

If You Please, President Lincoln Short Guide

If You Please, President Lincoln by Harriette Gillem Robinet

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

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". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

If You Please, President Lincoln Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	6
Social Sensitivity.....	8
Literary Qualities.....	9
Themes and Characters.....	10
Topics for Discussion.....	12
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	13
For Further Reference.....	15
Related Titles.....	16
Related Web Sites.....	17
Copyright Information.....	18

Overview

Published by Atheneum in 1995, this historical fiction novel occurs in the mid-1800s when Abraham Lincoln and America began implementing the Emancipation Proclamation which gave slaves in states that seceded from the Union their freedom upon victory by Northern forces. However, in states that remained within the Union, slavery was still permitted.

Robinet portrays Moses as a fourteen-year-old slave who lives in Maryland on the eastern shore of the Potomac River.

Living in a state exempt from the early promises of the Emancipation Proclamation, Moses must run away from his master to find freedom. He must get to Washington, D.C., which outlawed slavery in 1862, to have a chance at freedom. Early in Moses' journey, he meets and befriends the blind adult Goshen. Together, they find themselves on a clipper ship leaving Annapolis, Maryland. They unwillingly become part of a colony on Isle a Vache. Moses becomes a leader and, with Goshen, helps the group survive. Through his bravery and persistence, Moses effects the rescue and return of the colony to the United States.

About the Author

Born July 4, 1931, in Washington, D.C., to teachers Richard Avitus and Martha Gray, Harriette Gillem Robinet became familiar with slavery during her childhood summers in Arlington, Virginia. Her maternal grandfather served as a slave under General Robert E. Lee until age thirteen, while her father's family served as slaves to Jesuit priests in Maryland. This childhood experience paved the way for the author's interest in slavery and historical fiction.

In 1953, Robinet graduated with a bachelor of science degree from the College of New Rochelle in New York. The author then earned her master of science (1957) and doctorate (1963) degrees in microbiology from Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. From 1953-1954, Robinet worked in Children's Hospital, Washington, D.C., as a bacteriologist before serving at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., as a medical bacteriologist and as a research bacteriologist. Later, she worked as a biology instructor at Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana, and as a civilian food bacteriologist for the United States Army Quartermaster Corps.

In August 6, 1960, the author married McLouis Joseph Robinet (pronounced robi-nay), a health physicist. The couple raised six children: Stephen, Philip, Rita, Jonathan, Marsha, and Linda, including one son with cerebral palsy.

Influenced by her family's slavery and her disabled son's challenges, Robinet began writing books about children's struggles and victories over physical and emotional difficulties. Her first book, *Jay and the Marigold*, describes an eight-year-old boy who, like her son, deals with cerebral palsy.

The author's second book, *Ride the Red Cycle*, portrays a disabled child seeking individuality and self-respect.

According to the biography on Robinet's Web site, she believes history gives perspective on life today. She also suggests that historians have deliberately changed or ignored the stories of African Americans.

To combat this, Robinet writes historical fiction, portraying amiable children and adults with their needs and struggles, during pivotal times in American history.

Four of the author's books have received the Notable Social Studies Books for Young Children Award from the National Council for the Social Studies. *Children of the Fire* won an award in 1991 from the Friends of American Writers; *Washington City Is Burning* won the 1997 Carl Sandburg Award; and *The Twins, the Pirates, and the Battle of New Orleans* won the 1998 Midland Authors Award. The author received the Society of Midland Authors Award for Children's Literature in 1998. *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule* won the 1999 Scott O'Dell Historical Fiction Award for the Year's Best Fiction, as well as the Kentucky Bluegrass Award for Grades 3-5 in 2000-2001.



In a telephone interview on February 1, 2001, Robinet expressed that her interest in Civil War reconstruction led her to write *If You Please, President Lincoln*. As she researched the Civil War, she found footnotes indicating President Lincoln wanted to colonize slaves. The footnotes stated that someone tried a colony and failed. This mention peaked Robinet's interest. She researched historical papers in private libraries, read newspaper archives, browsed cabinet meeting minutes, and read Lincoln's poetry to learn about the failed colony. Her research led her to write the award-winning book *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule* as well as *If You Please, President Lincoln*.

