Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule Short Guide

Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule by Harriette Gillem Robinet

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The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

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BOOKRAGS

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Overview

Twelve-year-old slave, Pascal, is reunited with his runaway brother, Gideon, who brings news that all slaves have been freed.

Pascal, Gideon, and eight-year-old Nelly flee their master's plantation, searching for the forty acres and a mule General Sherman has promised the ex-slaves. En route to Georgia, they meet poor white travelers, bigoted ne'er-do-wells, and night riders.

During this six months of the Reconstruction, the children and their new friends claim their promised land, plant crops on it, and attend school. But all the while, they fear retaliation by resentful white Southerners. Finally, the family is evicted from their farm, Green Gloryland. As the story unfolds, each character seeks and amends individual definitions of freedom.

About the Author

Harriette Gillem Robinet was born July 14, 1931, in Washington, D.C. She is the daughter of Richard Avitus and Martha Gray, both teachers. She spent her childhood in Arlington, Virginia, where her maternal grandfather had been a slave under General Robert E. Lee. She attended the College of New Rochelle in New York and received her master's and doctorate degrees from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. She lives with her husband, McLouis Robinet, in Oak Park, Illinois. Before turning to writing in 1962, she worked as a bacteriologist in Children's Hospital, Washington, D.C., a medical bacteriologist at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, a research bacteriologist at Xavier University in New Orleans, Louisiana, an instructor in biology for the U.S. Army, and as a civilian food bacteriologist. She has six children and four grandchildren. A son afflicted with cerebral palsy has influenced Robinet's writing, as the protagonists in her first two books, Jay and the Marigold and Ride the Red Cycle must triumph over physical handicaps.

Setting

By mentioning that a treat for Pascal was an uneaten biscuit his mother picked up from the Master's plate, that he slept in a shanty with six other people, or that no one had hugged him since his mother's death, Robinet brings the reader face to face with the realities of plantation life from which Pascal escapes. Robinet is at her best describing rural environments. At a campsite among the trees, for example, she surrounds the children with "the gurgle of the ditch," "mosquito whines and cricket chirps."

She writes that "sunbeams danced on their faces, and the scent of broken pine branch spiced the air." Robinet makes Gideon's parcel of land seem like an Eden. "Winddancing willows" line the lake and creek.

"Grass and wildflowers blanketed the land.

Meadowlarks flashed yellow feathers, singing as they flew across the flowers. Redwinged blackbirds called from cat-nine-tails at the creek. The land smelled clean and fertile and good."

Social Sensitivity

Robinet's story ably dramatizes the atrocities of plantation life and the South's continuing hatred of its freed slaves. The plantation master and overseer are despicable.

Night riders lynch hard-working farmers simply because they are ex-slaves. Ne'erdo-wells in carriages malign President Lincoln's policies.

Through the events surrounding Pascal, readers see that neither war nor law change social attitudes. The legislation first gave and then took away the ex-slaves' land grants. Similarly, Pascal's story has no happy ending. As Robinet points out in her Author's Note, out of 40,000 freed slaves who were awarded farm land, all but 1,565 lost the land. By 1877, most of the land returned to the hands of the former slave owners. Northern troops, Abolitionists, and even the Supreme Court abandoned the cause of freedom for the ex-slaves.

Literary Qualities

There is no doubt why this book is entitled Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule. The phrase, first mentioned on page four, is the refrain to the ex-slaves' song of freedom. It appears in practically every chapter as the goal Gideon hopes to achieve, as the dream they attain in Georgia, and as the vision they lose when their farm is confiscated.

Robinet expands facts text books would cover in three or four paragraphs. The entire Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule personifies one family's application of General Sherman's Field Order No. 13. Pascal and Nellie bring the reader along with them into the town where freed slaves are enveloped in the Black Codes and required to sign work contracts.

Robinet chooses three trees to symbolize the effects of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Pascal and his expanded family.

The whipping tree on the plantation, the Ghost Tree on Green Gloryland, and the apple seedlings the Bibbs give them represents the past, present, and future for the liberated slaves.

By the book's end, Robinet ironically makes Pascal and Gideon switch attitudes towards injustice that befalls them. Once quiet and acquiescent, Pascal is outraged by the loss of the farm. Once a fighter and rebel, Gideon grasps at the hope of a new farm on Sea Island.

Throughout the story, Robinet uses rural colloquialisms like "living high on the hog" and "when push comes to shove," explaining their literal meaning within the action of the story. She replaces "are" and "was" in the freed slaves' conversations with "be," as in "When he said his mama be Jerusalem City, I knew he be our brother. When I told him I be Gideon, his baby brother, he smiled and died." Reviewers have praised Robinet for her ability to capture the rich language used by the freed slaves, adding to the historical context of the novel.

