

Harriet Jacob's Window from an Abysmal Crawl Space

In addition to the fact that "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" took over a century to gain credibility as an authentic narrative, it is surprising, if not a bit disappointing that it has yet to be established in U.S. History curriculums. I have taught the subject at varying levels in five schools and I had never heard of the book. Nor has it ever appeared in a bibliography in the (Ivy League) graduate courses I took on the Ante-bellum South. Needless to say, as I progressed into the narrative I found myself increasingly captivated by the story as well as the profound experiences and emotional capacity of its author. While I had intended to read it simply to enlarge the hemisphere of my understanding of the institution of slavery in the South, toward the end of the text I found myself quite affected by not just the remarkable sequence of events, but in particular the extraordinary journey of a young girl to womanhood. It was this tone of a female voice wrapped around the savage experiences of human bondage that impressed upon me a novel and valuable voice on the experience of slave daughters, mothers and women. The modification in my viewing lens did not come from the common source stock of a male slave, secondary source saturated with third person description or a public record enumerating plantation based statistics or the most common denominator, a source generated by a white male planter. Instead, I grew mesmerized in the candid narrative of a female victim characterized by an unfathomable will to adequately survive and ensure the same for her mulatto progeny. Jacob's book has several themes, but I would suggest that Jacob's is determined in its chronological accounting of her journey from a virgin child to free abolitionist mother in New York.

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