

Discussion Guide

Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

Introduction

Because nineteenth-century women were socially relegated to a status subordinate to men and because enslaved persons were prohibited from becoming literate by Antebellum slave laws, the fact that an escaped female slave produced one of the most powerful documents in U.S. history is doubly remarkable. Harriet Jacobs was born into slavery in Edenton, North Carolina, a small but bustling port frequented by sailors and merchants. Jacobs's grandmother, a freed person, was a trusted member of the Edenton community and an important role model of fortitude, self-sufficiency. Jacobs credits her grandmother's moral sensibilities as a formative influence on her own worldview.

Although women writers penned a number of slave narratives, none is now as widely-read as *Incidents*, though before the 1980s, scholars were skeptical of the work's authenticity, and wrongly assumed that Lydia Maria Child, Jacobs's abolitionist supporter, assisted Jacobs in composing her autobiography. Historians have since documented that, although Child did minor editing, the work is altogether Jacobs's.

If we are to gain a complete perspective on U.S. enslavement, it is vital that we read *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* carefully since its female perspective on slavery not only differs from that of Douglass, but also is assembled from experiences unique to slave girls and women, who were physically, psychologically, and sexually abused by white planters. An especially powerful example of nineteenth-century writing, Jacobs's narrative stands as a testament to how an enslaved person maintains purpose and integrity amidst overwhelming odds, mindful of the risks she takes in exposing the unsavory events of her life.

Reading Jacobs

The through-line in Douglass's work follows a trajectory across greater and greater expectations of eventual freedom, from his glimmers of another world beyond the Wye plantation, to his glimpses of work life in Baltimore, to his triumph over Covey, and his escape. That narrative toward freedom is rather steadily progressive. But Jacobs's testimony involves a very different trajectory of early resistance to her enslaver, self-willed indiscretion, disappearance, and the near dissolution and sacrifice of her body and mind. Her path to freedom is crooked, marked by twists, turns, and returns.

As a writer, Jacobs faced an impossible dilemma: if she revealed the nature of her sexual abuse, and was honest about her resistance to it, Northern readers would likely think of her as a fallen woman, a person well outside the boundaries of true womanhood, which was marked by piety and chastity. Part of the wonders of reading Jacobs is to witness how she aims to circumvent readers' assumptions about behaviors that deserved to be made public.

Questions for Discussion: Part I | Wednesday, March 18 (1-16)

1. What strikes many readers is Jacobs's keen powers of discernment. Though she is a powerfully descriptive writer, she represents not only what she experiences, but how she interprets those experiences, how they inform her behaviors toward others and contribute to her sense of self. Did you notice where and why she self-analyzes and evaluates her own actions? Why do you suppose she felt such commentary was important to include? How do her rapprochements and asides contribute to seeing Jacobs as a good person, an ethical person?

2. One of the things that matters most to Jacobs is her family, especially her own children's fate. How does Jacobs enhance our understanding of the precarious dynamics of enslaved families? What role does kinship play in sustaining Jacobs through difficulties? How does U.S. enslavement require us to modify or extend the typical meaning of "family"?
3. Dr. Flint's abuse is a horrible part of Jacobs's young life. She recounts many of their violent encounters. How would this emphasis enhance Northern readers—especially Northern women readers'—understanding of slavery?

Questions for Discussion: Part 2 Wednesday March 25 (16-35)

1. What does Jacobs have to tell us about the role of the Episcopal church in her life? What do her remarks suggest about our church's priorities and view of enslavement in the antebellum slave states?
2. Readers have noticed that Jacobs often refers to the "kindness" of others—family members, friends, and strangers who, even in small acts of compassion, assist her with her goal of escaping to the North and reassembling her family. As Christian readers, what do you make of the way in which she threads a recognition of kindness through her story? Why might you suggest that we at St. Albans pay special attention to this?
3. It is remarkable that Jacobs hid for nearly seven years in the crawlspace of her grandmother's house. Recall the mental and physical changes she endures: extreme heat and cold, tremendous pain from frostbite and insect stings, muscle atrophy (that plagued her the rest of her life), not to mention the nearly unimaginable torment of hearing and glimpsing her children as they grew up, unable to mother them. How does Jacobs's dark night of the soul speak to you? How does her virtual entombment enhance our understanding of willpower, of purposeful suffering, and of faith itself?