# Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers Short Guide

## Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers by Jean Fritz

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# Contents

# Overview

There was much more to Harriet Beecher Stowe than the writing of Uncle Tom's Cabin, but such is the stature of that book as one of the most influential novels ever published, and anyone who studies Stowe's life is likely to emphasize the writing of her novel.

Given that the novel is part of the curricula of many schools, discussing it would be one of the primary tasks of a biographer. Further, modern attitudes toward the novel are very mixed, with some people trying to ban the book from schools, and others hailing the book as one of America's best. Thus, Fritz sets for herself the twofold task of explaining how the novel came to be written and why it became almost instantly influential, making Stowe one the world's most famous writers in a matter of months.

Fritz identifies Stowe's family life and Stowe's reading as the principal influences award, Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecheron how Stowe became a writer and on the subjects she chose. According to Fritz, writing was a form of liberation for Stowe, who felt painfully constrained by her father's view of what was proper for women to do, and Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers is a study of how the liberation that writing brought Stowe turned into passions for the liberation of others and for fiction that condemned unreasonable restrictions on the freedoms to speak and act as one chooses. Fritz's prose is lively, her research sound, and her blending of quotations from letters and other sources into her narrative of the remarkable life of Stowe is masterful.

# About the Author

Jean Guttery was born in Hankow, China, on November 16, 1915. Her parents, Arthur and Myrtle Guttery, were missionaries for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Around 1928, she and her family left China to escape the warfare that swept through country in the aftermath of the revolution that removed the old monarchy and replaced it with a fragile civilian government. While in China, she kept a notebook of her thoughts and observations that later served as a basis for writing about China. Guttery's writings about her own life reveal a nostalgia for China.

After she graduated from Wheaton College in 1937, she took a job with an advertising agency in New York, but left it to work for a textbook publisher, Silver Burdett Company. She married Michael Fritz on November 1, 1941, just in time for him to be called to military service and sent to San Francisco, after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, marking America's entrance into World War II. In 1953, she and her husband and their son and a daughter moved to Dobbs Ferry in New York. There, she found a job as a librarian, creating a children's literature section.

During the 1960s, Fritz researched the history of the American Revolution, resulting in a work intended for grownups but suitable for teenagers, Cast for a Revolution (1972), and several works for young readers such as Will You Sign Here, John Hancock?

(1976) that have gone through many reprints, including one in 1999. Although she has written distinguished fiction, Fritz is drawn to biography, particularly lives presented in context with the history of their times. She was nominated in 1982 for the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award for her lifetime of writing, but did not win until 1986.

Although published after Fritz won that Preachers may be the most universally praised of her books. Certainly it and her other publications since then have been as vibrant with life and thought-provoking as any of her writings.

Fritz has been nominated for awards such as the National Book Award many times, winning some of them. The Children's Book Guild gave her its honor award in 1978 for her many historical writings. In 1982, her autobiography Homesick: My Own Story was named a Newbery Honor Book and a Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor Book, and it won the American Book Award (what the National Book Award was called for a brief period). The Double Life of Pocahontas won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Nonfiction Award for 1984, and The Great Little Madison won the same award in 1990. The Madison biography also received the Orbis Pictus Award from the National Council of Teachers of English.

# Setting

Harriet Beecher was born on June 14, 1811 in Litchfield, Connecticut. Her father was Lyman Beecher, one of the most famous Americans of his time. He was a religious minister who preached a strict Puritan view of Christianity; he pressed his sons to become ministers, too, and he lamented having daughters, who at the time were not allowed to preach because to do so was thought to be unladylike. From her Aunt Mary, Stowe heard harrowing tales of how slaves were mistreated in Jamaica.

Aunt Mary had been married to a Jamaican planter but she fled him and Jamaica because she could not tolerate his abuse of slaves.

In 1816, her mother died; in 1818 her father remarried. Her stepmother remained cold and distant from Lyman Beecher's children, but she was an efficient manager of his household. At age fourteen, in 1825, Stowe begins teaching in her eldest sister Catherine's school. Her move in 1832 with her father and other family members to Cincinnati takes her to where she would establish herself as a professional writer, and where she would gather firsthand accounts of slavery. While there, she began to publish essays and short stories based on people she had met through her father.

