



Wench

Dolen Perkins-Valdez

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In 1850s Tennessee, 13-year-old slave named Lizzie is taken on by the plantation owner as a sexual mistress, a practice common to the time. Lizzie's master even takes her along with him to a spa resort in "free" Ohio when the Southern summer heat becomes too much to bear. There, Lizzie meets two other young black women caught in a similar form of bondage, and the three begin considering a break for freedom--an act that would mean abandoning everything in their life they know as home. A disturbing and engrossing historical novel, WENCH addresses many of the unspoken complexities and bizarre social permutations brought about by the atrocity of slavery.

Wench Details

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From Reader Review *Wench* for online ebook

Jamie // Spines & Vines says

I've put off reading this book for such a long time because I just didn't want to read another slave story. But this is far more than the life of slave women in the 1800's. This is a story surrounding the power, strength & courage of four women; the safe haven found in true friendships and ties that bind the afflicted. Most of the story takes place in free Ohio at Tawawa Resort where slavemasters vacationed in the summer with their slave mistresses, leaving their wives behind at home. What I found painstakingly profound was that these women vacationed in a free state and boarded the coach back to their enslaved southern states each summer. The love for their families, children & other slaves back home surely outweighed their temptation for freedom just beyond the resorts boundaries. | "...perhaps whites did not understand how it felt not to be able to go where one wanted to go, dress how one wanted to dress. They took simple things like movement for granted." ~ Lizzie

Historical Fact: Tawawa Resort opened in 1852 and closed in 1855. The land and the surrounding area was sold to the Cincinnati Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and it established the Ohio African University in 1856. Enrollment declined with the onset of the Civil War and the original campus closed. In 1863, the property was purchased by the African Methodist Episcopal Church and was renamed Wilberforce University.

Tara says

Not just another book retelling the horrors of slavery. Perkins-Valdez brings to life a little-known piece of history, and I'm so glad she did. If she hadn't, the fact that white slave owners not only kept black women as sex slaves, but elevated them in a way that sometimes surpassed the roles of their own white wives, and traveled with them on vacation to a place near Xenia, Ohio, would have disappeared into our tragic American history. The author worked hard to show the complexity of the relationships. No easy answers in this book, as the lead character, Lizzie, wonders if she loves her master, the same master who chains her to a porch then kisses her and calls her his darling, one of the most chilling scenes in the book for me. It's all there, the sick, power-driven intentions of the white male during southern slavery, in that simple scene. And the dignity of the women, both black and white, who bear their burden in different ways gets center stage in this gritty but thought-provoking novel.

Zanna says

Lizzie is a woman in love, on holiday with her lover, a man married to someone else... or is she? What happens to these phrases when we add that Lizzie is a slave, and her 'lover' is her master? *Wench* confronts this problem from Lizzie's perspective:

Inside the cottage, Lizzie felt human. She could lift her eyes and speak the English Drayle had taught her. She could run her hands along the edges of things in the parlour – two chairs, a sofa, a wooden table, a tall oil lamp with a milkglass base, a cast-iron stove – as if they were hers. And she could sit.

If Lizzie's occasional access to such simple pleasures is exceptional for a slave, Perkins-Valdez leaves us in no doubt about the limited extent of her privileges when on the very next page we read her rehearsing a calm request, but then begging Drayle to free their children, the only ones he has fathered. Drayle sidesteps, avoiding the question. There's never the slightest suggestion of equality in their relationship; though Drayle sometimes makes an effort to keep Lizzie sweet, she is his servant at all times and in all ways. Reading community reviews of this book, I can see that many readers found the topic extremely painful and difficult to read. The ambiguities and implications of Lizzie and her children's status make this a deeply uncomfortable book.

However, there are a lot of things that make it an enjoyable book, less harsh, I felt, than other slave stories. Chiefly, there is friendship. No doubt about this. The relationships Lizzie has with Mawu, Philip, Reenie and Sweet are troubled at times, but they are real, strong and meaningful to her. Her attraction to Mawu is especially beautifully written, at times with sweet hints of eroticism. Mawu herself, the novel's most vibrant character, lifts the book as much as she does the social life of the group of slaves, leavening their lives with her sharp tongue, her magical cooking, her unsubdued spirit. When Lizzie looks at her, she wonders if she has ever been beaten, because she holds herself so boldly, but it turns out that Mawu's life has been full of extreme suffering including many beatings. Three of her four children have been sold, only one boy has not, because a brain injury has made him less saleable. This reminded me of *Kindred*, in which the cook has only been able to keep one of her children, a deaf girl. *Wench* reminded me of *My Brilliant Friend* and *Code Name Verity* because of the shared strategy of having the viewpoint character admire a bolder friend. I appreciate this move, because it's much easier for me to relate to a fairly timid and ordinary person in awe of someone impressive and charismatic than to imagine myself into the shoes of such a fabulous person!

