

Mississippi Chariot Short Guide

Mississippi Chariot by Harriette Gillem Robinet

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Overview

Atheneum published Robinet's novel *Mississippi Chariot* in 1994. A historical novel, it tells the story of a sharecropper family in the Mississippi Delta living in a troubled racial climate in May of 1936. The novel focuses on Shortning Bread Jackson, a twelve-year-old boy who wants to free his innocent father from a Mississippi chain gang. Sheriff Clark of Sleepy Corners has arrested Rufus Jackson after wrongfully accusing him of stealing a car. The difficulties Shortning faces in freeing his father show the challenge of making changes in an era when whites and African Americans coming together almost always caused trouble.

The significant events in the novel occur during a crucial one-week period that positively alters the Jacksons's lives forever.

The narrative begins with Shortning asking his mother, Claudia Jackson, for time off on his twelfth birthday. He has never had a birthday present and never asked for time off from chopping cotton. However, he needs to think up a plan to save his father, who has left two years earlier to serve time in a chain gang for a crime he did not commit. Shortning's family has been miserable, and he worries about his mother. She is raising five children alone and providing food for her family by taking in laundry and ironing. As Shortning copes with trying to fix this injustice, he reexamines himself and his relationships. He knows the painful reality that only a white person with influence can free his African-American father. *Mississippi Chariot* shows the complexity of racism. It illustrates the ability of young adults to overcome odds in pursuit of justice and to persist in overcoming negative attitudes.



About the Author

Harriette Gillem was born to Richard Avitus and Martha Gray, both teachers, on July 14, 1931, in Washington, D.C.

The author became familiar with slavery during her childhood summers in Arlington, Virginia. Until the age of thirteen, her grandfather, with his brothers and sisters, were slaves on the Virginia plantation of General Robert E. Lee. This childhood experience paved the way for the author's interest in slavery and historical fiction.

In 1953, Gillem graduated with a bachelor of science degree from the College of New Rochelle, in New York. Gillem earned her master of science (1957) and Ph.D. (1963) in microbiology from Catholic University of America in Washington, D. C. From 1953 to 1954, Gillem worked in Children's Hospital, Washington, D. C., as a bacteriologist, and then she served at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D. C., as a medical bacteriologist (1954-1957) and as a research bacteriologist (1958-1960). In 1957 to 1958, she taught biology at Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana. She worked as a civilian food bacteriologist for the U. S. Army Quartermaster Corps from 1960 to 1961.

On August 6, 1960, Gillem married McLouis Joseph Robinet (pronounced ro-bi-nay), a health physicist, and changed her name to Harriette Gillem Robinet. The couple raised six children, Stephen, Philip, Rita, Jonathan, Marsha, and Linda. One of their sons had 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.

Like a marigold, Jay "blooms" under adverse circumstances. 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; historians have deliberately changed or ignored the stories of African Americans. To combat this, Robinet writes historical fiction. She portrays goodnatured children and adults, with their needs and struggles, during pivotal times in American history.

Listening to accounts of slavery from her 103-year-old great-aunt Anice, Robinet heard agonizing stories of suffering as well as humorous stories of outwitting white people who treated their family badly. Robinet also felt the intense pain of segregation during her childhood in the 1930s. She experienced personal humiliations and kept vivid memories of a photograph of a lynching in Virginia.



In the 1950s, when Robinet taught in New Orleans, Louisiana, students and staff told stories of Mississippi. For more than thirty years, she has driven through Mississippi with her family, having both satisfying and troubling experiences. These experiences inspired her to write about racism in Mississippi.

Many of the author's books have received awards. The New York Public Library selected Mississippi Chariot as a 1995 Book for the Teen Age. It also won an award as a 1995 Notable Children's Trade Book in the Field of Social Studies.

Robinet loves reading, especially mysteries. In winter, she knits; in summer, she crochets. She adores dogs, cats, and bird watching. She takes pleasure in sketching; camping with her family; and growing plants, especially orchids. She is an active member of several groups: the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators; the Society of Midland Authors; Sisters in Crime; Mystery Writers of America; the National Writers Union; and the American Orchid Society. Robinet lives in Oak Park, Illinois, with her husband, McLouis Robinet.

