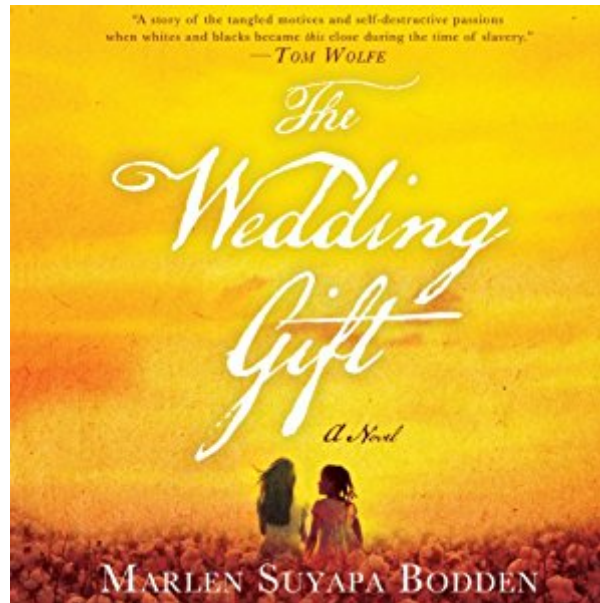


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The Wedding Gift



Synopsis

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. Marlen Suyapa Bodden's novel is an intimate portrait that shows where this particular American story and dynamic all started and will leave listeners breathless. Includes a reading group guide read by the author.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Last summer I met the author, Mrs. Bodden and her husband at the 2010 Harlem Book Festival. I made a promise to myself that I would purchase the book and read it. A year later I ordered the book as I had the postcard on my refrigerator as a reminder to purchase a copy. My normal summer read is a Benilde Little book, which I am awaiting a new one. And a friend had just given me *Raising Ce Ce Honeycott*, which I simply devoured. So it was time for me to keep that promise to myself and purchase "The Wedding Gift" for this summer. When I first began reading it I was surprised that it

was about slavery, I was expecting something like "Jumping the Broom," or some modern day marriage twist like the "Wedding," by Dorothy West. As I relinquished my expectations I became enveloped in the storyline and couldn't put it down. As I began reading Theodora's accounts of being the Mistress of a Plantation, her accounts answered so many questions I had about what women thought of their husbands, slavery, and mulatto children born to them. Like many others, I was thrilled at the surprised ending - and to tell you the truth, I am now wanting a sequel to what happens next? I am so grateful to have been given this insight into the lives of slaves and of the women of that period. This book was indeed a gift to the reader. If you haven't gotten a copy - it will be worth it! Even if you've been putting it off - The main character you will just love to hate her and then love Sarah Campbell - she is spoiled, naive at first, and then brave and eventually your heroine. Though many slave stories have been told, this is still a one-of-a-kind tale, you will not want to miss.

"The Wedding Gift" is the debut novel of New York lawyer, turned novelist, Marlen Suyapa Bodden. Set in antebellum Alabama, the focus of Ms. Bodden's novel is the complex relationship between slaves and their owners. Sarah Campbell, Ms. Bodden's protagonist, is a light skinned slave who has dreamed of freedom her entire life. She is the product of a long term sexual relationship between her mother, Emmeline, a slave, and her owner, Cornelius Allen. Cornelius, The Allen family patriarch, serves Ms. Bodden's plot well as the antagonist of the story, he is manipulative, vindictive and at times physically violent. Interestingly enough, his manipulative machinations, vindictiveness and physical violence are usually focused on the females of Ms. Bodden's novel, be they either black or white. When Emmeline stops going to him at night, Mr. Allen retaliates by selling Sarah's sister Belle. The Allen's daughter, Clarissa is the engine that drives Ms. Bodden's story forward. Sarah and Clarissa are both roughly the same age, and from childhood Sarah has been groomed to be Clarissa's servant. As girls Sarah and Clarissa were playmates. Clarissa asked that Sarah be allowed to sit with her during lessons with her mother. Consequently Sarah learned to both read and write, at the time a crime for both the slave and the teacher. When Clarissa marries, Sarah is to go with her and act as her personal servant. When Clarissa comes of age she is actively courted by two suitors; her unexpected pregnancy sets in motion a series of events which ultimately leads to Sarah's freedom and the Allen family's ultimate destruction. A parallel theme in the novel is the subjugation of women in the American south. Sarah's first person narrative alternates with that of Cornelius' wife Theodora, juxtaposing the two women's lives. On the surface Theodora Allen's life seems genteel, she is a white woman of wealth in the south, but by highlighting the relationship

between Cornelius, his wife and his daughter once Clarissa's pregnancy is revealed, Ms. Bodden proposes that the role of a white woman in the south, is only slightly above that of the slave; that women and slaves are the property of their white male masters, and must obey them or suffer the consequences. Ms. Bodden's tome is well written and carefully researched. It is fully grounded on historical facts, though her narrative leans toward the melodramatic. Sarah and Theodora, her two narrators, seem to be fully fleshed out characters, but Cornelius is a caricature of the worst imaginable kind of slave owner. Ms. Bodden's title, "The Wedding Gift" is somewhat misleading. Sarah is groomed to be Clarissa's servant from a very young age, and everyone acknowledges that when Clarissa marries Sarah will go with her. Sarah is never presented to Clarissa as a wedding gift. Though the cover art was probably not within the realm of Ms. Bodden's control, it is also a bit misleading as the big dipper is prominently displayed pointing the way north to freedom, but Sarah ultimately finds her freedom by going south. The big dipper, also known as the "drinking gourd," looms large in slave literature and song is never once mentioned in Ms. Bodden's text. "The Wedding Gift" is a highly enjoyable novel. It should not be taken as an accurate representation of slavery in the American South. It is a novel, and as such it must follow the conventions of fictional storytelling. It is no more an accurate representation of antebellum life in the American south than are Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin" or Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind."

Fantastic book. I couldn't put it down. Great surprise ending--I never saw it coming. If you like historical fiction, this book is a vivid, and sometimes heartbreaking, portrayal of early American slavery and the oppression of women. You can tell this book is well researched, but the impressive part is how seamlessly it is woven into the story. I can't wait to tell my friends about this book.

The material in the story was interesting, however, from the beginning the writing struck me as being that of an inexperienced author. The author "tells," but doesn't "show." Description of setting is minimal at best. Character development is so lacking that the reader does not get to understand who the characters are as people and what leads them to make decisions. This makes it difficult to be able to sympathize with any of the characters, and I finished the novel feeling like all of the characters were still strangers to me. Sentences are choppy and short, and the dialogue sounds the same regardless of who is speaking and their education level, gender, or background. In addition, the plot twists at the end seemed to come out of left field with no foreshadowing and no insight into the character's thought processes as she made those decisions. It felt like the last two pages were an afterthought tacked on to the rest of the story with the main character saying, "Oh, by the way, I

did this. Hope I am forgiven." In this section, the protagonist also spoke directly to the reader for the first time in the entire story ("Reader, I ask that you do not judge me harshly...") This direct addressing of the reader also felt unnatural. Overall, the story itself has the components of what could be an engrossing novel if only with better writing and editing. The poor writing got increasingly annoying as I held on to finish the novel. This is the first 99-cent novel I have read on my Kindle, and I really hope the other 99-cent books I have purchased are of better quality. Given the number of 5- and 4-star ratings this book received, I expected it to be much better. Perhaps my expectations were too high for a 99-cent book.

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