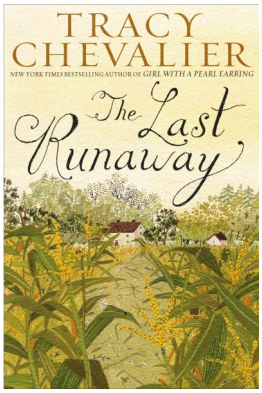
The Last Runaway



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In *The Last Runaway* (as in all Tracy Chevalier's historical novels), you feel as though you are living exactly in the time period that she is describing. Her combination of research, realistic dialogue, characters true to the day, plus her skill at capturing the myriad details of daily life make her writing very believable. In this novel, Chevalier transports us back to 1850s Ohio to a small town at the edge of the wilderness. But first, we experience a grueling ocean voyage from Quaker Honor Bright's perspective.

Honor Bright accompanies her sister to America where Grace plans to wed someone from their English hometown. After Honor suffers terrible seasickness on the journey, she refuses to take the lake route to Ohio, so they proceed by train and carriage. However Grace comes down with yellow fever and dies on the trip. Not knowing what else to do, Honor continues the journey to Faithwell, Ohio.

She catches yellow fever also and stops in Wellington at a local milliner's shop. Belle Mills takes her in. Unfortunately, she's already met Belle's brother on the journey. Donovan is a slave hunter and he has stolen the key to Honor's trunk after ransacking the carriage while searching for runaway slaves.

Belle is an older woman, a non-Quaker, but both very kind and wise to the ways of the world. While staying at her shop and recovering, Honor notices that Belle does more than make and sell elegant hats. She hides and feeds runaway slaves; at one point telling Honor that she tries to make up for the slaves that her brother captures.

Honor is a gifted seamstress and quilter--one of the charms of this book is its discussion of quilt-making, especially the difference between American and English quilts of the period. If you are a quilter, you will find the historical quilt-making very interesting.

Chevalier succeeds at recording a young woman's introduction to a strange new land with unusual foods: boiled corn on the cob; unusual weather - violent thunderstorms; unusual insects - crickets and cicadas; and unusual customs: quilt parties before weddings.

In Faithwell, Honor lives with her sister's fiancee and a widow who has recently lost her husband to scarlet fever also. But the Quakers soon start talking about how inappropriate it is for a bachelor to live with two unmarried women. When Jack Haymaker, a local dairy farmer begins courting Honor, she decides to marry him despite the fact that she is also drawn to the slave-trader and non-Quaker, Donovan.

The Haymakers were involved in the underground railroad in the past with dire consequences for their family, so Judith (Honor's new mother-in-law) extracts a promise from the bride that she

will no longer feed or direct runaway slaves to safe havens in nearby Oberlin, Ohio.

One delightful part of the book are Honor's letters home to her family and a close friend, Biddy, in England. Belle also shares a few scribbled notes with Honor that brim with Belle's wisdom, humor, and her idiosyncratic take on the world.

The characters of Belle, Donovan, Jack, and particularly Honor are extremely well-drawn. At heart this is a tale of morality, an immigrant to a new land being forced to decide between loyalty to her new family or to her conscience. It's an absorbing read that will linger long after you've read the final sentence.

For another take on runaway slavery in Ohio, read or reread Toni Morrison's *Beloved* [2].

For the Love of Reading [3] Information, Answers & Reviews [4] African American [5] Fiction [6] Historical [7] The Last Runaway [8]

Posted by Dory L. on Jan 23, 2013

- [9]
- [10]
- [11]

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