Cincinnati had periodic outbreaks of cholera, and unhealthy living conditions took many lives, including those of people close to Stowe. The second wife of Lyman Beecher died in July 1835. Stowe had formed a close friendship with Calvin Stowe and his wife, and when his wife died, she and Calvin were drawn together by their common interests in literature and current events. They became engaged in November 1835, and in January 1836, they married. Calvin proved to be a steadfast supporter of Stowe's literary ambitions.

In 1850, the Stowes moved to Brunswick, Maine. On September 12, 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act became law. It placed a bounty on runaway slaves in free states and encouraged private parties to hunt them. Stowe, who had been a moderate on the issue of slavery, hoping for a peaceful phasing out of slavery in the United States, became an abolitionist because of the new law, al though she was unwilling to go so far as to advocate violence to end slavery.

On March 20, 1852, Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin was published and became an instant best-seller, going through several printings in just a few months. It was also pirated overseas, especially in England, for which she received no money. The royalties from her American publisher proved to be enough for her to supply her family with comforts and to make her financially secure, to the relief of her husband Calvin, who constantly fretted over the previous lack of money. She moved her family to Andover, Massachusetts, into what she considered a better house.

In 1853, Stowe visited England, then continental Europe. From the moment she stepped off her ship in England, crowds surrounded her, then politely moved out of her way.

Stowe's fame is such that people just wanted to see her, the great writer of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Although shy, she accepted the attention in good humor.

In 1864, Stowe moved her family to Oakholm, in Hartford, Connecticut, where she lived for many years, with her daughters helping her in her social work. The Civil War ended in 1865, which is when Fritz ends Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers. Her husband Calvin died in 1886, ending a remarkable love affair and domestic partnership and Stowe died in 1896.

# Social Sensitivity

"Without realizing it, Harriet Beecher Stowe had written America's first protest novel, the first book written against a law," declares Fritz about Uncle Tom's Cabin. Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers traces the development of Stowe's social consciousness and how its development affected her writing. Key to Fritz's reasoning is the influence of Stowe's father, Lyman Beecher, then one of the most famous people in America. Fritz unveils irony in Lyman Beecher's efforts to get his sons to follow him, for his sons abandoned his unforgiving Puritanical view of Christianity for a more loving view of Christ, with the ultimate irony being found in the success of a daughter at preaching through writing that far exceeded that of any of his sons. Fritz cites letters in which Stowe says that she will preach through her writing; she would be the ideal son, the boy her father wished she was.

It is very interesting how strong-willed, self-motivated daughters emerged from a family life in which female domesticity was emphasized. One daughter went about the United States founding schools, and Stowe developed her own independent view of how a woman may interact with her society. Fritz notes that Stowe took great care to fulfill her domestic obligations to first her father's family and later to her husband and children, although Fritz detects stress in Stowe, believing she would have forgone some of her duties if she could have.

Stowe was blessed with a husband who wholeheartedly supported her work as a writer, even making domestic concessions so that she could have privacy and time to write. Perhaps from his respect for his wife's working and likely from Stowe's own example, they had remarkably independent daughters, two of whom not only fulfilled their domestic obligations to their mother by caring for her as she grew old, but became influential suffragists.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is a striking condemnation of the abuse and debasement of a human being by other human beings, and it realistically depicts the language of racism and slavery of the time. In Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers, the word "nigger" shows up in conversations (for example, "I never see a nigger yet I couldn't bring down in one crack"). Such foul language was typical of the era, and it would be almost impossible to present an honest analysis of Stowe's emergence as an abolitionist without noting the debased attitudes represented by such language that she and almost any American of the time would have encountered.

# Literary Qualities

Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers is not a biography of adulation. Instead, it is a careful reconstruction of what Stowe's life was like, with care taken to explain some of the complexities of her seemingly contradictory nature. It is likely that Fritz admires Stowe, but the tone of her biography is even, allowing Stowe's life to seem as though it is telling itself.

Any reader is likely to notice that a large chunk of Stowe's life, the period after the Civil War, is only sketched in Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers. The reason for this may be a limitation on the biography's length. Publishers tend to shy away from young adult biographies that are over 50,000 words in length in the belief that young adults may be put off by something long. Of greatest interest to most young readers would be Stowe's rise to fame and influence, and Uncle Tom's Cabin would be Stowe's publication of greatest interest. Fritz covers these ably. Even so, Stowe's influence on literature and society extended well beyond her protest against slavery, and the "Afterword" only sketches what her life and career were like in the late-nineteenthcentury.

