

Washington City Is Burning Short Guide

Washington City Is Burning by Harriette Gillem Robinet

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Overview

Atheneum Books for Young Readers published *Washington City Is Burning* in 1996 as a Jean Karl Book.

This historical novel transpires during a pivotal time in the War of 1812. It portrays the adventures of a White House child slave, Virginia. As a servant to President Madison and his wife, Virginia witnesses the invasion of the British soldiers who burn Washington City, including the White House, in 1814.

The novel gives enormous insight into the lives of slaves during this era, as well as glimpses into the lives of the United States president, his family, friends, and political partners. *Washington City Is Burning* shows the complexity of slavery, the anger as well as the compassion inherent in difficult times, and the ability of young adults to overcome odds in pursuit of justice.

About the Author

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

The author became familiar with slavery during her childhood summers in Arlington, Virginia. Her grandfather, great aunts, and great uncles served as slaves on the Virginia plantation of General Robert E. Lee. Gillem's childhood experience paved the way for her interest in slavery and historical fiction.

In 1953, she graduated with a bachelor of science degree from the College of New Rochelle in New York. The author earned her master of science (1957) and doctorate (1963) degrees 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 worked at Walter Reed Army Medical Center as a medical bacteriologist (1954-1957), before traveling to New Orleans, Louisiana, where she taught biology at Xavier University (1957-1958).

She returned to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in D.C. as a research bacteriologist (1958-1960). After that, she worked as a civilian food bacteriologist for the U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps (1960-1961).

On August 6, 1960, she 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, 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.

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 purposely 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.

Robinet's grandmother, Martha Madison Hoard, served as a childhood slave at the Madison estate, which inspired Robinet to use the character Virginia in her book *Washington City Is Burning*, which won the 1997 Carl Sandburg Award.



Robinet loves reading, especially mysteries. In winter, she knits; in the summer, she crochets. She adores dogs, cats, and bird watching. She takes pleasure in growing plants, especially orchids, sketching, and camping with her family.

She stays active as a member of 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 several grandchildren.

Setting

The significant events occur within a crucial one-month period which changes the characters' lives forever. The story begins with Virginia announcing that she's writing about the adventures of August of her twelfth year. She believes she starts the month like a wobbly caterpillar only to emerge as a winged butterfly.

Virginia has left President James Madison's country estate of Montpelier in Orange, Virginia, to work at the White House in Washington City. Virginia is surprised that Tobias, another house slave, chose her to serve at the White House. She quickly learns that she will have opportunities to help slaves escape. As a child, she can do things that would be too dubious for an adult slave to carry out.

Robinet effectively contrasts slaves and masters. For example, she describes the fashions, furnishings, and cuisine of the White House occupants. Robinet describes the "grand White House staircase railing" over which Virginia tosses pantaloons, shirts, jackets, gowns, turbans, men's, women's, and children's shoes, children's pantalets and dresses. The slaves bathe, dress, and feast on veal, ham, chicken, cabbage, sweet potatoes, corn bread, pears, apples, and berries. As Virginia notices, "Our white masters and guests had need of many clothes; each slave desired but one outfit to ride proudly into liberty."

Robinet uses distinctive information to substantiate her historical representation.

She makes use of relevant character attributes and unique contributions to create her story. For instance, the real Miss Dolley loved to entertain guests, and she frequently eased the tensions of her husband's political rivals. Robinet shows the slaves serving ice cream, something that Miss Dolley initiated at the White House. Robinet also mentions the Easter Egg Roll on the Capital Lawn, introduced by Miss Dolley during her tenure. These references make the novel feel genuine and credible.

Social Sensitivity

Robinet approaches the intrinsic struggle in racial inequality with compassion.

She portrays the daily lives of the slaves without optimism. Not only does she compare the lives of the White House slaves but she also shows the plight of slaves shackled in chains walking row-by-row on their way to market to be sold.

Robinet discusses the dilemma in slavery: Miss Dolley admits that she does not like slavery; however, as a Virginian, she upholds the state's laws regarding slavery.

She shows how fundamental indifference can take hold in appalling situations when the slave Rosetta Bell earns money by divulging escape plans. Robinet's sensitivity enables readers to grasp the complexity of the issues faced by colonial Americans.

