

THE FREE WOMAN Harriet Jacobs Transcript

What'sHerName Podcast Episode 52

[This episode contains discussions of sexual violence that may be upsetting to some listeners and may not be appropriate for children.]

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[music]

Olivia Meikle: “Reader, my story ends with freedom, not in the usual way, with marriage. I and my children are now free.”

[music]

Olivia Meikle: Hi Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi Olivia!

OM: I am going to tell you the story of a woman who escaped from enslavement in the American South, moved to the North, became a leading abolitionist working to free other enslaved people, including members of her own family, and eventually became one of the most prominent free Black activists and educators in the United States. And her name was...?

KN: [hesitantly] ...Harriet?

OM: Yes!

KN: Yes, [Harriet Tubman](#). [pause] Uh, she's too famous for *What'sHerName*.

OM: Agreed!

KN: Uh?

OM: We're not talking about Harriet Tubman.

KN: Oh!

OM: Today we are talking about [Harriet Jacobs](#).

KN: Harriet Jacobs? [pause] I guess there's only room in the historical canon for one Harriet.

OM: Right, we've talked about this many times on here, but the way that history gives one slot...

KN: Yeah.

OM: ...for each category of women, and this slot has been taken by Harriet Tubman.

KN: Who is awesome!

OM: Yes! There's no question that Harriet Tubman deserves that slot.

KN: [laughter] Yeah.

OM: And her story is incredible! And I'm glad that it's finally getting out there, the [“even more dramatic than you thought it was”](#) story.

KN: Yeah.

OM: But *our* Harriet, Harriet Jacobs, has a story that is every bit as dramatic and astonishing, and she deserves to have it told.

KN: Cool.

OM: Especially since she is one of the very rare examples that we have of a formerly enslaved woman who tells her own story in her own words.

KN: Ah!

OM: In her case, in her autobiography called [Incidents In The Life of a Slave Girl](#).

KN: Oh! That Harriet Jacobs!

OM: You may have heard of this.

KN: Yes!

OM: Some of our listeners may have encountered this book.

KN: Uh-huh.

OM: It's being taught more now, in college and sometimes even high school, and her story is sometimes being talked about. But, for over one hundred years she was completely erased. And it's time to bring her back!

[music]

OM: I'm Olivia Meikle.

KN: And I'm Katie Nelson.

OM: And this is *What'sHerName*!

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[music]

OM: So to learn more about Harriet Jacobs I talked to [Maria Windell](#).

Maria Windell: I'm Maria Windell, and I'm an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

OM: And, most importantly, she was one of **my** favorite professors in graduate school.

KN: Aww!

[Laughing]

[music]

OM: Harriet Jacobs did not know that she was enslaved until she was six or seven years old.

Maria Windell: Harriet Jacobs is born in 1813, and she grows up actually not realizing that she is enslaved. So, she grows up living with her grandmother, and living with a “mistress” who is very kind to her, teaches her to read and to write.

OM: That all changes when she is thirteen years old.

Maria Windell: Part of what's really crushing about that moment, when we go back and look at it historically as well, is to realize that it's distinctly possible that that women may actually have intended to free Jacobs. And it is quite possible that the man who came to possess her altered that will in order to come to possess Jacobs.

OM: [Dr James Norcom](#) witnessed a [codicil](#) when this woman died that stated that Harriet Jacobs, specifically, was willed to Dr James Norcom's Daughter. This codicil was not signed...

KN: Uhhh!

OM: ...but, the word of two white men...

KN: Oh, are you serious?

OM: ...was enough that this codicil was taken as truthful, and Harriet Jacobs was transferred to James Norcom's daughter, who is a young girl - so, effectively, to James Norcom.

05:03 - 10:02

KN: Wow!

OM: She probably didn't even know this, she probably had no idea.

Maria Windell: It's not knowledge that necessarily would have been helpful to her at the time, but looking back at it now, it's something that's really painful to recognize.