An active member of Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Robinet lives in Oak Park, Illinois, with her husband. They have four grandchildren.

Setting

The novel begins with Moses writing his story. Moses feels compelled to document the cruel plan to take hundreds of African Americans from Annapolis, Maryland, to Isle a Vache, or "Cow Island," in the Republic of Haiti. Moses vividly tells readers about his life as a house slave. His personable and straightforward account begins on Christmas Eve of 1863, in St. Mary's of the Sea Church. Moses kneels beside Aunt Rebekah.

Together they pray, and Aunt Rebekah mutters, "our honorable Congress last year freed those slaves living in Washington, D.C."

Her disclosures give readers the background they require to understand this historical story.

The author uses dialect appropriate for slaves of the era. Moses uses the phrase "must needs" when he experiences an imperative need. Other colony members use slang: "When do we git to each," "But we've been here a week, boss," "We is better off slaves if they gotta send us away," and "They ain't letting none of us go."

These phrases, associated with less educated speech, help readers identify with the slaves. In addition, references to African Americans as "colored" and "Negro" highlight the dialect of the era.

Robinet effectively contrasts slaves and masters. For example, Father Fitzpatrick and his guests feast on roast lamb, potatoes, rice, dinner rolls, stewed tomatoes, and plum pudding. Simultaneously, Moses serves dinner as his stomach rumbles with hunger. The slaves are given little or nothing to eat. Moses must sneak outside into the frigid air to deliver a bucket of victuals to the field hands that work the rice land. According to Father Fitzpatrick, well-fed slaves get "lazy and uppity."

Robinet portrays the era's fashion colorfully and illustrates the clothing habits of slave owners and their slaves as well as the differences in dress among the slaves. For instance, Father Fitzpatrick's sister would not "wear any fancy dress twice." As a house slave, Moses shares that his "stiff white collar was above a starched white jabot with lace edging," and that he also wore a "well-fitted black jacket cut away to the front, and black, tight-fitting pants."

Aunt Rebekah wore a "dark blue dress with full white collar" and her "red turban." The field slaves often wore tattered clothing.

The author references old square-rigged ships, new ships with steam power, oldstyle brigantines, and clipper ships. She uses appropriate shipping terms, like jib, mizzenmast, quarterdeck, bow, stern, and deck throughout her work. Along with creating a setting for the story, these accurate references to ship terminology give the story credibility and broaden readers understanding.

If You Please, President Lincoln describes slavery realistically. References to the War between the States, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the brief encounter with President Lincoln set the historical stage.

Social Sensitivity

Robinet approaches slavery vigorously and with seriousness. Her novel illustrates her desire to share what she calls America's little-known history. Through Moses' eyes, she educates readers, perhaps for the first time, about colonization and slavery. She effectively highlights the conflicts inherent in slavery and demonstrates how it affected both master and slave.

The universal concept of struggling with self-worth arises throughout the novel. As readers experience Moses' growth, they see Moses learn to believe that he deserves freedom, that he can be powerful, and that he has value for being. Robinet also addresses the issues of overcoming obstacles, such as blindness and starvation, and surviving against the odds. As readers watch Moses survive and grow from the challenges, the virtues of courage, hope, and stamina emerge.

Literary Qualities

Robinet employs a plain writing style by using simple sentences, words from everyday speech, and clear and direct statements.

She narrates the story in chronological order through the protagonist's eyes. Her realism depicts slavery and colonization without idealizing or romanticizing it.

Robinet's use of aphorism creates brief and clever statements that make wise observations about life. For example, Moses uses aphorisms at the resolution when he writes: "Cow Island: Out of treachery, truth; out of strangers, family; out of struggle, strength; and out of suffering, understanding sweeter than milk and honey in heaven."

The author's use of imagery is simple yet effective. She gives readers a concrete sensation of the slaves, their masters, and the journey of this colony by describing their attire and their surroundings.

Robinet creates her writing style by employing the historical language native to slaves who lived in the United States at that time. This use of the vernacular language, combined with regional behavior and attitudes, adds credibility to her novel. It enables readers to better understand the dynamic elements between slave and master.