They have four grandchildren.

Setting

Mississippi Chariot is set in the southern state of Mississippi in May 1936 and describes the situation of sharecroppers there.

Robinet vividly tells young adults about the hardships of Shortning's life as part of a sharecropper's family. She describes the family's poor living conditions and tattered clothing. She contrasts the advantages of white people with the prejudice African Americans endure. In these ways, the novel depicts both the social and economic climate.

The author also develops the natural beauty of Mississippi. For example, she describes: "moths with eyespots on their wings . . . air so clean and so cool and so sweet... honeysuckle flowers... fragrance in breezes that seemed to sweeten the whole world." The summer climate of a Mississippi May weaves into the adventures. She also uses southern dialect to characterize the "colored folk."



Social Sensitivity

Robinet explores racial inequality by showing how it affected whites and African Americans. After two centuries, whites fear for themselves because they recognize their dependence on African-American labor and worry about African-American freedom.

Robinet also shows how overcoming obstacles may require compromising other values. She seems sensitive to the value of honesty while she describes a situation which unfolds in dishonest ways. In this case, less-than-honest methods are used to bring about justice. Robinet is sensitive to the ethical questions involved in the plot, and she is careful not to condone dishonesty. As she points out, "Faced with Mississippi, he [Shortning] just had to do it this way [solve problems around the truth] sometimes." She shows the inherent dilemma in correcting a wrong by committing another wrong. Thus, Robinet depicts her characters as real human beings in real families who make difficult choices.



Literary Qualities

Robinet's plain style uses simple sentences, words from everyday speech, and clear and direct statements. She narrates the story in chronological order through the protagonist's eyes. Her writing is realistic.

Robinet's similes, when taken from nature, effectively convey her themes. For example, her phrases, "wiggled like a wet worm on a dry fish hook," "felt like an electric wire in a lightning storm," and "Cicadas screeched in hot harmony like grease sizzling on the stove," evoke visual images to support the emotions of Robinet's characters.

Finally, Robinet employs the regional language of African Americans in the Mississippi Delta. This vernacular, combined with regional behavior and attitudes, adds local color to the novel. It facilitates young adults' understanding of racial inequity of the era.

Themes and Characters

This depression era novel is written in third-person limited point of view to relay the thoughts and feelings of one character, Shortning. It tells the story of the clever and daring protagonist, Shortning, who along with Peanuts, his sister and confidant ten months younger, successfully free their father from a chain gang. The novel's title derives from an early slave hymn that acted as a code to warn of impending danger. It parallels the experiences of the Jackson family as they risk death in finding their way to freedom.

Set in the 1930s, the story explores the themes of racial inequity, honesty, and friendship. Shortning grapples with issues of race, has to confront ethical questions about honesty, and develops friendships, as he experiences his adventure. Several characters emerge to empower Shortning to challenge racial inequality and to create a new future.

Peanuts, his eleven-year-old sister, comforts and strengthens Shortning. She helps him accomplish his missions, and he supports her by getting the money others owe them, but will not pay. This relationship gives Shortning the support he needs to take risks.

Hawk Baker, the white postmaster general's boy, plays an instrumental role in developing Shortning's maturity. Hawk also provides Robinet with an opportunity to educate young readers about racial inequality without being didactic.

Shortning begins his new relationship with Hawk when he saves him from drowning. Shortning does not tell anyone for fear that whites will twist the truth and he will be accused of trying to drown him. Afterward, Hawk repeatedly attempts to befriend Shortning. He wants to visit Shortning at his cabin and learn about his life.

Through his relationship with Hawk, Shortning matures. He understands that some whites do not hate African Americans. He understands the pressures and retaliation whites may endure if they openly support African Americans.

As the two boys learn about each other, they discover their similarities, emphasized by the fact that they were born on the same day and year. Hawk teaches Shortning about mail and music. Shortning teaches Hawk how to climb a tree.

