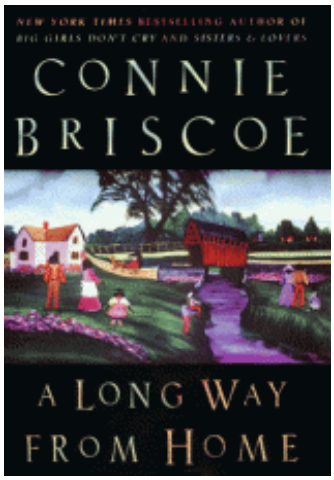
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A Long Way From Home

by Connie Briscoe



About the Book

Spanning more than sixty years, **A Long Way from Home** is the story of Susie; her daughter, Clara; and her granddaughter, Susan?house slaves born and reared at Montpelier, the Virginia plantation of President James Madison. Proud and intelligent, these women are united by love, fierce devotion, and a desire for freedom that grows stronger year by year.

A Long Way from Home vividly re-creates Southern life and the ambivalent, shifting relationships on both sides of the color divide, from the cruelty and insidious benevolence of white owners to the deep yearnings and complex emotions of the slaves themselves. It is an unforgettable story that pays homage to the African-American experience and to the ancestors whose lives and histories are indelibly entwined with our own.

Discussion Guide

1. The author sets her fictional characters among historical figures and events. How does this technique affect your reaction to the story?

2. As a girl, Clara is critical of her mama's placid behavior, of her seeming acceptance of their life in slavery. Yet years later, when Clara is head of the house slaves in the Montgomery household, Clara's daughter Susan has the same criticism of Clara. What makes Clara, once so rebellious, reach a similar state of acceptance as her mama?

3. Parts I and II are told by two different narrators, Clara and her daughter Susan. Though they are a generation apart, their lives have many parallels. Both worked in the households of wealthy white families and enjoyed certain privileges. And both rejected a possible turning point in their lives: Clara declines her father's offer to "run" with him, and Susan, sitting in the Richmond train station with money stolen from Miss Lizbeth, changes her mind and returns to the Montgomery house. What kept them from running? What might their futures have held if they had carried out their plans

for escape?

4. The author writes of an "invisible mask" that slaves pull over their faces when speaking and acting before white people. What kind of behavior is the mask hiding? What is it projecting?

5. As Susan is chained to a wagon and wrenched from her family, her mother valiantly tries to give her a string of blue beads that belonged to Grandmother Squire. What does the shattering of the beads signify? What objects in our own lives convey a sense of family unity?

6. When Susan's name is changed to Suzanne for her owners' convenience, she feels this insult above all else. What significances is attached to a name? Does her acceptance of this new name reflect a defeated spirit? How would we react if our employers requested us to change our names?

7. Susanne witnesses Oliver's forcible removal from a public park for lack of the "proper papers" and sees his humiliation. She reflects that Oliver, a free man, is not so different from her --he is merely a "slave without a master". How does society limit a person's freedoms even when the law has freed them? Does today's society continue to restrict its black citizens?

8. Many of the slaves are conflicted about pursuing their freedom. What are some of the things they feared would be lost with the gain of freedom? Was it more difficult for a slave like Susan, living amidst wealth and privilege, to see the gains of freedom? What convinces her that a free life is the life she must live?

9. The slaves were forbidden to learn to read. Why did slave-owners fear the literacy of their slaves? How would communication among the slaves challenge the power of the slaveholders? What other ways were the slaves kept dependent?

10. The pre-Civil War South housed an obvious division between whites and blacks. More subtle divisions existed between house slaves and field slaves, between country slaves and city slaves, between American-born blacks and African-born blacks. Besides color, what are some of the prejudices that divide people in our society today?

Author Bio

My real name is Constance, but everyone has always called me "Connie." I was blessed with a wonderful upbringing. Although my immediate family is small --- I have one sister --- we are very close and supportive of each other.

The only thing unusual about my life was that I was born with a hearing loss, inherited from my father's side of the family. From childhood through my twenties, it was a moderate loss and I was able to attend public schools and to go on to college with few problems. When I was in my mid-twenties the loss worsened and by graduate school I needed a hearing aid. I eventually took a job at Gallaudet University and began to learn sign language. I never let my hearing loss hold me back from doing the things I wanted to do. I just adapted and plowed on.

A couple of years ago, I had a cochlear implant and most of my hearing has been restored. I'm now doing things I hadn't done in years, like going to the movies, enjoying music and using the telephone. It really is a miracle.

I'm not sure when I first thought about being a writer. I've always had "a way with words" and took a few stabs at writing a novel when I was in my twenties, but I never finished --- perhaps because I did not have enough life experience to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion. I put it off and pursued other things --- a brief marriage, my career, traveling around the world, photography --- but the desire to write was always in the background. And although my career as an editor was progressing fairly well, I realized that I wanted more out of life. So I took another stab at writing.

This second attempt resulted in **Sisters and Lovers**, and to my amazement it eventually sold more than 100,000 hardcover and about a half million paperback copies. It appeared on the bestseller lists of the *Chicago Tribune, Washington Post, Boston Globe, Boston Herald, USA Today*, and *Publishers Weekly*. My second novel, **Big Girls Don't Cry**, hit many of the bestseller lists as well, including the New York Times. A Long Way From Home, the story of my ancestors, was nominated for an NAACP Image Award.

I live with my family in Maryland in a quiet community with beautiful pastoral views. Although I sometimes miss the hustle and bustle of the big city, it's the perfect setting for writing.

As for favorite sites --- I'm all over the web. My favorites when I was researching women for **Jewels** were probably Google and Wikipedia. I would almost always start there.

Critical Praise

"Connie Briscoe vividly evokes the joys of love and family, and the pain of separation and bondage. A Long Way from Home is a wonderful celebration of strength and perseverance, and a brilliant song of hope. "

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