# Themes and Characters

Harriet Beecher Stowe was born into an intense family, ruled by its patriarch, her father, Lyman Beecher, a Puritanical preacher proud of his ability to make his audiences feel the flames of Hell as he spoke. According to Fritz, "He knew what everyone ought to be, and he made no bones about it." He also knew what people ought not to be, and women ought not to be preachers. He was trying to father as many Beecher preachers as possible, making the birth of any daughter a disappointment to him. In Fritz's analysis, Stowe spent much of her life trying to be the boy her father always wanted.

Lyman Beecher suffered "fits of depression," during which he would shovel sand in his basement from one side to the other, trying to work the melancholia out of himself. His depressions were sometimes so severe that he would lose the ability to speak for weeks at a time. In one fashion or another, his neuroses were visited upon most of his children.

For instance, his son "Calvin was a lifelong procrastinator who at times could only be called lazy." He was not alone in sometimes finding it impossible to work, to even move. Eventually, Stowe's closest brother George killed himself, seeming to do it for no particular reason, although he had suffered from depression all his life and had struggled to live up to his father's expectations. Indeed, in Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers none of Lyman's children quite live up to his expectations, even those who were industrious.

His eldest child Catherine, in Fritz's view, came closest to fulfilling Lyman's views on women. Although she was a vigorous founder of schools, she was accepting of her role as a domestic organizer—bossing the other children around much of the time, even long after they were all adults. His son Henry Ward Beecher became the most famous of the sons, a truly dynamic preacher, but his emphasis on the Gospel was different from his father's—where Lyman's audience felt fire, Henry Ward's felt love. Except perhaps for Catherine, none of Lyman's children accepted his demanding view of God, each finding in the Bible a forgiving Lord.

Even Stowe, who tried to please her father as much as she could, did not accept his Puritanical teachings. Fritz finds evidence early in Stowe's life of an admiration for the Episcopalian view of Christianity; still, she waited until her father was dead before formally joining the Episcopalian Church.

Taken as a group, the children of Lyman Beecher formed one of the most remarkable families in American history. They influenced religion, the arts, and society throughout the United States, from the North to the Midwest to the deepest South to the East, they left their marks on numerous states and on national affairs. Henry Ward Beecher and Stowe were especially sought out by politicians, royalty, religious leaders, and social activists; Stowe's views were even entered by Senators into the Congressional Record.

Stowe herself is a difficult figure to understand. In her were contradictions of personality and social views that biographers have found difficult to explain, usually with only indifferent success. For instance, Stowe was determined to be the ideal of the domestic wife, no matter how badly the role suited her, and she devoted much of her time to running her husband and children's lives. Yet, she was an independent-minded person who read widely and formed her own opinions on political, social, and religious issues. She struggled to pursue her interest in writing while trying to manage a large household and often put her literary work on hold while planning her household's affairs. If she had not married an unusually open-minded man, implies Fritz, there is no telling whether she would have ever become as important as she did.

"Calvin often felt sorry for himself. Here he was, he sighed, feeling poorly, abandoned to a life of domestic disorder. Calvin couldn't stand anything out of place. He objected to furniture being rearranged. He hated to see a newspaper scattered helterskelter on the floor." He was prone to panic, and money worries depressed him. Stowe took his complaints in stride, saying facetiously, "I really pity you in having such a wife." For all his woes and weaknesses, Calvin brought to the marriage a good mind and a great heart; he seemed to have always supported Stowe in her work and to have said to her that her work was more important than her domestic life. According to Fritz, his encouragement was constant and firm; however fussy he might be in other matters, he was clear in his devotion to his wife and to her ambitions.

Perhaps ambition is the most important factor she learned from her father. He had towering ambitions; in Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers, he foresees a nation united in his personal view of God, as preached by himself, his children, and perhaps their children, as well. By the time she was a young adult, Stowe had already determined to preach with the written word; she had been delighted when an essay of hers had been read publicly (not by her) and that her father had liked it. Abolitionism had not originally been an interest of hers. Her essays and stories tended to be character studies based on the many unusual people who had visited her father.