Robinet seems sensitive to integrity. She falls short of condoning dishonesty, but rather supports human rights of individuals regardless of skin color or heritage. She demonstrates that situations may require less-than-honest schemes to beget justice.

Literary Qualities

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

She narrates the story in chronological order through the protagonist's eyes. Her realism depicts racial inequity without idealizing or romanticizing it. The author effectively uses flashbacks to provide needed information. For example, Virginia tells the story of her willingness to suffer severe burns on her legs to protect other slaves from punishment.

Robinet's hyperboles express the intense emotion associated with the arduous themes.

For instance, phrases like "head spun like a muddy wagon wheel," "my mind flew to Rosetta Bell like an arrow," and "in rain, Pennsylvania Avenue was a running river of mud" evoke images to support the emotions and observations of the characters.

Robinet's imagery is simple and effective. She gives readers a concrete sensation of the African Americans, the different classes of slaves, and the privileged lifestyle of whites.

Robinet creates her writing style by employing the historical language native to African Americans in colonial America. This use of the vernacular language, combined with regional behavior and attitudes, adds credibility to her novel as it facilitates a better understanding of the era's racial inequality.

Themes and Characters

Robinet uses the first-person point of view. Virginia narrates the story and gives readers facts about slavery swiftly. This kind-hearted, daring African-American girl serves as the twelve-year-old protagonist.

Orphaned, she has learned to care for herself from an early age.

Robinet selected the title *Washington City Is Burning* because the story occurs during the month that the British occupied Washington D.C. during the War of 1812. Soldiers set the White House, and countless prominent buildings, on fire.

Set in wartime, the story explores the themes of racial inequality, self-worth, friendship, and honesty. Several characters emerge to help Virginia mature as she re-examines herself, challenges racial inequality, and creates a new attitude towards herself and her future.

The story begins with Virginia's and Tobias's chariot ride from Virginia to Washington City. Virginia grapples with the fact that Tobias has arranged for her to serve the president's entourage at the White House.

She's not sure why he's done this; Robinet gives readers the first glimpse of Virginia's struggle with self-worth. Robinet also begins to introduce the complexity of racial inequality as Virginia sees chained, hungry, and dehydrated slaves walking in rows to be sold at market. Virginia eventually learns that she will be a vital person in bringing slaves to freedom.

Tobias emerges as a key character in the novel. As a father figure to Virginia, he points out information she will need to keep herself safe. He shows her confidence and respect. Whenever Virginia needs an understanding soul, she can look to Tobias for guidance.

Liberty Kitty, named for Virginia's pursuit of emancipation, is also a main character. Playful and frisky, Liberty Kitty provides Virginia with reassurance and acts as a symbol of safety and continuity in this tumultuous era. Liberty Kitty draws out Virginia's childish ways in a time when being playful can be dangerous. Virginia's thoughtfulness and protection of Liberty Kitty emphasizes the theme of friendship.

Several other characters demonstrate the universal theme of friendship. Aunt Sally evolves as Virginia's surrogate mother, educating her on White House protocol. For instance, when Virginia arrives, Aunt Sally hugs her and orders a bath and clean clothes.

Aunt Sally washes and rinses Virginia's hair, and tends to her wounds. She explains which china to use and when, along with the White House way of life. Aunt Sally aids in



Virginia's development towards maturation by supporting her and warning her about Rosetta.

Prisca, a light-skinned slave about Virginia's age, brings out laughter and humor during the tough times. She mimics facial expressions and mannerisms of people when they are not looking, causing fits of laughter among the slaves. Virginia frequently remarks how the slaves burst into laughter during horrible events. Robinet uses Prisca's character to reveal the horrific events of August 1814 with a jovial attitude that makes the information more appealing to grasp.

The adult antagonist, Rosetta Bell, enables Virginia to mature. Rosetta knocks Virginia to the ground when they meet.

This brutal introduction confuses and offends Virginia. She questions what she's done to anger Rosetta. Virginia questions her self-worth.

Virginia tries to gain Rosetta's respect.

She discloses to Rosetta her part in an upcoming slave-freeing mission. Rosetta thwarts the mission for money, and twelve slaves die. This tragic event leads Virginia to question her need for Rosetta's approval. She begins to realize the complexity of racial inequality.

Virginia's character transforms as she realizes that not all slaves are good-hearted.