OM: *This* situation is entirely different. James Norcom begins pursuing Harriet Jacobs sexually from the moment she enters his house.

KN: Ugh!

OM: She's a child, and she is trying to fend off sexual advances from a man who has absolute control of her, and her life, and her body.

KN: Ugghhh.

Maria Windell: Dr. Norcom begins to threaten to do things like send her to a cabin that he's going to build on one of the plantations where he can 'keep her to himself.' This becomes for her a really defining experience and this is what her narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* seeks to share with the reading public. To try to reveal, specifically, what enslaved women experienced that enslaved men did not, and that means the sexual abuse that enslaved women underwent.

This isn't to say that enslaved men didn't also at times suffer sexual abuse. And there are different forms of sexual abuse that both enslaved men and women underwent. Being forced to sleep with men and women who enslaved them, or to quote/unquote "breed" with particular other slaves, which, you know, is a terrible way to have to say it, but...

KN: [Sound of grimace]

OM: When Harriet Jacobs eventually falls in love with a free Black man in the community Norcom refuses to allow her to marry him, and he refuses to allow her to marry anyone.

Maria Windell: You know, which has its own issues because of the legal status of marriage for enslaved people in the nineteenth century, but on top of that he had mocked her for even declaring feelings for someone, particularly a free Black man.

OM: So, Harriet Jacobs makes a calculated decision, weighs all of her options very carefully...

KN: Mmm.

OM: ...and decides to enter into a consensual relationship with a white lawyer named [Samuel Sawyer](#).

KN: Whoa!

Maria Windell: Jacobs attempts to make a calculation for how she can preserve herself from Norcom and his 'advances.' And what she decides to do is, essentially, to offer herself instead to a wealthy white man as a mistress. One of the reasons that she does this is that she hopes that he will be able to purchase any children that they might have -- to purchase his own offspring to free them from slavery under Dr. Norcom.

KN: [Sound of disgust]

OM: Because, of course, any children that she gives birth to, no matter who the father is, are enslaved, and are the property of Dr. Norcom.

KN: Ugh!

Maria Windell: She's also hoping that if she becomes pregnant by another man that Dr. Norcom will... desist from pursuing her.

OM: She calculates out all of these options and decides that a relationship with a wealthy white man (who eventually becomes a Congressman) is her best option for giving her children any chance of escape.

Maria Windell: Jacobs is then also trying to navigate explaining this decision-making process to her readers, and to do so while maintaining her position as someone who is the nineteenth century version of a 'proper' woman. Having to explain why she had sex outside of marriage, had children while she was unmarried. All of these different things that would, basically, totally destroy the idea of a nineteenth century ideal woman.

She does so by explaining that she knew what was right, and that slavery made it impossible to uphold those ideals. That slavery as an environment essentially makes that impossible. So, she actually very directly says, "Reader, this is something that is difficult for you to imagine, I'm sure, but this is **what slavery is.**"

10:00 - 15:18

OM: The system of slavery has made it impossible for her to "do right."

KN: Yeah.

OM: She cannot do what is right.

KN: Mm-hmm.

OM: And this is the best possible alternative that she can see.

Maria Windell: So she says, "But, O, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been

abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by the laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery. I wanted to keep myself pure; and, under the most adverse circumstances, I tried hard to preserve my self-respect; but I was struggling alone in the powerful grasp of the demon Slavery; and the monster proved too strong for me. I felt as if I was forsaken by God and man; as if all my efforts must be frustrated; and I became reckless in my despair.”

OM: And I think this is the most important part of what makes Jacobs’ story so valuable now is that it gives us a way to understand and think about what agency looks like for women in this situation.

Now, this is really common in our narrative of what slavery looked like, but this book is really the first to address what being an enslaved *woman* was like. The sexual abuses that are amplified. Especially white abolitionists sympathizing with this anti-slavery movement are reading *men’s* slave narratives, at this point. But no *woman* has been talking about this aspect.