"Stowe had hated the idea of slavery ever since she'd been a little girl and Aunt Mary, her mother's sister, had run away from her husband, a planter in Jamaica, because she couldn't stand to see how his slaves were treated," notes Fritz. But the horrifying tales of how slaves were abused had not inspired a novel. Like her father and many others who wanted slavery abolished, she saw compromise as the way to settle the issue of slavery in the United States. They saw slavery as an institution that would fade away.

What stirred Stowe to write Uncle Tom's Cabin is not entirely clear in Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers.A voracious reader with opinions on almost any subject, Stowe may have been discouraged by United States Supreme Court rulings making slaves from slave states still slaves if brought by their owners to free states. In Fritz's view, the Fugitive Slave Law passed by Congress may have radicalized Stowe, turning her from a gradualist to a fervent abolitionist.

This shift in her views does not seem to have been immediately evident to her family and friends. The novel actually began as a novella meant to be serialized in only a few

parts in a newspaper (the popular belief that it was too controversial for book publishers is implicitly denied in Fritz's account—it began as a serial). "It seemed to her," says Fritz of Stowe, "that the book [Uncle Tom's Cabin] had always been there.

All she had done was find it and take down the words." She drew on her extensive reading and on the many people she knew who were familiar with slavery, both pro and con. Stowe's narrative, constructed from many sources, fell together in an impassioned account of brutality and degradation presented with clarity and bluntness, united with a fashionable literary style that made her novel unique. It became clear early on in writing her proposed novella that it was going to be much longer than anticipated, but her editors accepted this. It was considered by many to be a masterpiece in the making.

Stowe "was shy and short (five feet at her tallest), and she considered herself plain," notes Fritz, yet she responded to the firestorm of praise and protest Uncle Tom's Cabin elicited with grace and fortitude. As the daughter of the passionate Lyman Beecher, she was no stranger to controversy. Perhaps she learned from her father how to respond to criticism by citing chapter and verse, but when Southern newspapers called her a liar (and more vile words), she wrote a "key" to Uncle Tom's Cabin, citing her sources for the events recounted in her book. When she traveled, she found herself the object of respectful but intense scrutiny. Rather than shrink away, she let people have their look.

The full extent of the influence of Uncle Tom's Cabin and Stowe's other writings is hard to measure. It is possible that Stowe influenced the course of America's most devastating war. That she also opened vast new avenues for women writers is probable. As far as Fritz is concerned, Stowe invented the protest novel, which would mean countless American writers since her time have been influenced by her literary innovation. Fritz insists that in almost any list today of ten books that have changed the world, Uncle Tom's Cabin will appear. Harriet Beecher Stowe was a towering figure in her time, and although Lyman Beecher might not have admitted it, she was the best preacher of them all.

# Topics for Discussion

1. Why would Fritz abruptly end her biography of Stowe after the end of the Civil War?

2. How does the "Afterword" help you to better understand Stowe's life? What does it leave you wondering about?

3. How did Stowe's family influence her life and her work? How did Stowe benefit from being a Beecher? How was being a Beecher a disadvantage for her?

4. Why was Stowe at first disappointed with President Lincoln? What happened during their meeting that changed her mind?

5. Why were some Southerners angry about Uncle Tom's Cabin when it was first published?

6. Why would the phrase "an Uncle Tom" become a pejorative slur used against some African Americans in the 1950s and 1960s?

7. Was Stowe "the best preacher of them all"? How does Fritz show this?

8. Does Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers show why some feminists would have ambivalent feelings toward Stowe? What about her life, career, and attitudes would put off some feminists?

9. Is it really possible for any one novel to start a war? What were the other factors related to Stowe's work that Fritz mentions as influences on the start and course of the war?

10. How does Stowe deal with her father's prejudice in favor of boys? How much does she overcome his attitude? How does Stowe's father's prejudice affect her work?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Do some of your own research on Harriet Beecher Stowe and compare her to others who have fought for freedom and equality. What are some of the contributions and changes that they have made? Are their efforts still felt today?

2. Some Southerners were angry about Uncle Tom's Cabin. Who hated it? What did they write about it? What did they threaten to do to Stowe?