Two white women are important in Lizzie's life: Drayle's wife Fran, who is typical of master's wives in being neurotic, jealous and annoying, making Lizzie into 'a giant ear', attempting to sell her behind Drayle's back, making temporary pets of her children and generally being a royal pain in the ass, but there are moments when a flicker of empathy appears in her, such as when the trader gropes Lizzie in front of her and she 'looks nervously out of the window', and more decisively when she protects her from Drayle's attentions when she is sick (view spoiler) The other woman is Glory, who lives near the resort and, opposed to slavery and racism, helps Lizzie and Mawu. The first thing she does is show Lizzie where to find some beautiful flowers. The description of these is truly beautiful, linking colours in nature to emphasise a relationship between aesthetic experience, connection to the land, and freedom.

Lizzie's deep friendship with Philip is a source of strength and support, and his narrative journey has heartening aspects. He falls in love with a freeman's daughter, and Perkins-Valdez uses his story to explore one of the ways a person might get out of slavery. She is very skilful in giving each character a distinct personality at the same time as she builds the ideas she wants to communicate into their stories – I feel the book has depth philosophically, intellectually and emotionally, written into the relationships and events at all levels, in beautiful, easily readable prose and a carefully structured plot. I'll read anything Perkins-Valdez writes.

My favourite thing of all is the regular supply of references to Africa, brought most palpably to the resort by Mawu who has rebelliously renamed herself, who carries things on her head 'the way they had in the old country' and learns spiritual knowledge and spells from 'an old conjuring man who lived back of the plantation'. Mawu's disdain for the religious beliefs of the other slaves makes this book more appealing to me personally than slavery stories where the protagonists find strength and solace in Christianity. As well as this window to an imaginary beyond the limits of Euro-American thought, (another, smaller, but no less real is in the name of the resort Tawawa, which Perkins-Valdez is careful to note is the 'Shawnee Indian word for "clear water"') there are other strands that offer hope, such as the neighbouring resort for free black people,

which they are guided to by Glory (though she warns them against approaching too closely) and where Lizzie imagines her own daughter as a (care)free girl, and the hints that foreshadow the Civil War. Through all the pain, all the violation and outrage, there are whispers of better things on the way.

Bob Schmitz says

I saw an article that Dolen Perkins-Valdez was speaking about her book here in Durham. I had never heard of her or her book but a book about a resort in Ohio where Southern men brought their slaves as escorts was an interesting topic so my wife and I joined 25 black people and 10 other whites in a local church to hear what she had to say.

Perkins-Valdez had been told by a writing teacher to look for materials in books in obituaries. She didn't like reading obits. She did however run across a footnote some where that mentioned Tawawa House, a resort in Southern Ohio, a free state, where Southern masters brought their slaves without their wives. More than cooking and mending went on. Fascinated she researched and found that it had existed and had failed prior to the Civil War because Northerners didn't like being around the Southern slave owners. It became a school and eventually Wilberforce College. None of the original building remain and the springs for which people came have dried up.

Perkins-Valdez was an engaging speaker. She mentioned that slavery had many secrets and that her (black) college roommate had only recently told her that she was descended from former president Andrew Johnson. That fact had been hidden in the family handed down through the females but never made public because of the shame that incest was involved. With her research skills Dolen was able to find that the Johnson ancestry was true and the incest was not. So many stories hidden away.

So now onto the book. It was interesting in that it portrayed some of the ambiguities of slavery. Other reasons besides fear could keep a slave woman from leaving her master. Perhaps affection? Perkins-Valdez is ambiguous on this point with her main character, Lizzie. That being said I did not find the book that engaging. One of the main things that bothered me is that many of the things she described did not ring true. For instance Lizzie several times confides in white people and suffers each time. I would think that even by the age of 13 she would know to hide her feelings. She refers to "driveways" A word that dates to 1865-70 10 years after the story. (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse...> "chicken wire" that was invented after 1947 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicken_...))*** This just seemed sloppy writing and I felt the characters were developed in a sloppy way also.

I thought the topic was interesting but the book was not.