KN: Right. Because in Victorian society you don’t talk about any of that, no matter what.

OM: Right! And so, the fact that she walks this incredibly fine line of... making it clear what she’s talking about without horrifying and offending her readers so they put the book down, and she has to create a narrative of herself as the ‘good woman’ who has been forced into bad situations because of this system.

Now, in the narrative, Dr James Norcom is not successful in his sexual pursuit of Harriet Jacobs.

KN: Oh! Hmm.

OM: That she successfully fends him off...

KN: For years and years?

OM: ...for years and years and years.

KN: Ah.

OM: ...and manages to maintain her “purity” (in the rhetoric of the time) until she makes this conscious decision to engage in this relationship with Samuel Sawyer.

Maria Windell: In *Incidents* she writes that Dr. Norcom stops pursuing her after this. This is one of those moments where it's difficult to know how accurate the narrative is being to life. It's possible that that's the case. It's also possible that this is a moment of, sort of, self-protection for Jacobs. It's still quite possible that Dr Norcom would *either* continue to pursue, *or* take vengeance on Jacobs.

OM: We have no way of knowing if that's true, of course.

KN: It would be surprising if it were true.

OM: It does seem surprising.

KN: Yeah.

OM: It would be impossible for her to talk about it, if it is *not* true. Because, you know, this is still a scenario in which you can't even mention that someone is pregnant...

KN: Yeah.

OM: ...let alone *how* a person *became* pregnant. So, this fine line that she has to walk of revealing enough to make it clear what she's trying to bring to people's attention, like, "You need to know what is happening, you need to understand the horrors of what enslavement looks like for women," while zealously maintaining her own position as a righteous, virtuous woman. Because that's also critically important for what she's doing. She is writing this at a time where women are officially pedestaled and cherished and protected to make sure that Womanhood is not ever 'defiled.' None of that applies to enslaved women, and she is making a case for: "It should! If you really believe this -- if you believe these Christian virtues, if you believe in chastity, marriage -- all of those things are impossible under the system that you have built. And they're not just impossible for me, a Black woman," she's saying, "they are impossible for you! They are impossible for anyone in a situation in which these kinds of things are being permitted and encouraged."

15:18 - 20:05

OM: It's a ridiculous balancing act that she's doing. She's, like, juggling fire on a high wire above alligators.

KN: [laughs] And she pulls it off!

OM: She somehow is so successful! I mean, this book was *so* successful at what it was trying to do.

OM: There's a line in her book that says, even after she is finally free, "The dream of my life is not yet realised. I do not sit with my children in a home of my own. I still long for a hearthstone of my own, however humble. I wish it for my children's sake far more than for my own."

I mean... that is activating all of those 'codes' of what women are, what women do, what they're for. And really driving home this point of, "if you really do value this, society, then why am I not allowed to have it?" And so, it works in the moment, at making people confront the cognitive dissonance that they're having around "Women are sacred and special and must be protected / Black Women are not."

KN: Yeah...

OM: And she forces them to think these things through without ever violating Victorian morality codes of what you can say.

KN: Tricky.

OM: But I think, it also really really pushes us to confront that question of: what *are* choices? In a situation where your choices are so severely limited?

Maria Windell: So, there is one way of thinking about things where the power balance is so uneven in slavery that you can argue that all sexual encounters that enslaved women have and particularly that enslaved women have with white men are, essentially, rape. Because there is no way of equalling out that power balance. One of the ways of also then thinking about that, is that that argument strips any idea of choice or agency from enslaved women. Which is then difficult to try to sort of, historically, square. And the choice that she makes is a choice that she makes. And as she recognizes and acknowledges in *Incidents*, it's not a choice that she would make under any other circumstances -- but it *is* a choice.

OM: "In these circumstances, this is the choice that I made." I love that! The reclaiming of her own ability and right to make decisions about her life -- to do what she believes is best. Even in extremely limited circumstances.

