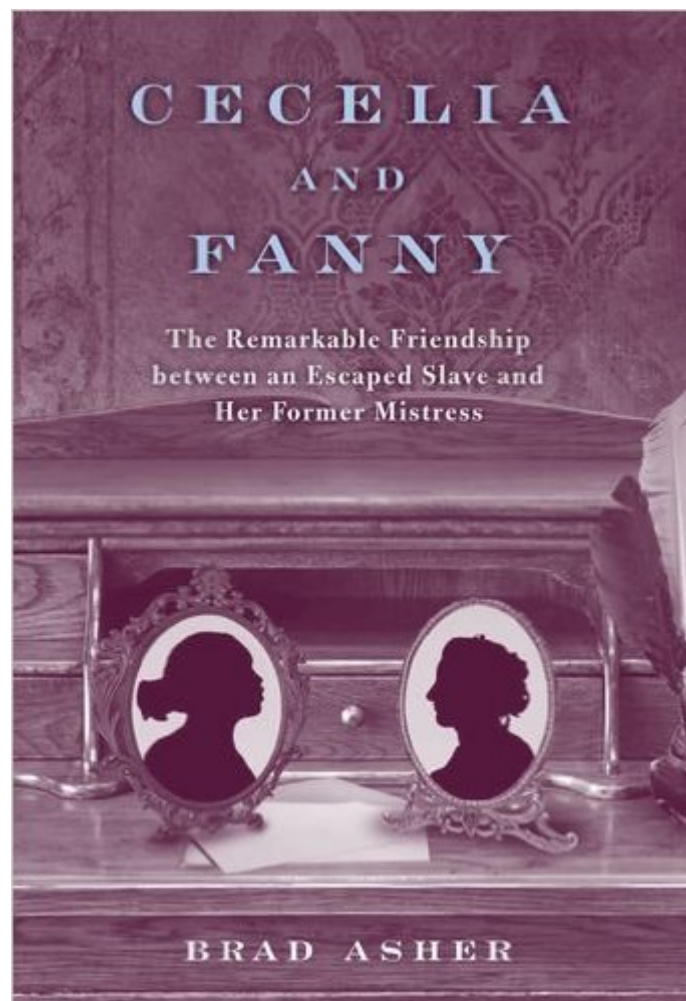


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Cecelia And Fanny: The Remarkable Friendship Between An Escaped Slave And Her Former Mistress



Synopsis

Cecelia was a fifteen-year-old slave when she accompanied her mistress, Frances "Fanny" Thruston Ballard, on a holiday trip to Niagara Falls. During their stay, Cecelia crossed the Niagara River and joined the free black population of Canada. Although documented relationships between freed or escaped slaves and their former owners are rare, the discovery of a cache of letters from the former slave owner to her escaped slave confirms this extraordinary link between two urban families over several decades. *Cecelia and Fanny: The Remarkable Friendship between an Escaped Slave and Her Former Mistress* is a fascinating look at race relations in mid-nineteenth-century Louisville, Kentucky, focusing on the experiences of these two families during the seismic social upheaval wrought by the emancipation of four million African Americans. Far more than the story of two families, Cecelia and Fanny delves into the history of Civil War-era Louisville. Author Brad Asher details the cultural roles assigned to the two women and provides a unique view of slavery in an urban context, as opposed to the rural plantations more often examined by historians.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Living in Louisville, KY and having known at least one well-respected local "historian," I'm always interested in the convoluted, sometimes strangely recalcitrant history of our area, one whose identity has been shaped by a multiplicity of people and events and one that is misunderstood to this very day... especially by the local inhabitants themselves. When I first heard about this book, I was

expecting a treatise, a kind of literary dissection, on the intimate communication between Cecelia and Fanny. It took only a few pages into the book to discover that not only was I quite wrong on that point, but that the "recalcitrant history" I just alluded to would be used as a kind of contextual backdrop for the enduring personal relationship of the two protagonists. I'm amazed at how Mr. Asher is able to weave such a small amount of information on Cecelia and Fanny into a detailed, big-picture drama that transcends the lives of the two ladies and at the same time provides the reader with a far greater understanding of the day-to-day and year-to-year impacts on their lives. I'm not sure if this book is more like "History Detectives" or "Gone with the Wind," but be assured it contains elements of both. I'm also not sure if this book has been nominated for any historical or literary awards, but in my humble view, if it hasn't, it should be. Histories don't get any better than this.

This book does an excellent job of describing what life was like for real people who were slaves and slave owners in America before, and after, the Civil War. The stories of Fanny and Cecelia and their families are skillfully interwoven with all the background material needed to understand their stories. And I was pleased that Asher was careful to draw the lines between fact, speculation, and the unknowable. The subtitle is slightly annoying - the "friendship" sounded normal enough, not "remarkable". It's not a close friendship, they don't feel compelled to see each other. If you've ever known someone who worked as a housemaid for the same family for several years, this relationship will seem familiar.

The writer has taken a small amount of information and developed a theory as to the relationship between a runaway slave and her former mistress. Fanny Ballard took her slave Cecelia on a family vacation to Niagara Falls in 1846. Cecelia took the opportunity to escape to Canada, leaving her mother and brother behind in slavery. She settled, married and raised a family in Toronto, where there was a large community of freed and runaway slaves. Cecelia began writing to her former mistress, first through an intermediary to protect her location. She hoped to locate her mother and brother. After the Civil War, she reunited with Fanny. The book is an interesting contrast in views of slavery from the viewpoint of master and slave. Based mostly on census records, the Ballard family history and Fanny's letters to Cecelia (retrieved by Fanny's son after her death) the book provides a sketchy, though plausible, theory of what Cecelia's life may have been like, both as a slave and as a free woman.

A well researched and engrossing look at the relationship between a slave owner and her fugative slave. Fanny Ballard was from a prosperous Louisville family and in her teen age years was provided with a personal slave. Cecelia was a slave from infancy and found an opportunity to escape to Canada when she was a young woman. Dr. Asher provides an insightful look into their lives and the political and social history of mid 1800 century Louisville. Basing his book on correspondence between the two women follows the both of their lives until their deaths at the turn of the century.

I live in Louisville, so the details of this book are of particular interest, but the story and the historic events are certainly applicable to many areas of the country. The lives of two families, the white owners, a prominent Louisville family, and one of their female slaves and her daughter are followed from the 1840s until the end of the century. The author relates the process of slave owners "learning" how to carry out that role, and provides a heart-rending portrait of how slaves were handled, what just the fact of being property meant to them as individuals, and how it affected the slave families both before and after the war. The politics and events of the Civil War in Louisville and Kentucky are described in detail, as well as the life of escaped slaves in Northern US cities and in Canada. Because it is a history of real people the story is particularly emotional and touching, and the history of this time truly comes alive.

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