3. What is the history of the character of Uncle Tom in Uncle Tom's Cabin? How is someone like him viewed today?

4. What were Stowe's views on giving women the right to vote? What may have been her influence on efforts to enfranchise women? Research the suffragists. Do you think it was especially hard for Stowe, being that she was black and a woman living during a time that viewed both as second class citizens?

5. What did Abraham Lincoln think of Harriet Beecher Stowe? What is the history of their relationship?

6. It is possible that Uncle Tom's Cabin kept England from joining the Civil War on the side of the Confederacy. What is the history of the novel's influence on England's popular attitudes toward American slavery and how did it affect the English government?

7. Why have people tried to ban Uncle Tom's Cabin from schools and libraries? What is the history of efforts to ban the novel?

8. Stowe wrote a book that explained her research and sources for the events in Uncle Tom's Cabin. What is the title of this book? Read it and critique it. Does it have any unsubstantiated claims?

Does it do a good job of supporting the depiction of slavery in Uncle Tom's Cabin?

9. Harriet Beecher Stowe became the most famous member of the Beecher family.

How did she handle being in the public eye from 1865 until her death? How much privacy did she have?

10. Stowe's daughters Eliza and Harriet never married, instead spending most of their lives working with their mother.

What did they accomplish? What were their lives like? Were they happy?

# For Further Reference

Burns, Mary M. Horn Book 70, (SeptemberOctober 1994): 606. About Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers, Burns declares in her review, "Written with vivacity and insight, this readable and engrossing biography is an important contribution to women's history as well as to the history of American letters."

Margolis, Sally. School Library Journal 40, (September 1994): 227. This review praises Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers.

Review of Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers. Publishers Weekly 241, (August 8, 1994): 450. The reviewer notes, "Fritz's picture of Stowe . . . isn't so much that of an influential writer as it is of a Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers 187 woman struggling to make her voice heard in a family where boys were seen as assets and girls as, simply, not boys."

This brief review declares that Stowe "shines through" in Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers.

Rochman, Hazel. Review of Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers. Booklist 90, (August 1994): 2036. In her review, Rochman criticizes Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers for having "no source notes." Otherwise, "Fritz quietly dramatizes a momentous truth: this woman wrote a book that, for all its flaws, changed the world."

# Related Titles

Suzanne M. Coil's Harriet Beecher Stowe (1993) and Norma Johnston's Harriet: The Life and World of Harriet Beecher Stowe (1994) are two of the most recent young adult biographies of Stowe. Coil attempts to cover Stowe's entire life, while emphasizing the writing of Uncle Tom's Cabin. She plainly admires her subject. Johnston tries to place Stowe's achievements in the context of her time, using Stowe to illustrate attitudes of the time toward women, writers, and social protest. Robert E. Jokoubek's Harriet Beecher Stowe (1989) is for somewhat less advanced readers than the books by Coil and Johnston.

Jokoubek ably recounts the basic facts of Stowe's life, although not with the style and vigor found in Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Beecher Preachers.

Joan D. Hedrick's Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life (1993) is a full-length biography of Stowe written for adults. Hedrick offers a feminist interpretation of Stowe's life, but sometimes seems to strain to put a modern feminist spin on Stowe's devotion to domestic life. An aspect of the lives of the Beechers not often covered in biographies is their sojourning in Florida, but John T. Foster and Sarah Whitmer Foster's Beechers, Stowes, and Yankee Strangers: The Transformation of Florida (1999) discusses their efforts, along with those of others, to make post-Civil War Florida into an ideal state, where all races could live freely and without conflict.

Marie Caskey's Chariot of Fire: Religion and the Beecher Family (1978) and Charles H. Foster's The Rungless Ladder: Harriet Beecher Stowe and New England Puritanism (1954) examine Stowe's religious beliefs. Caskey does a good job of explaining how Stowe's views differed from those of her father.

Capturing not only Stowe's religious thinking but the whole of her complex personality in a biography is a challenging task, but Edward Wagenknecht's Harriet Beecher Stowe, the Known and the Unknown (1965) comes close to showing how Stowe could contain within herself a powerfully independent mind and yet embrace the traditional tasks of domestic motherhood.

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