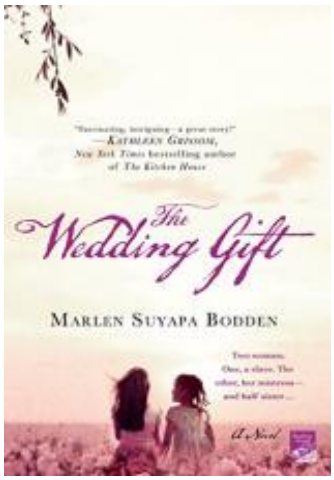
The Wedding Gift

by Marlen Suyapa Bodden



About the Book

When Cornelius Allen gives his daughter Clarissa?s hand in marriage, he presents her with a wedding gift: the young slave she grew up with, Sarah. Sarah is also Allen?s daughter and Clarissa?s sister, a product of his longtime relationship with his house slave, Emmeline. When Clarissa?s husband suspects that their newborn son is illegitimate, Clarissa and Sarah are sent back to her parents, Cornelius and Theodora, in shame, setting in motion a series of events that will destroy this once powerful family.

Told through alternating viewpoints of Sarah and Theodora Allen, Cornelius? wife, THE WEDDING GIFT is a stunning novel that shows where the complicated and compelling bonds and relationships between women explored in novels like THE HELP and THE SECRET LIFE OF BEES began. It is an intimate portrait that shows where this particular American story and dynamic all started and will leave readers breathless.

Discussion Guide

1.List the main themes of THE WEDDING GIFT. What was the point that Marlen tried to make with each theme?

2.Even though the characters lived in a radically different time, with which, if any, of their predicaments could you relate?

3.How does Sarah Campbell change or evolve? What events triggered these changes?

4.How does Theodora Allen change or evolve? What events triggered these changes?

5.List any parts of THE WEDDING GIFT that made you uncomfortable. Why? Did this discomfort lead to a new understanding of some aspect of your life you might not have thought of previously?

6.What, if any, parts of THE WEDDING GIFT were too violent? Could Marlen have made her points without such level of detail?

7.Were any parts of THE WEDDING GIFT not credible? Why?

8.What were the clues that Marlen planted relating to the ending? Were the clues not obvious enough? Should Marlen have revealed the ending earlier?

9.Using concrete examples, describe the main reasons why planters and legislatures in the slaveowning states enacted laws making it a crime to teach slaves how to read and write.

10. When was the international slave trade abolished? What effect did that have on slave owners?

11. What did some slave owners and traders do to get around the international ban on importing slaves?

12. What were the slave owners? two main tools for controlling slaves and preventing them from fleeing?

13. Using examples from THE WEDDING GIFT, state the ways slaves were hunted and recaptured when they escaped. What was the government?s role in helping to capture escaped slaves?

14. Sarah Campbell fled from slavery because she wanted to be free, but what were the immediate reasons?

15. What were Theodora Allen?s goals? Which, if any, did she accomplish?

16. One of the themes in THE WEDDING GIFT was the relationship between mother and daughter. Separately describe the relationships between Sarah and Emmeline and Theodora and Clarissa.

17. Even though most slaves were illiterate, they passed knowledge from one generation to the next by telling stories. Emmeline, for example, tells Sarah a folktale about a woman named Lela. What did Emmeline teach Sarah by telling her that story?

18. Citing specific examples from THE WEDDING GIFT, state how Theodora and Emmeline showed their daughters that they loved them.

19. How did medical care differ between women slaves and slaveowning women? Which was better, and why?

20. State why spirituality was important to slaves.

21. What aspects of Sarah?s personality, if any, do you admire, and why? What do you not like about her, and why?

22. What aspects of Theodorah?s personality, if any, do you admire, and why? What do you not like about her, and why?

23. In what way were Sarah, Clarissa, and Isaac related?

24. Citing specific examples from THE WEDDING GIFT, how did planters control their wives and daughters?

25. State specific examples of how slaveowners showed slaves that their masters had control over every aspect of their lives.

26. What was the document that Cornelius Allen was drafting just before Sarah murdered him? What happened to that document?

27. Why did Cornelius Allen let Clarissa?s son live? Why did he not sell him into slavery?

28. How were New York City businessmen involved in slavery in the 19th century?

29.2011 was the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War. Why was the Civil War one of the most important events in the history of the United States and the world?

30. What is the effect of having an unpaid labor force on the development of an economy?

31. What do you think was the most memorable passage in THE WEDDING GIFT, and why?

32. Sarah Campbell: villain or vixen? Why?

Author Bio

Marlen Suyapa Bodden is a lawyer at The Legal Aid Society in New York City, the nation?s oldest and largest law firm for the poor. She has more than two decades? experience representing poor people and low-wage and immigrant workers, many of whom are severely underpaid, if paid at all. She drew on her knowledge of modern and historical slavery, human trafficking, and human rights abuses to write THE WEDDING GIFT, her first novel. Marlen is a graduate of New York University School of Law and Tufts University. In 2012, the University of Rhode Island awarded Marlen an honorary Doctor of Laws degree.

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