So, her plan kind of works. She has two children with Samuel Sawyer: [Joseph](#) and [Louisa Matilda](#). Because she's enslaved, these children are enslaved and owned by Norcom (or, technically, by Norcom's daughter). But by 1835 Norcom is angry enough with her that he is

threatening to send her children away to work on the plantation rather than in the house. Which is a much more dangerous, terrible situation for them. So, she makes another desperate choice.

Harriet Jacobs hopes that if she leaves, he will leave her children alone and, possibly, consent to sell them to their father, Samuel Sawyer.

KN: Like, runs away?

OM: Runs away.

KN: Wow!

OM: And where do enslaved people run?

KN: North.

OM: They run North.

KN: Uh-huh.

OM: Harriet Jacobs does not have the resources to do that. So, she stayed a little closer to home.

KN: Oh.

OM: She went to her grandmother's house where she will hide in a tiny garret space in the attic. There's no windows. There's no insulation. This is North Carolina. It's unbelievably hot and humid in summer. It still gets significantly cold in the winter. There are bugs that -- as one who lived in North Carolina, the bugs almost drove me out of the state and I was living in a modern house with glass windows, and air conditioning, and etc!

But, most importantly, this little enclosed hidden space is seven feet by nine feet, and the highest point of the roof is three feet tall.

KN: Wow!

OM: It slopes down on the side, with just enough room for her to lie down on one side. If she rolls over, she bumps into the roof.

20:05 - 25:18

KN: Wow!

OM: This is a microscopic space.

KN: How long did she hide there?

OM: Seven years.

KN: What?!

OM: She is hiding in this space for **seven years**.

KN: Are you kidding?! Wha?!

OM: Very occasionally, when the family is very confident that it's safe, she might be able to come down and walk around a little bit in a larger space in the middle of the house and try to stand up and stretch out and move her body around.

KN: Wow!

Maria Windell: And that's one of the only reasons that she has some mobility left. She actually, for the rest of her life, suffers difficulty walking, things like that, from her seven years in this garret space.

KN: Wow!

OM: Essentially in a box for seven years.

KN: What did she do?

OM: Well, she would... she did carve-out tiny peep holes in the wall where she could watch the street, and the outside world. And where she can sometimes see her children playing in the street outside.

KN: What?

OM: Because, she is across the street from Norcom's house.

KN: [laughter]

OM: For *seven years* she is hiding in a garret *across the street*, essentially, from her enslaver.

KN: Whoa. That blows my mind!

OM: I cannot imagine.

Maria Windell: One of the things that I do when I teach her narrative, to try to actually get students to visually comprehend what this must have been like, is I'll tape out on the floor of the classroom that seven by ten space, and then it's basically about the height of a classroom table. And I'll sit in that for the entire class. And even just by the end of, like, fifty minutes, or the hour and fifteen minutes, I am so sore trying to get out. But it's really hard to actually imagine what that must have been like.

She refers to this in *Incidents* as her "loophole of retreat." And so, again, you can kind of see from her language there how different that idea of escape from enslavement is, than something like running or...

And yet, she fully understands the power of that idea because one of the things that she does to convince Dr Norcom that she has fled north is she'll write letters to her grandmother as if she is in New York or somewhere like that and send them north with friends, who will then postmark them from New York.

KN: No way!

OM: To convince Norcom that she is gone.

KN: That is wild!

OM: And he is constantly going up to New York City, sending agents to New York City trying to find her.

KN: [Laughing]

OM: There's another really remarkable thing about Harriet Jacobs' narrative and the historical record.

