



To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker

Sydney Nathans

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What was it like for a mother to flee slavery, leaving her children behind?" To Free a Family" tells the remarkable story of Mary Walker, who in August 1848 fled her owner for refuge in the North and spent the next seventeen years trying to recover her family. Her freedom, like that of thousands who escaped from bondage, came at a great price-remorse at parting without a word, fear for her family's fate.

This story is anchored in two extraordinary collections of letters and diaries, that of her former North Carolina slaveholders and that of the northern family-Susan and Peter Lesley-who protected and employed her. Sydney Nathans' sensitive and penetrating narrative reveals Mary Walker's remarkable persistence as well as the sustained collaboration of black and white abolitionists who assisted her. Mary Walker and the Lesleys ventured half a dozen attempts at liberation, from ransom to ruse to rescue, until the end of the Civil War reunited Mary Walker with her son and daughter.

Unlike her more famous counterparts-Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, and Sojourner Truth-who wrote their own narratives and whose public defiance made them heroines, Mary Walker's efforts were protracted, wrenching, and private. Her odyssey was more representative of women refugees from bondage who labored secretly and behind the scenes to reclaim their families from the South. In recreating Mary Walker's journey, "To Free a Family" gives voice to their hidden epic of emancipation and to an untold story of the Civil War era.

To Free a Family: The Journey of Mary Walker Details

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Author : Sydney Nathans

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Jodi says

Interesting biography about Mary Walker who escaped her master and found freedom in the North. She might have been happy with her new-found freedom but couldn't be happy because she had left her family behind. She worked for many, many years to free her family too. She finally succeeded but it was not without cost. I enjoyed reading about Dickinson College which is located in the town where I live. I only wish I could have seen a picture of her! There were many other pictures of people mentioned in the book but none of her. Maybe she never had a photo taken but it would have been nice to see a picture of this brave and strong woman.

Rebecca says

The only reason I gave it 4 stars (rather than my usual 5) was because it was rather scholarly (meaning slow). But, of course, that's because it was very well researched and not meant to be a novel. Added much to what I've been learning about those times and The South.

Carole says

This was the compelling true story of a woman who escaped from slavery in 1848 and her struggle to try to save her children who were still enslaved. While I was very impressed with Mary Walker and her courage and perseverance, I was a little disappointed in the book as it seemed slow going.

Nancy says

Well written and documented story of Mary Walker, a slave from North Carolina, who escaped bondage, leaving her children and mother behind. She ends up in Cambridge, MA. " She read, wrote, prayed, she was a gifted seamstress and devoted caretaker. She was a woman so fair she could be taken as white. Still by law she was a slave.her appearance and carriage confronted all who know her with the utter arbitrariness of slavery in America."

Merged review:

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Carin says

I have just had the unique experience of reading the account of someone's life without whom I would not exist. I feel so privileged to be in a position to be able to have that experience. Knowing what frustrations and joys my family was experiencing from the 1850s-70s . . . so powerful, especially when one sees that certain familial personality characteristics still exist after all of these generations. We are still a family of caregivers. We still can't say no. :) Such a great reading experience.

Eliza says

1/26/2014: Mary Walker is buried at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, and this biography of her was assigned as the next book for the MAC Book Club. I don't get to it often, but it's such a great group of people, so I try to read the book whenever I can.

TFAF brings to light a great story: Mary Walker was an escaped slave who ended up in Cambridge, working as a seamstress and caregiver for a number of families. She had left her mother and children in slavery, in Raleigh, NC, and spent much of her time and energy (and that of her protectors/employers) trying to find ways to bring them out of slavery. The biography talks about her life, and also about the historical context, what was happening up and down the East Coast during these important years of 1848-1872. Nathans is a diligent and scrupulous researcher, and does little embellishing, sticking closely to what could be verified through letters and journals. This is a careful and thorough study of Walker's life, which also brings home what it must have been like to live through this terrible time in American history.

That said, the book is a tough go. It is dry and rather plodding, focusing so closely on the facts and the line of the story that it sometimes loses sight of these people as living beings, and of his readers as curious thinkers. Nathans must have been advised about this; in the second half of the book, he begins using questions about how the characters might have felt, or what their motivations might have been, to try to fill in the gaps in the story that he couldn't fill with facts. But this falls flat; I would have preferred that he (with all his scholarship) take an educated guess and back it up with why he thought that this or that might have happened. That would have been more thought-provoking and interesting.

Also, his writing is curiously repetitive and stilted. He always refers to the main characters with their full names, even when they are the focus of that chapter or section. Often he includes their identifying characteristics as well, as though we might have forgotten who these people are from one page to the next. (Reminds me of *The Odyssey*....) He tries to find new ways to say the same thing over and over; Anne Jean Lyman has progressive dementia, and every time she comes up in the narrative, we have to hear again how she is deteriorating even further—which is already abundantly clear. I suppose the book could have used a good editor—it could certainly lose about a third and still tell the full story—but that wouldn't take care of the feeling that Nathans has serious tunnel vision. He tries to expand his landscape outside these major characters, but he doesn't have the confidence (or perhaps the breadth of knowledge?) to do so, so his writing is so overly focused on keeping the specifics straight that he loses sight of the larger goal. He simply can't relax into his own story.

