning. Crafts's portrayal of the Wheelers--a small-minded but ambitious couple who prefer to "live at the public expense"--is incisive and

utterly familiar. Though Gates chose to touch up Crafts's punctuation, he left her spelling as is and included her revisions, which were remarkably few. Crafts clearly understood the needs of her narrative and the conventions of the 19th-century novel in a way that many first novelists (of any century) don't. While scholars will have to decide whether this is "the unadulterated `voice' of the fugitive slave herself," lay readers can simply enjoy Crafts's remarkable story and Gates's own story of discovering her.

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From Library Journal

Read by Anna Deavere Smith, this is an unprecedented autobiographical tale written in the 1850s by an African American slave who is probably the first black woman to write a novel. Crafts recounts her life story while simultaneously revealing her new mistress's secret that forces them to flee from slave hunters.

Throughout the book, the author's path crosses with a powerful and determined enemy. Typical of sentimental and gothic novels, this suspenseful work is atypical in that it provides a black female writer's account of the brutalities of her society. A highly remarkable literary and historical work by a self-educated woman who gives a slave's experience of slavery from a humanistic view. The introduction and commentary by Henry Louis Gates discusses the provenance of the original manuscript and its place in history and literature. Highly recommended for academic and public libraries.

Bernadette Lopez-Fitzsimmons, Manhattan Coll. Libs., Riverdale, NY

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ricky Copeland:

Book is actually written, printed, or descriptive for everything. You can know everything you want by a guide. Book has a different type. As it is known to us that book is important issue to bring us around the world. Close to that you can your reading talent was fluently. A reserve The Bondwoman's Narrative will make you to end up being smarter. You can feel more confidence if you can know about anything. But some of you think in which open or reading a book make you bored. It's not make you fun. Why they can be thought like that? Have you in search of best book or suitable book with you?

Raymond McMillion:

Nowadays reading books become more than want or need but also work as a life style. This reading addiction give you lot of advantages. The huge benefits you got of course the knowledge your information inside the book in which improve your knowledge and information. The details you get based on what kind of guide you read, if you want get more knowledge just go with schooling books but if you want truly feel happy read one with theme for entertaining including comic or novel. Often the The Bondwoman's Narrative is kind of guide which is giving the reader unforeseen experience.

Joel Jones:

People live in this new day of lifestyle always try and and must have the extra time or they will get lot of stress from both way of life and work. So , when we ask do people have spare time, we will say absolutely without a doubt. People is human not really a robot. Then we consult again, what kind of activity are you

experiencing when the spare time coming to you of course your answer will probably unlimited right. Then ever try this one, reading ebooks. It can be your alternative throughout spending your spare time, the particular book you have read is usually The Bondwoman's Narrative.

Alex Miller:

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