Maria Windell: I think this is the only slave narrative that we have where we also have the runaway ad that goes with it. You can see, in comparison with all of the things that she talks about in her narrative, the way that Dr Norcom frames her in his ad. It's from an 1835 newspaper from [Norfolk](#):

“One hundred dollar reward will be given for the apprehension and delivery of my servant girl, Harriet. She is a light [Mulatto](#). Twenty-one years of age, about five feet four inches high. Of a thick and corpulent habit. Having on her head a thick covering of black hair that curls naturally but which can be easily combed straight. She speaks easily and fluently and has an agreeable carriage and address. Being a good seamstress, she has been accustomed to dress well, has a variety of very fine clothes made in the prevailing fashion, and will probably appear, if abroad, tricked out in gay and fashionable finery. As this girl has absconded from the plantation of my son, without any known cause or provocation, it is probable that she designs to transport herself to the North. The above reward, with all reasonable charges, will be given for apprehending her, or securing her in any prison or jail within the U. States. All persons are hereby forewarned against harboring or entertaining her, or being in any way instrumental in her escape, under the most rigorous penalties of the law. -James Norcom, Edenton North Carolina. June 30th.”

OM: Even these descriptions of her hair, of her skin, of her clothing -- all of these are describing her appearance, but also reinforcing the idea of her appearance as ‘more white,’ if we wanna say it that way, is also, in some way, a negative for her -- that she is aspiring out of her station, that, these things (which of course she has no control over) are a sign of her own deviancy, or her own bad character.

25:19 - 29:52

OM: It's really important to address the fact that when you look at Harriet Jacobs -- we have a beautiful portrait of her, a photograph -- she does not look the way that we expect an enslaved woman to look. She's described as a “light Mulatto.” She is biracial. There are a *lot* of white people in her family tree, and yet, because of the legislation which means that ‘children follow the condition of their mother,’ it doesn't matter what your racial makeup actually is. What matters is if your mother was enslaved.

Eventually, Norcom does sell her children to their father. Samuel Sawyer **buys** his children...

KN: Ugh!

OM: ...he doesn't **free** his children.

KN: Ewww!

OM: He allows them to live with their grandmother in the house where Harriet Jacobs is hiding in the attic. The children do not know she's there.

KN: What?!

OM: So, she can hear their voices and listen to them downstairs...

KN: No way. That is so bonkers!

OM: The danger is so high that absolutely no one can know that she is here.

KN: Wow!

OM: He allows them to live with their grandmother, for a while. But, he does not free them, and eventually he sends Louisa, his daughter, to work as a slave...

KN: What?

OM: ...for family friends.

KN: No! Really?

OM: Yes. The complexity of these relationships is... hard for us to understand.

KN: Very! Wow.

OM: But, once her children are at least safe, if not free. Harriet Jacobs finally makes her way north after seven years...

KN: Wow.

OM: ...by dressing as a sailor, and being transported to a ship, and finally does escape to New York.

KN: Wow!

OM: Where she gets a job as a nursemaid, a nanny, in the home of a man named [Nathaniel Parker Willis](#).

Maria Windell: Willis is especially interesting because he's a very prominent literary figure, literary editor especially, in the nineteenth century. He is not as well known today, although he was very famous in the nineteenth century. The person that *does* have a lasting reputation is his sister, who we now know today as [Fanny Fern](#), that was her pen name. Sarah Peyton Willis, who wrote a novel called [Ruth Hall](#) as well, was a very very popular... I'm gonna say columnist.

Jacobs becomes very close with both of Nathaniel Parker Willis' wives, but is very fearful that he will discover that she is a self-emancipated slave. Because she is afraid he will turn her in as part of the [Fugitive Slave Act](#). At some point, Nathaniel Parker Willis's second wife, [Cornelia Grinnell Willis](#) learns that Norcom's daughter and her husband are in town trying to find Jacobs. And Cornelia gives Jacobs the baby that Jacobs is there to help care for and says "Take the baby, go out of town so that if they come to the house, they won't be able to find you." That's how much she cares about and cares for Jacobs that she gives her the baby and sends her off, I think, to the seaside.

OM: Eventually, Cornelia Willis purchases Harriet Jacobs from Dr. Norcom and frees her.