Themes and Characters

Robinet fleshes out this specific episode of the Reconstruction with a quintet of characters, each having strengths and weaknesses. Pascal, a twelve-year-old slave with a crippled leg and arm, is the likable narrator of the story. He is charming as he amuses Nelly and Judith, his two friends, with terrible puns. His generosity and kindness towards the poor, white Bibbs family has great appeal. Falling asleep in the cotton rows or sneaking away from the field are realistic reactions to the fatigue, hard work, and withering Georgia sun. The reader quickly empathizes and identifies with him.

Pascal progresses from a tag-along little brother to a problem solver. His quick thinking saves Gideon after he falls through a dilapidated bridge. He also rescues Gideon from a confrontation with a white man. A clever youth, Pascal asks Michael and Judith to play near Green Gloryland so that others might think that whites own the farm. Night riders who would burn the crops on freed slaves' farms, thus pass by, fooled by Pascal's trick.

However, Pascal has a big responsibility as narrator in the story. He must tell the reader much of what happens before the story actually begins, either by conveniently remembering the past or by summary. Some reviewers feel that Pascal sees and remembers just too much for his age, and notice that his moralizing seems a bit forced. As freed slaves flee the burned down Jubilee Town, he wonders, "Brother? Sister? Yes .. . in bad times and good we all be family.

He was looking for three brothers, but maybe he belonged to a bigger family."

Pascal's older brother, Gideon, enters Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule as a brittle militant. Slaves on the plantation think the sixteen-year-old has always been a "soundoff" and are surprised he has not gotten himself killed for his outspokenness. Pascal remembers that previously, Gideon put burrs under the overseer's saddle so his horse will throw. Gideon plans "slow downs" for the young slaves in the fields. He is rebellious and insolent to hostile whites.

Though he cruelly calls his brother "crooked leg" and eight-year-old Nelly "good for nothing," he does possess a softer side. He tells Pascal to stay out of town and protect Nelly while he finds out about the Freedmen's Bureau. He reasons, "Just in case some white man get mad. I'll do the finding out." He offers food to other exslaves and asks Mister Freedman, an exslave they come upon, to join his troupe for supper. He is emotionally overcome when he obtains the farm land. When it is taken from him, he cries again.

Nelly is an eight-year-old with "biscuittan skin color and full'moon eyes of honey brown." An orphan, she joins the brothers' search for land. At first, she is so frightened all she can do is twist her braids and wait for Pascal's reassurance and protection.

Later, when Gideon returns from town beaten up, she tends his cuts and holds a wet rag to his swollen face. Gradually she acquires a larger matriarchal role, suggesting she

and Pascal fish, giving food to Pascal (actually, stuffing it into his mouth like a baby), and sewing pockets on his clothing.

More importantly, her imaginative insight lifts their spirits. She tells Pascal to pick up a pretty pebble to appreciate "the glory of the earth" and urges him to make his shadow dance. She answers Pascal's question about dreams and wishes. "We living out the dream of every slave what ever been borned.

Landowners of the prettiest farm on God's green earth."

Pascal provides the wit. Gideon provides the will. Nelly supplies the imagination for their new life. Mister Freedman, as the only adult in Pascal's ever-increasing family, brings adult skill to the enterprise of farming. He suggests clearing the land by burning instead of plowing. He knows how to build a house, complete with front porch and hidden escape routes. When they lose Green Gloryland, he dismantles the house and reassembles it on the Bibbs' place. He will survive after the farm is given to whites by his carpentry skills.

The Bibbs family, who eventually settle on adjacent land, seem to be color blind.

From their first meeting, they treat the freed slaves well. They see the freed slaves as individuals seeking a dream, just as they do. They regret the injustices that fall on Pascal's family when they lose Green Gloryland.

The characters in Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule consider the many nuances of freedom. Throughout much of the book, their definition requires owning land. Gideon first introduces the notion when he returns to the plantation with the news. He says, "President Lincoln freed us slaves two years ago. And better still, now we gonna have our own land."

The characters then embellish this requirement with the other trappings of freedom. Pascal concludes freedom means there will be no more running errands, fanning breezes, or shooing flies for the Master.

Nelly believes freedom also means no more whippings at the whipping tree. Daydream ing, Pascal says "every morning we gonna rise up singing, and every night we gonna laugh till the moon rise, and the stars sing 'Glory to God.'" Mr. Freedman thinks eating biscuits for breakfast every day of the week is part of freedom.

In another discussion, they reach deeper definitions of freedom. Mr. Freedman says, "Freedom is all about having dignity. I don't have to feel shame." Gideon adds, "I think freedom be all about owning land and having people look at you with respect."