Significant events dramatize these characters' maturation, their ability to overcome racial inequalities, and developing friendship. When Hawk shakes Shortning's hand, they admit their equality. When Hawk's father aids in Rufus Jackson's return home, Shortning begins to learn he can trust some whites. At the resolution, Shortning plans to write letters to Hawk from Chicago.

Shortning also learns about honesty. He grapples with this value as he sets out to trick an FBI agent into entering Sleepy Corners and talking with the sheriff. He uses the informal rumor mill to his advantage and thus effects the release of his father.



Shortning feels guilt and questions his morality as he sets up the trick. When it works, he continues to question his motives. Through a series of significant events, he realizes that sometimes correcting an injustice cannot be done without breaking rules, especially if a person is dealing with dishonest people. The novel does not endorse trickery or lying, though it does explore the intricacies of moral issues as they surface in an immoral situation.



Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize Shortning. How does he grow and change during the story?
2. How does Shortning's friendship with Hawk deepen the novel's examination of race relationships?
3. How does Peanuts's role communicate family values and develop the significance of female contribution in the plot? How would this novel be changed if the main character was a female who was helped and comforted by a younger brother?
4. Study the significance of the word "chariot" in Negro spirituals, and then apply what you learn to an explanation of the title's significance.
5. Characterize the antagonist Sheriff Titus Clark. Why is his character essential?
6. List the events that lead to Shortning and Hawk playing at Hawk's house.
7. Compare and contrast Shortning and Hawk.
8. Describe how Hawk develops Shortning's character. What does Shortning learn from him?
9. Name two important themes the author conveys through her story. What positive messages does she suggest?
10. People in Sleepy Corners are more likely to believe rumor than fact. How do rumors help Shortning free his father? What might have happened if the rumors did not work? List examples of rumors in the novel that fueled racial inequality.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Racial inequality is a central theme in the novel. Research post-Civil War development of sharecropping and how it perpetuated racial inequality.
2. Research the Mississippi Delta region. What agriculture does the region support? How has agriculture changed over the last seventy years? Take a journey back in time and learn about sharecropping. What economic basis did it have? How did it happen? Summarize the lifestyle of a sharecropper family like that of the Jacksons.
3. Describe the life of a white teenage boy in the 1930s. Contrast it to the life of an African-American teenage boy. Now compare and contrast teenage life for white girls and African-American girls. Come up with some ideas about how these differences shaped American society.
4. Define the words honesty and integrity. Shortning had to make difficult choices to free his daddy from an injustice. Do you support how he did it? Why or why not?
5. Research how cotton is grown—the climate needed, the time of year, how it is harvested and prepared for market. Describe how people used cotton in the early-1900s. Could people make a good living farming cotton?
6. Shortning and his father deliver milk to Sleepy Corners in the 1930s. Describe milk production in that era. How did they collect the milk? How were the cows treated? Describe milk delivery.

Compare and contrast those experiences with modern-day production and delivery of milk. Has the treatment of cows changed?

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Readers fascinated with racial inequality may enjoy *If You Please, President Lincoln* by Robinet. This historical novel takes place in the early-1860s when Abraham Lincoln begins executing the Emancipation Proclamation. Moses, a fourteen-year-old Maryland slave, runs away from his master to find freedom.

In *Missing from Haymarket Square* by Robinet, Dinah, a child of former slaves, must care for herself and work twelve-hour days to support her family. In the spring of 1886, the dreaded Pinkerton detectives, who prevent unions from organizing in factories, take Dinah's father prisoner. Dinah must find her father and free him.

Robinet's *Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule* takes place during the Reconstruction after the Civil War. The government promises ex-slaves Pascal and his older brother Gideon forty acres and perhaps a mule. With friends they consider family, they claim Green Gloryland, farm a vigorous cotton crop, and grow ample food to eat. However, the dishonorable nightriders threaten to take away their newfound freedom.

In Robinet's *Washington City Is Burning*, Virginia remembers her experiences as a slave girl in the White House serving Dolly Madison, the wife of James Madison.

Related Web Sites

"Robinet, Harriette Gillem." <http://www.hgrobinet.com/index.html> This site offers a brief biography and a listing of the authors publications.

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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

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