****Please read the comments of "Sue" below from 1/29/12 who points out some inconsistencies in my review and my response to her comments.

Lois says

This remains as good as I remembered.

Mari Anne says

I probably shouldn't have read this so close on the heels of "The Kitchen House". While this novel explores another interesting aspect of Southern antebellum slave life, it wasn't nearly as well done as "The Kitchen House". I am waffling between 2 and 3 stars for this one.

"Wench" explores the lives of four slaves who act as mistresses to their slave owners. They meet up four summers in a row at a Northern resort and the novel explores their lives and situations.

The basic storyline is very interesting, but the book is unevenly written. The author tends to jump around a lot in time and perspective and this unevenness somewhat spoiled the book for this reader. The strongest part of the book is definitely the section where the writer tells the story of Lizzie, the main character. This section is fascinating and very well done. The other characters are not written as well and their stories are somewhat lost in the shuffle.

I also hated the ending. It is really somewhat of a non-ending and is very awkward. The book really just kind of peters out more than ends.

Maegen says

Wench was a book club choice and I was quite frustrated by it's selection. I hate reading about slavery or anything connected to it. It makes me uncomfortable, sad and angry. Furthermore, the idea that this story focused on the lives and relationships of four slave mistresses turned my stomach. Needless to say, I struggled with this book. It was incredibly difficult for me to get through. I read and put it down so many times that I often thought of not picking it up again, but I kept coming back to it until I finished it-several weeks later. In the end, it was well worth the emotional journey. Even now, many months after reading it, I'm at a lost as to how to articulate why this book is so important, a must read and the best book of 2010 for me. There were so many moments I cringed, wanted to cry, even fight. I realized that is a part of the book's charm--the emotional roller coaster of reading it. Not to mention, the rich history Perkins-Valdez weaves in so brilliantly. She's an excellent writer. I'm happy that I finished the book and am certain that I will never think about slavery and enslaved women the same ever again. I am so grateful to have been challenged in this way.

Taryn Pierson says

We who have spent a February or two in America's public schools know intellectually that slavery is terrible. We look back with dewy young eyes on the Civil War era and nod along as our teachers describe what the lives of slaves were like. We know the words of the story by heart, an oft-repeated refrain that grows comfortable in its familiarity. We are so comfortable with slavery as America's legacy that we can no longer see it for what it was.

And what it was, was horror.

Wench made me feel that horror. It scrubbed away the anesthesia of a childhood full of whitewashed history lessons and brought me face to face with the wrenching complexities that constituted slave life. Your child is not your own. Your child can be taken from you, at any moment, with no explanation and no recourse. Your husband is not your own. He is not even your husband; he is your owner, and can do with you whatever he chooses, indulge any whim at any time. Your body, your life, are not your own. During the time I was listening to this book, I had to sit with those thoughts. Afterwards, I felt my skin had been scrubbed raw.

Perkins-Valdez takes us deep inside her characters. Lizzie, Reenie, Sweet, and Mawu are slave mistresses. They meet every summer at a resort in Ohio where their masters take them for some private time, away from judging eyes. Their position is an impossible one: they are in some ways favored—allowed to sleep in the house instead of the slave quarters, given better rations and clothing—but in others horribly exploited. The relationships share many dynamics of abusive marriages, with their constant ambivalence—the women never know whether they will be treated as human or chattel, and they can never trust their masters because the balance of power is always skewed.

And still, these women have to get up every morning and live their lives as best they can, inside the web of a waking nightmare that has trapped them like flies. Are you feeling the tension yet?

I love books that lift the veil from my eyes and allow me to see the world in a more honest way. Books that shock me awake like a bucket of cold water over my head. Books that tell me a story that in my jadedness I thought I'd already heard before. Wench does all of those things, and does it in lyrical, lovely prose, a stylistic choice which makes it all the more heartbreaking.

An emotionally challenging but necessary read. Book clubs, order another round of drinks, because your discussion will run overtime.

More book recommendations by me at www.readingwithhippos.com

Will Byrnes says

Set in the mid 19th Century, Wench offers a fictionalized account of a very real and strange practice. Southern slaveowners would vacation in a particular Ohio resort and take slave women along as their vacation partners, leaving their wives at home. The story centers on several slave women, their different backgrounds, experiences with slavery and relationships with the masters. All are used sexually, but one, Lizzie, holds actual feelings for her owner.