Themes and Characters

Robinet cultivates a kindhearted and reliable African-American boy, Moses Lincoln Christmas, as the protagonist. Well-educated, he can read and write—gifts for any slave. These skills elevate Moses into his leadership role in the colony.

Robinet uses a first person point-of-view so that readers "may understand slavery and how it affected slave and master." This viewpoint allows readers to hear Moses' distinct voice and dialect, which add to the effectiveness of the historical account. The insights shared highlight the theme of slavery and self-worth.

Robinet amplifies Moses' thoughts to draw in readers. The title, *If You Please, President Lincoln*, fits the novel well. As the story begins, Moses expresses an urgent hope that President Lincoln will read his account of the Isle a Vache colony. This plea introduces readers to Moses' sense of responsibility and conscientiousness. As the story develops, Moses describes slave and master perspectives so that readers can identify both perceptions and comprehend slavery more fully.

The story's conflict develops Moses' character and reflects the theme of self-worth.

At the beginning of the story, readers meet Moses, the slave of Father Fitzpatrick. As Moses takes his freedom and travels through Washington, D.C., he meets President Lincoln. Inspired by the man that Aunt Rebekah called "Father Abraham, the Great Liberator," Moses changes his name to Moses Lincoln. Later, inspired by his faith and a belief that President Lincoln wanted to wrongfully colonize slaves, he becomes Moses Christmas. By the resolution of the novel, President Lincoln declares, "we must hang onto" colored people. Moses realizes that people make mistakes, even presidents, and he changes his name back to Moses Lincoln Christmas.

As the story develops, Moses departs from his birthplace after the death of his adopted "aunt," Rebekah. The only mother Moses knew, Aunt Rebekah is an important character. She encourages Moses to think for himself and to take his freedom. Her death prompts him to start this journey. His remorse about leaving his master Father Fitzpatrick comes second to claiming his birthright of freedom. The memory of Aunt Rebekah and her encouraging words inspire Moses during his troubles, giving him courage.

Robinet develops Goshen as another vital character. His character plays an important role in developing the theme of self-worth. For example, Moses meets Goshen, who is traveling to Annapolis, Maryland, to find employment as a free colored man.

Blind and in his thirties, Goshen befriends Moses and they travel together. Moses reads Goshen letters from his mother. Goshen enables Moses to realize that "we are people of immeasurable worth just from being, and as beings we have work to do, a role to play."



Moses and Goshen involuntarily find themselves on a clipper ship headed for Isle a Vache. They have become part of a group of African Americans that Bernard Kock intends to colonize without authorization from the United States Government. Mr. Kock wants to develop a productive cotton farm and believes that he can "establish a colony on Cow Island that will make President Abraham Lincoln jealous!"

The ship's poor conditions caused many people on board to die from starvation, dehydration, and illness. The hardships continue on the island. Moses uses his intelligence to organize the group; they hunt for fish, collect water, and build shelter. Mr. Kock becomes ill and acts incoherently, wallowing in the illusion that they are running a productive, successful cotton farm.

For the seven weeks they live on the island, Moses leads the people with Goshen as his right hand man.

To rescue the colony, Moses takes a dangerous journey aboard a handcrafted barrel to a neighboring island. Upon returning to Isle a Vache, his new family—Goshen, Cassius, Simeon, and Sarah—await him. They whisper, laugh, hug, and eat bread with reverence as they celebrate his return. Moses realizes that he loves "being colored, being a Negro."

Moses' trip succeeds in bringing a ship to pick up the colony. Through the tough experiences the slaves faced, readers can more fully comprehend the hardships of African Americans during this pivotal time in American history.



Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize Moses. How does he grow and change during the story?
2. Describe Goshen. What makes his character important to the story? Why?
3. Exemplify Aunt Rebekah. What role does she play in developing Moses' character?
4. Cite two of the obstacles that the colony overcame. Why did the author include them? What purpose do they serve?
5. Characterize Mr. Bernard Kock. Why is his character essential? How does he develop the personalities of Moses and Goshen?
6. How would the story change if Robinet wrote it from the viewpoint of Bernard Kock as a sympathetic boss and supporter of African Americans?
7. Sarah befriends Moses and Goshen.