Worth a read if one is interested in Cambridge history of the mid-19th century. Otherwise, probably not.

Kathy Arle says

Sydney Nathans tells an incredible story of Mary Walker's journey from being a slave in North Carolina to escaping to the north to becoming a successful and respected seamstress and caregiver - and eventually rejoining her children once the Southern slaves were freed by Lincoln. Reading this book, I learned a lot about slavery and the Civil War and was spellbound by the story itself.

Liz says

This is absolutely a wonderful book. It is non-fiction that reads like a novel. It had me in tears more than once and also running to the computer to seek more information about certain events. What a story!

Linda says

This could be on my short list for best books for 2012. The story of Mary Walker has been created from a solid archive of letters and civil documents. In the mid-1800s the art of letter writing was essential for communication, but beyond mere letters, Mary and her friends come alive. I have been humbled by the feelings, friendships, courage and sufferings of her and her children as they seek freedom in Boston, and the efforts of many who broke the law to insure her safety and freedom. History at its finest, most personal level.

Kidada says

Nathans's To Free a Family is a beautifully written but difficult history of the life of Mary Walker, an enslaved woman who fled slavery during the antebellum period and who could not rest and truly enjoy freedom until she freed her family. Told using primarily the records kept by Walker's white abolitionist allies (who kept great records of their work that were preserved by their descendants), this book reveals the fact that for runaway slaves who safely made it to the North, leaving loved ones behind in bondage cast a huge shadow over their ability to enjoy freedom. Some runaways were lucky enough to get loved ones safely out of slavery but many were not.

Mrs. Hassig says

The courage and perseverance that it took to survive and go on living day to day is evident in this true story of Mary Walker, free black or contraband slave, depending on what year it is or what side of the Mason Dixon you were on. Could you flee slavery and its horrors even though you were leaving your children and family behind and then spend the next 17 years of your life trying with every fiber of your being to get them back? Most of couldn't but Mary could! Read and find out how she did it!

Danielle says

I was drawn to this book because I've always been fascinated by strong women who've been through a lot. The problem with the book is that, beginning in the middle, it drags. There are a lot of unanswered questions, probably due to the fact that the "story" relies on letters, second person interviews, and hypothesis. Little is known about Mary Walker (much less than is known about Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman)--I just wish that this novel, as heavily researched as it is, shed more light on her.

Hillsa says

I had read something about this book a while ago, so I had put it on my list of books to read. The story is remarkable, as noted on the dustjacket and in some reviews. However, it lacks something. It reads a little too much like a historical chronicle vs. a story. There is a lot of material here to really hook you emotionally, however I felt like throughout the story there was a veil separating me from embracing the emotion. Maybe it was the constant reference to the main characters by their full names (Mary Walker, Susan Lesley, Peter Lesley, Chauncey Wright, and so on and so on). I felt like I was reading the narrative notes to a Ken Burns documentary. And I love Ken Burns, but I'm not expecting a movie when I watch a Ken Burns film, I'm expecting a documentary. With this book, I was expecting a story based on facts told from the perspective of a witness, even if that witness was made up. Instead, I always felt like a bystander.

The drawing on the cover of the book also is a bit misleading. I wonder if Mary Walker's story would have been the same had she looked like any of the women pictured on the cover. One key part of the story of Mary Walker - and a recurring theme as her descendants grow up - was her mixed heritage. She had a white father and grandfather, and was considered fair enough to pass as white although she chose not to. In addition, her bearing allowed her to represent something unexpected to the white anti-slavery community she encountered in the North....a slave that appeared to look like them. This is not a frequent topic when we discuss slavery....we acknowledge that white slave owners fathered children with their female slaves...but we always picture dark-skinned slaves, we don't necessarily discuss or picture the slaves who had been so mixed through a few generations that they actually looked white.

The story of Mary Walker is a long and sad one, but even so, there are bright spots and it's very interesting to read how connected she was to many recognized historical figures, whether coincidentally or intentionally. There are not necessarily the scenes in this story that you would expect in a typical story set in the decades leading up to the Civil War, however it does shed light on a different type of experience, which is quite fascinating and underscores just how peculiar that "peculiar institution" of slavery was and its long-lasting impact on society, culture and economics that lasts into today.

I would recommend this book, but read it with your "American History" hat on, it's not a text book by any means, but it is not "The President's Daughter" either.

Mjlibrary NDSCS says

Cataloging in process

Mary Walker was a mother who fled slavery in 1848 and spent the next 17 years trying to recover her family. The documents supporting this story come from two collections of letters and diaries, one from her North Carolina slaveholding family and the other from the northern family which protected and employed her after her flight. Mary Walker was persistent and was greatly aided by black and white abolitionists over many years before the end of the Civil War enabled her to be reunited with her son and daughter. Her journey was more common than those of her more famous counterparts such as Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth. This is a more hidden story of emancipation but one which tells us a great deal about the Civil War era. Nathans is Professor Emeritus at Duke University.

Nancy says

Well written and documented story of Mary Walker, a slave from North Carolina, who escaped bondage, leaving her children and mother behind. She ends up in Cambridge, MA. " She read, wrote, prayed, she was a gifted seamstress and devoted caretaker. She was a woman so fair she could be taken as white. Still by law she was a slave.her appearance and carriage confronted all who know her with the utter arbitrariness of slavery in America."