Dolen Perkins-Valdez - from her Twitter page

This is an engaging story, one that offers some insight into what it might have been like to be a slave. It raises questions about the experience. For example, is it at all possible for a person who is regarded as chattel to have real affection for her owner, however kind that man may be? Can a slave ever give herself freely to her owner or is any physical relationship rape by the nature of the relationship between the parties, in the same way that society today considers sex between an adult and a minor rape because a minor is assumed not to have the ability to offer responsible consent?

One might think that slaves brought to free Ohio would seize every opportunity to flee. But what if their children were still back on the plantations as insurance for their return?

I was engaged with the book pretty much for its entirety. I questioned a few decisions the author made for her characters, wondering if they really would have acted in such a manner. But overall, this is a solid read, offering payload in the form of a look at an odd aspect of the history of slavery in America.

=====EXTRA STUFF

Links to the author's personal, Twitter and FB pages

Perkins-Valdez's subsequent novel Balm was released in 2015

Sheila says

I enjoyed this book, but only up to a point. The subject matter was quite gripping, but I found it an "almost there" book rather than a completely satisfying read. I found the prose a bit "prosy"; flat and straightforward, and not always in a good way. The characters were interesting but did not quite come alive; even Lizzie, the main character, who was the most developed, somehow was not completely well-rounded. The biggest disappointment was the ending, because it made no sense to me. Many loose ends were left untied, and I had no idea what Lizzie was facing, or how her life would pan out, or, most importantly, what she was thinking when she made the choice she did. A sense of resolution was lacking. But I did find it an easy read and I liked learning about the lives of the slave women; the book includes details that bring their situation to life. However, there were instances where it did not ring true - why Lizzie loved her slave owner/lover, for instance. I'm absolutely sure this could have happened, even given that he did not treat her well, but what I found lacking was insight - Lizzie's insight into why she kept loving him, or loved him at all - plus scenes and descriptions vivid enough to make me see what the attraction was. In general this book, though good enough, seemed to remain on the surface of things, especially people's emotions.

Cina says

I gave this book 2 stars because I am still waiting for a conclusion to this book. I kept reading hoping that the more I read the better it would get but that didn't happen. Some of the stories of the characters fell to the side or didn't develop fully, there was very little development and disheartening that the main character Lizzie/Eliza never really realized her worth as a woman in the story. To the bitter end, even knowing what being a slave vs a free black woman meant and who were her oppressors she still pined for the love of her master. That is how it came across to me, yes it was Stockholm syndrome to a degree. After being captive so long she started to feel a sense of sordid love for him, he chose her above everyone, he treated her right but did he really? There were moments of clarity when she could see that she was nothing more than a slave to him but they were blurred by false words of love. Ridiculous...every slave arrived to the point that they learned that they were nothing more than cattle and freedom was the ultimate goal not a life of servitude. Lizzie's inability to find freedom frustrated me, I wanted the character to develop so much but true to the title all she remained was a wench.

I would recommend this if only you want a quick read, briefly touches on the cruelties of slavery with the acts of a few bad masters, there is no real love in this novel, just a great sense of loss that could have been developed into a lot more.

Jen says

-Edited 10/21/12-

If you are considering reading this book and are cruising 'round reviews, then consider reading

The Book of Night Women instead. It is infinitely better, although it will break your heart and stomp on the pieces.

*****original review*****

My thoughts: Should a writer take the most boring character and make her tell the story? Should I write that? Probably not. But, damn! I didn't want to hear any more about mealy-mouthed Lizzie. Give me Mawu, crazy assed Mawu, with the black skin and the violently red hair. Or tell me more about Reenie, born for suffering. And don't forget to fill me in more on Sweet, the woman who grieves by sewing day in and out. Just don't give me Elizabeth the unsure, the hesitant. Because I just didn't really care enough about her, even if she could read and endure. Give me a voice strong enough to burn the book down around my head.

But maybe it's my fault. And now, cue the spoiler alert!

My middle sister picked this book. She always picks tragic books. With children. But she's consistent. She liked this book okay, but she was most disturbed about (view spoiler) I was most disturbed about (view spoiler) But I'm funny that way.

Which leads me to my youngest sister, infrequent GRder, Jane Austen lover. She found many things in here disturbing. And she thought that I should have been a bit more gracious to the author; that the character chosen to carry the story along needn't be the strongest voice. But she is my younger sister, so I don't really think I have to agree with her. My years make me wiser. Or something.