KN: Wow!

Maria Windell: So, she basically purchases Jacobs and then gives Jacobs her freedom. And Jacobs understands why this had to happen, *and* is totally distraught.

OM: She already freed *herself*.

KN: Mmm.

OM: And in this purchase, all of these people have turned her back into a slave. She is now being bought and sold, as she points out, "Now history will see a bill of sale."

29:52 - 35:01

Maria Windell: She is so upset that she has been bought and sold after all of the effort that she had made to free herself from slavery. She writes at the end of *Incidents* about the sort of horror, of a human being being bought and sold in New York in the mid nineteenth century, as this sort of travesty. And, even though she recognizes the necessity of it and she is grateful to Cornelia for

having done this, because it means that she no longer needs to leave the city at the drop of a hat, she's very angry that this had to happen.

OM: It just further illustrates, you know, sort of the same problems of the [white savior narrative](#) and that even when you are trying to do the *best* thing, we can't do the *right* thing. No one in this situation can do the right thing.

It's a heartbreaking and really nuanced and complicated way of thinking through this problem *now*, let alone for the nineteenth century. It's an astonishing passage in this book.

This system doesn't just compromise enslaved people's morals, as she is framing it. It compromises the morals of the entire nation.

KN: Yeah.

OM: So, after Jacobs is finally freed from the worry of being recaptured by the Norcoms, she begins what will become the real work and focus of her life. She starts running an abolitionist reading room in Rochester, New York.

Maria Windell: That was something that she had initially done with her brother, and he goes on to become an abolitionist lecturer, and he travels with people like [Frederick Douglass](#) doing the lecture circuit. She runs the reading room alone, and works with some really high level abolitionists in Rochester who she continues to correspond with and work with. That's also how she ends up getting put in touch with [Lydia Maria Child](#) who edits *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

OM: So now that she is officially, legally, no longer enslaved, Harriet Jacobs' friend, [Amy Post](#) -- another name that people who study this time period will recognize very well -- suggested that Jacobs should write her life story. So, the reason this is so rare -- as I said, most of the slave narratives that we have are written by men, but even most of those -- most famously, [Nat Turner](#), who led the largest and most successful slave rebellion in US history -- they weren't even really written by the person. They were 'dictated to,' or *heavily* edited by people with other agendas. And so it's almost impossible to unpack, what did Nat Turner actually say, and what did the white pastor writing down his words insert? And is any of this true?

Here we have Harriet Jacobs' *actual* words. We know that the white woman who was involved in editing and helping to publish this narrative was very clear that she did almost nothing.

KN: Huh.

OM: That this is not a case of her rewriting, or taking dictation. These **are** Harriet Jacobs words.

Maria Windell: It does seem as though most of the narrative is actually Jacobs'. And this is something that's really important to recognize, because of the fact that for a long time people didn't think that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was a real slave narrative.

OM: Everyone at the time this book comes out knows that this is a factual slave narrative. Somehow, during the Civil War, this starts to be known as a work of fiction -- that this is a novel by a white woman abolitionist.

This is the part that is completely wild to me. For a *hundred years*, everyone believes that this is a work of fiction by a white woman!

Maria Windell: In the twentieth century, people began to think that it was a fictionalized slave narrative, that it was a novel, and they often thought that it had been authored by Lydia Maria Child who was known for having written other novels often related to, sort of 'activist' causes in the nineteenth century. It wasn't until about the 1980s that a scholar by the name of [Jean Fagan Yellin](#) did the research to actually locate the, kind of, historical basis for *Incidents* that people realized that this is a true story.

35:02 - 40:10

Part of that is because Jacobs had written under the pseudonym of Linda Brent, so in *Incidents* her character is called Linda, Dr. Norcom is called Dr. Flint. But, if you look at their histories, if you look at the way that she maps where things are in the town, everything maps exactly. So when Jean Fagan Yellin started to do this research, it very quickly became clear that *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was in fact a historical slave narrative, and not at all a fictionalized story trying to, sort of sensationalize the sexual aspects of slavery for entertainment or salacious purposes. Which was kind of what people had thought one point.