Describe how they develop her temperament.

8. Father Fitzpatrick played an important role as Moses' master. How? What favoritism did he show Moses and how did that help him? How did Father Fitzpatrick's attitudes support slavery?
9. Discuss Miss Phoebe Wilson. What distinctive qualities enabled her to run a boardinghouse? Why did Moses compare her to his Aunt Rebekah? What did Goshen adore about her?
10. How did Moses become a leader to the African Americans headed for the colony. What qualities did he develop to become a leader? Were they qualities he always had or did he acquire them as the need developed?
11. Describe Isle a Vache. What food did the colonists find? Water? How did they build shelter? Could they have grown and harvested cotton or any other crops there?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research the role slavery played in the economic development of the United States.

2. Research slavery. What clothes did slaves own and how did they get them?

Describe their living quarters. How did these possessions differ with slave status, i.e., field hands and house slaves?

3. Read the Emancipation Proclamation and the history surrounding it. Identify its merits and shortcomings.

4. Research colonies in the mid-1800s. Why did they fail? Did any succeed at helping slaves become free and productive?

5. Moses and the African Americans spent several weeks on a clipper ship headed for the island. Find out the types of ships used for travel in 1864. Describe them using boating terms of the era.

6. Learn about the War between the States.

What benefits arose out of this tragedy?

What failures?

7. Characterize President Abraham Lincoln. Why did he emancipate slaves?

What sacrifices did he make politically, economically, emotionally, and personally?

8. Investigate the Negro Colonization Scheme. Identify its virtues and deficiencies.

9. Families can often be formed by people that have no blood relationships, such as Moses' family on Isle a Vache. Describe characteristics that build a family. What characteristics fracture it?

10. Part of the story occurred in Washington, D.C. Describe the District of Columbia in 1864. What kind of traffic filled the streets? Did Pennsylvania Avenue exist? How did the President give the State of the Union Address from the White House?

11. Describe the White House in 1864. What was it like before and after 1864? How has it changed with the times?

12. Research blindness in 1864. How did people's attitudes affect the blind? What resources did the country have to help blind people, if any? Did the resources differ for blind African Americans?



13. Catholicism played a key role in Moses' religion and worship. Describe Catholicism in 1864. Have the attitudes of the Church changed since then?

14. Research how to grow cotton, including the climate needed, the season during which it grows, and how it is harvested and prepared for market. Describe how people used cotton in the mid1800s. Could people make a good living farming cotton?

For Further Reference

"Harriette Gillem Robinet." Telephone interview with Michelle Prebiloc, freelance writer, February 1, 2001.

Phelan, Carolyn. Booklist (August 1995): 1947.

In this review of *If You Please, President Lincoln*, Phelan describes the book as having "an exciting plot, convincing characters, and a most original setting."

"Robinet, Harriette Gillem." In *Contemporary Authors, New Revision Series, Volume 42*. Detroit: Gale, 1994. Offers a brief biography of Robinet's life and commentary on some of her work.

Related Titles

Readers interested in finding out more about slavery and historical fiction may enjoy some of the following titles. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain receives deep praise and elicits strong controversy as it grapples with issues of slavery and the quest for freedom. Janet Cave's *African Americans: Voices of Triumph: Perseverance* presents a spirited history of the African American from slavery to today.

Illustrated with black-and-white photographs, the book features diaries, letters, and census records, supplying remarkable facts and tales to create an interesting history of slavery. *The Africans (We Came to North America)* by Jen Green explores the African immigrants who arrived in North America—kidnapped from their homelands and imported as slaves. Detailed maps illustrate where they settled. The novel highlights how they ultimately prospered against over-whelming prejudice and how they celebrate their traditions today. For a true story about the slave trade, readers should consider *Amistad*, written by Joyce Annette Barnes and others, which tells the true story of illegally enslaved Africans who toppled their captors in 1839. Upon reaching the United States, the Africans faced courtroom battles that questioned slavery and the slaves' human rights.

Related Web Sites

Harriette Gillem Robinet Web Page <http://www.hgrobinet.com/index.html>.

March 28, 2001. This Web site provides a brief biography of Robinet and lists her children's books to date, providing jacket art for each work.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996