Virginia feels immense guilt over prattling to Rosetta. Virginia's ability to identify her weakness and to seek atonement shows her maturity and self-worth. Virginia realizes that she has had unconditional love from slaves like Tobias, Prisca, and Aunt Sally.

Topics for Discussion

1. Characterize Virginia. How does she grow and change during the story?
2. Describe Rosetta Bell. What makes this character important? Why?
3. Exemplify Tobias. What role does he play in developing Virginia's character?
4. Characterize Miss Dolley. Why is her character essential in Virginia's maturation?
5. Virginia befriends Prisca. Describe Prisca's importance.
6. List the attitudes of colonial America that allowed slave children to do things that would be too dubious for an adult slave to carry out. How did Virginia take advantage of this and help her people?
7. What important part did Liberty Kitty play as Virginia's companion?
8. Compare and contrast house and field slaves using the details provided in the novel.
9. Characterize Aunt Sally. What role does she play in developing Virginia's character?
10. List the literary qualities that Robinet employs in Washington City Is Burning.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Research Montpelier, Virginia, and the Madison family (1723-1844). What businesses did the family own and manage?

2. Detail the existence, contributions, and sacrifices of Montpelier's slave community. What skills did slaves learn? In what domestic activities did they serve?

What did they eat? How did they spend their time off?

3. Families can be formed by people who have no blood relationships, such as Virginia's family at the White House.

Describe characteristics that build a family. What characteristics fracture it?

4. The story occurs in Washington, D.C., in 1814. Describe the city, including its layout (the Mall, Capitol Hill, rivers, boundaries, etc.) and traditions. What businesses supported the culture? How did the city change when it was rebuilt after the fires of 1814?

5. For two hundred years, the White House has stood as a symbol of the Presidency, the United States Government, and the American people. Describe the architectural history of the White House.

6. After inauguration, each presidency decorates the White House to make it a home. Describe how the interior decorations have reflected each presidency and its era.

7. Research and analyze the War of 1812.

What benefits arose from this tragedy?

What losses occurred?

8. Characterize President James Madison Jr. What contributions did he make to the United States? For his efforts, what sacrifices did he make politically? Economically? Emotionally? Personally?

9. Dolley Payne, born on May 20, 1768, lived in Guilford County, North Carolina. Characterize Dolley. Who was her first husband, and why did they separate? Did she have children? How did she meet James Madison, and how long did they court? What contributions did she make to the world?

10. Laws provided little protection for the status of African Americans in colonial America. Even though America banned slave importation by 1808, people illegally imported more than 250,000 slaves from 1808 to 1860. Research slavery in the early 1800s. What laws came into effect to abolish slavery? How did Americans enforce these laws? Why did it not work?



11. Robinet refers to pantaloons, pantalets, turbans, and shoes among other fashions. Describe the fashion styles of 1814.

How did it differ according to social status? Event? Season? Vacation? What gender restrictions did the fashions of 1814 embody?

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Cooper, Ilene. Review of *Washington City Is Burning*. *Booklist*, vol. 93, no. 5 (November 1, 1996): 5011.

Wright, Marie T. Review of *Washington City Is Burning*. *School Library Journal*, vol. 42, no. 11 (November 1996): 1101.

Related Titles/Adaptations

Readers fascinated with slavery and its concerns may enjoy these stories by Robinet.

The mid-1800 novel, *If You Please, President Lincoln*, occurs when President Abraham Lincoln begins executing the Emancipation Proclamation. Moses, a fourteen-year-old Maryland slave, runs away from his master to find freedom.

Missing from Haymarket Square tells of Dinah, a child of former slaves, who 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 and free her father.

The historical fiction novel, *Mississippi Chariot*, explores the issues of a sharecropper family in the Mississippi Delta living in a troubled racial climate in May of 1936.

Forty Acres and Maybe a Mule is set during Reconstruction, when 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 enough food to eat. However, the dishonorable nightriders threaten to take their newfound freedom away.

Related Web Sites

"Harriette Gillem Robinet." Harriette Gillem Robinet Web Page
<http://www.hgrobinet.com/index.html>. March 14, 2002.

"Harriette Gillem Robinet." Illinois Writers Directory
<http://www.litline.org/IWD/html/robineth.html>. March 14, 2002.



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