OM: This is a narrative written by this prominent abolitionist figure Harriet Jacobs, and the truth is probably much much *bigger* than even what is here, is really sobering to think about.

KN: Wow.

OM: So, normally the story would end here. She is free! But this is Harriet Jacobs, and she is *not* done. She is working in Alexandria and Washington DC organizing food and shelter for refugees from slavery and from the Civil War. As more and more formerly enslaved people travel north as

the Civil War goes on, and as more and more people are emancipated or self-emancipated, they are flocking into Virginia, into Washington DC, into all of these areas, with nowhere to go, no support network, generally the clothes on their backs, and she is hugely instrumental in organizing housing, food, work for all of these people.

KN: Yes, Harriet!

OM: She also realizes very quickly that her experience of learning to read and write are unusual and that so many of these formerly enslaved people have had no education at all. And she starts teaching. She starts a school! Her daughter Louisa eventually joins her, and they dedicate their lives to educating formerly-enslaved people. Eventually, they raise enough funds to have a building and we have a photo of that school on our website...

KN: Oh, cool!

OM: It's an amazing photo. They're teaching children during the day. They're running classes for adults at night.

KN: Wow!

OM: They're dedicating so much time and energy to this project, but Harriet Jacobs is also working on an activism front in so many other areas. She is raising funds and insisting on proper medical care for Black people, raising using huge amounts of money to assist with massive devastating smallpox outbreaks. Where all of these formerly enslaved people have almost no resources to combat these things, and many doctors refused to even treat them, she is making sure that every bit of care she can possibly find and provide is available to these people.

KN: Wow.

OM: She is fighting for the rights of Black soldiers who fought in the Civil War. And she's doing all of this with no one realizing who she is. They are not putting 'Harriet Jacobs the activist' together with 'the author of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.'

KN: Wow!

OM: The book ends with the lines that I quoted at the beginning of this episode. Which, for those who know nineteenth century literature is a perfect, brilliant inversion of a very classic nineteenth century trope for finishing up a novel. The most famous example being [Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre](#), the last line of Jane Eyre being: "Reader, I married him." Here she is

acknowledging what her readers are going to expect at the end of a story, and how it differs. “My story ends with freedom. Not with marriage.”

KN: Mmm!

OM: She's again invoking that aspirational ideal withheld from enslaved women. She's also destabilizing that ideal in the moment she's using it. It's such a fascinating way to end her story. I think it's especially poignant that as she wrote these words, the Civil War has not happened, the [Emancipation Proclamation](#) does not exist. So many people are still suffering what she suffered, and she hasn't been given a chance to accomplish any of the incredible work she is going to do after the Civil War.

40:10 - 41:33

This is how Harriet Jacobs chose to end that part of her story: “It has been painful to me, in many ways, to recall the dreary years I passed in bondage. I would gladly forget them, if I could. Yet, the retrospection is not altogether without solace, for with those gloomy recollections come tender memories of my good old grandmother, like light, fleecy clouds floating over a dark and troubled sea.”

[theme music]

OM: Huge thanks to Dr Maria Windell. If you want to learn more about Harriet Jacobs, see amazing photos of Jacobs, her children, some of the homes where she lived, etc, visit our website at WhatsHerNamePodcast.com. There you'll also find links to books, resources, and much more. You can also follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#) where we post lots of photos each week. Music for this episode was provided by [Andy Reiner](#) and John Souza, The [River of Suck Podcast](#), *I Think I Can Help You*, Doug Maxwell and the Library of Congress. We also want to extend a very warm welcome to our new director of curriculum for *What'sHerName*, Mary Quantz, and our intern Isabella Martinez. Our theme song was composed and performed by [Daniel Foster Smith](#). *What'sHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.