Tayari Jones says

Today I received my copy of *Wench*, the new novel by Dolen Perkins-Valdez. I really loved this book. (And what a gorgeous cover!) The novel is set at Tawawa House-- an actual Ohio resort where white plantation owners vacationed with their enslaved mistresses.

I know that there are some readers who are very tired of the American fixation with slave mistresses. I know where you are coming from. However, this novel is different. For one thing, *Wench* is the story of four women who are in the same situation. This is a wonderfully modern twist on the historical novel. The four-friend structure, a sly wink at Terry Mac, allows us to see how different women respond to the conundrum of

sexual slavery. Never in all my reading have I ever seen enslaved mistresses talk to each other. (Their conversations will give you a lot to think about.)

One of my favorite scenes is when one of the women is saying how much she liked Tawawa House because "we can spend time with our men." Another woman says, "You know he's not your man, don't you?" At Tawawa House, some women play house with their "master" while others plan escape.

This is a hard book to describe. After reading it, I feel weird using the word "mistress." I feel like we need a whole new vocabulary. What do you call a woman who is in a sexual relationship with a man who can sell her kids if he feels like it? Are you a "mistress" if you travel to a resort vacation literally in chains? This book is not romantic, nor is it preachy. Dolen wrestles with the truth and doesn't blink.

The most impressive aspect of this story is Dolen's way of making you unsure of who is right, and who has the best idea. I read this novel in one greedy gulp. The intellectual in me was intrigued by the historical matter. The philosopher in me was roped in with questions about the nature of freedom and progress.

Finally, the part of me that curls up in a slanket, well she stayed up late at night reading because I just had to know what was going to happen next.

Kathrina says

The historical authority necessary to write this novel was too much for this first-time author. There are various historical anachronisms that just rub wrong ("driveway", "chicken wire", growing soybeans in pre-Civil War Tennessee), but most importantly, the characters are flat, and our narrator's emotional terrain remains as elusive as it did in the first chapter. Perkins-Valdez admits to not knowing where her narrator was going as she began the novel, and I argue that she never did discover what she hoped her narrator would do. It felt more like layer upon layer of slavery-is-bad, without any exploration of the emotional and authentic human experience. The topics referenced -- the relationship of slaveholders and their sexual concubines, the effect of slavery on all women, free and enslaved, white and black, the strong ties of motherhood and sisterhood -- all deserve a more sensitive touch. Using an interesting and unusual footnote as the basis of one's novel requires a clearer understanding of what made that footnote so unusual -- an 1850's Ohio resort that catered to slaveholders and their slave entourage. As a reader, I need to understand all kinds of new context -- what did Ohio feel like at that time, through the eyes of slaves and the free, what did a "vacation" feel like, why Ohio? I should have a better understanding now that I've read this, but I don't. This book was good at asking those questions, but not at answering them.

Monica **can't read fast enough says**

Reading WENCH required me to constantly push aside my modern sensibilities. Knowing what slave women had to endure and in many instances convince themselves of in order to simply survive and maintain some sense of sanity is hard to accept. Lizzie is the perfect example of the divided and sometimes misguided loyalties that many slave women had to face. Taken from the only home that she had known and placed on a new plantation at a very young age, Lizzie doesn't have any semblance of a childhood. Lack of affection,

courtesy, and any positive attention Lizzie is ripe for being emotionally manipulated by her master. What put a little knife in my heart is the fact that a very young Lizzie is easily seduced by minimal kindness and glasses of water.

The four women followed in this story all have very different and unique personalities. They are all handling their stations in life differently but with one common thread. None of them have any say over their lives or the lives of the people they love; not even their children. Of the four women, only Lizzie has any affection for the man who holds her in bondage. Because of her conflicting loyalties it takes her a while to figure out her real place in the world and I found that just as frustrating as the other three women in the story. I had to remind myself that Lizzie is forced into womanhood and motherhood so quickly and at such a young age that she had to find a way to cope with what happens to her. Convincing herself that Drayle cares for her and her children makes things tolerable. However, Lizzie's willful blindness cause great harm to other people who should have been able to count on her.

Although I did enjoy WENCH there were a few circumstances left unfinished and I have some unanswered questions that I would have liked to have had filled in. The story ends abruptly and I just didn't feel as if the story was finished. If it had been an ebook instead of a physical book I would have sworn the last of the story hadn't downloaded. WENCH was published in 2010 and there is no follow up as of yet which is a shame. I would have loved to have gotten a story for Reenie and Mawu although I know that Mawu's story would be gut wrenching.

You can find me at:

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