Once the makeshift family settles on their forty acres, freedom includes an education, an ability to make money, and a house with a front porch. But by the book's end, they have lost the land, the farmhouse, and its front porch. Faced with the loss of all these material things, the family arrives at a larger definition of freedom. Their new definition is internal—one based on what each person believes about himself. Pascal tells Nelly,

"Freedom be here, like you said. Can't nobody take it away." Later he tells her ".. .we can BE free. We can do what be good and right."

Another theme of the book concerns survival. Gideon and Pascal's mother was shot because she fought injustice with confrontation. Gideon would be well on the way to same fate if it were not for Pascal's wiser counsel. He tells Gideon, "Sometime we got to talk nice to white folks and just accept things to stay alive." He seems to realize that the actions of ignorant white folks matter little when you already have the gift of freedom in your heart.

Topics for Discussion

Gideon is sixteen years old and Pascal is just twelve. Cite ways Robinet makes Pascal seem more mature than his brother.

2. On their journey to find forty acres and a mule, what other facets of freedom do the children discover?

3. How does the City family, the name Pascal and friends give themselves, change their idea of freedom by the end of the novel?

4. Describe what schooling was like in the novel in terms of discipline, subjects studied, and the attitude of the students. Compare this to today's education.

5. How does Miss Anderson, the schoolteacher, change her ideas of her students and what she should be teaching them by the end of the novel?

6. In the novel, three trees are very important: the whipping tree, the Ghost Tree, and the apple tree the Bibbs give Gideon and Gladness. Discuss what each tree symbolizes for the freed slaves.

7. Discuss the ways Robinet keeps the Bibbs' family, the school teacher, and the Freedman's Bureau's representative from becoming stereotypes of the vengeful whites.

8. Discuss the ways that Gideon and Pascal have exchanged viewpoints about the injustices that controlled their lives.

9. Explain how Pascal and Gideon have changed after farming their own land.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the circumstances surrounding the assassination of President Lincoln. What similarities have others found in the the assassinations of McKinley and Kennedy.

2. Compare and contrast the land provision programs of Reconstruction and Homestead Act.

3. The Bibbs family is hit by typhoid.

What are its symptoms, its cause, and treatment? Is it a serious health threat today?

4. Freed slaves were not considered equal to their white neighbors. In the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision, the highest court ruled that separate schools for blacks were permissible, so long as the facilities were of equal quality. Investigate the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in Brown v. Board of Education which finally changed that policy.

5. Investigate the terms of contracts signed by indentured servants who lived in Colonial America and those of the Black Codes of the South after the Civil War.

How were they alike? How were they different?

6. Investigate the following two Supreme Court rulings which impacted the lives of African Americans. First discover how and why the Supreme Court reversed the 1875 Civil Rights Act in 1883 and then research how and why that ruling was again reversed in 1964.

7. Who were the Abolitionists? What contribution did they make to the Civil War and to the Reconstruction when the war concluded?

For Further Reference

Isaacs, Kathleen. Review of Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule. School Library Journal (November, 1998): 128. Isaacs lauds Robinet for humanizing with Pascal, and his adopted family, a "little-known piece of American history."

Lempke, Susan. Review of Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule. Booklist (January 1-15, 1999): 879. Lempke praises Robinet's ability to blend her historical knowledge with feelings of her characters into a "fine historical novel."

"Robinet, Harriette Gillem." In Contemporary Authors, vol. 42. Detroit: Gale, 1994.

"Robinet, Harriette Gillem." In Something about the Author, vol. 104. Detroit: Gale, 1999. Biography of Robinet's career and life.

Related Titles

Robinet takes young readers into the drama of other historical events, including the War of 1812 (in Washington, D.C., and New Orleans), the Civil War, the Great Chicago Fire, and the early civil rights movement. Each story is told through the lives of young children. Children of the Fire (1991) deals with Chicago's catastrophic event.

Virginia, a young slave serving.President Madison in 1814, uses her position to help slaves escape in Washington City Is Burning (1996). The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans takes a look at the War of 1812 through the eyes of young brothers Pierre and Andrew who hope to find their father, one of Jean Lafitte's pirates. In If You Please, President Lincoln, Robinet dramatizes another obscure fact in history: Lincoln's proposed colonization of slaves after the Civil War. Walking to the Bus-Rider Blues centers on the early civil rights movement after Rosa Parks refused to relinquish her seat in Montgomery, AL.

Related Web Sites

Harriette Gillem Robinet Web site http://www.hgrobinet.com. October 20,2001. The author's Web site gives a brief biography, list of awards, and summary of her books.

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