

TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER

What was it like to be surrounded by luxury and not own a pair of shoes? How much did it sting to be slapped for raising your eyes, or walking too slowly, or spilling the milk? Award-winning author, Patricia C. McKissack, provides young readers with a window into the Old South through the eyes, mind, and personality of a twelve-year-old slave girl, Clotee.

What differentiates Clotee from other people, even her master's son, is her ability to read and write during an era of widespread illiteracy—not only among slaves, but also among the more powerful slaveholders. Clotee's diary provides an exciting entree into plantation living in pre-Civil War Virginia. Through subtle changes in Clotee's life, readers watch her become more courageous and more passionate about freedom. When she realizes that there are white men who care about the plight of the slaves, Clotee begins to comprehend that life is not a matter of black or white—whether in skin color, morality, or life-and-death choices.

Patricia C. McKissack has crafted Clotee's diary from anecdotes of her own ancestors, chronicles of an actual slave, as well as extensive research from her highly praised *Christmas in the Big House*, *Christmas in the Quarters*. Clotee's voice provides young readers with a much needed, fresh perspective on slavery and plantation life just prior to the Civil War.

A Picture of Freedom

The Diary of Clotee, a Slave Girl, Belmont Plantation, Virginia, 1859

BY PATRICIA C. MCKISSACK

Ages 8-14 • 240 pages

Trade Edition: 978-0-545-24253-0 • \$12.99

Reinforced Library Edition: 978-0-545-26555-3 • \$16.99

SUMMARY

Clotee has the most wonderful, terrible secret. She understands that if she shares it with the wrong person, she will be beaten unmercifully. What is her secret? By listening, watching, and constantly practicing, Clotee has taught herself to read and write. This twelve-year-old slave girl, living in 1859 on a plantation in Virginia, possesses one of the most valuable of all abilities, and readily accepts the attendant risks because to her, literacy is as precious as life itself.

As purchased property, the slaves on Belmont plantation, including Clotee, her best friends Spicy and Hince, and her only family, Aunt Tee and Uncle Heb, have no more rights than the horses and cattle. Clotee discovers that their very lives belong to Mas'm Henley when she witnesses Uncle Heb's death. But there's something different about Clotee—a part of her that no one can reach. "Mas' Henley thinks he owns everything here at Belmont, but he don't own all of me—not really. He look at me every day but he cain't see what's in my head. He cain't own what's inside me. Nobody can."

When Miz Lilly hires a tutor, Clotee fears her job fanning young Mas' William will cease and she will be excluded from the lessons that have introduced her to learning. But Ely Harms proves to be more than just a tutor. William and Clotee advance not only in their literacy but also in their understanding of humanity. Because of Harms's belief in liberty and personal rights, Clotee finally succeeds in visualizing the meaning of freedom. More than thirty years later, William writes these thoughts to Clotee: "Through education Mr. Harms did more to destroy slavery than all the laws on the books could legislate."

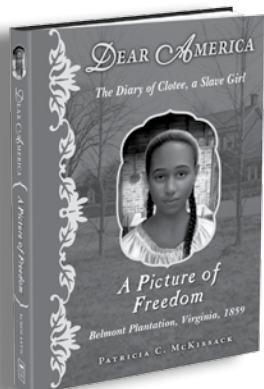
Patricia C. McKissack packs the pages of Clotee's diary with the intrigue and disloyalty of spies and traitors; the jubilant laughter of births, weddings and holidays; and the anguished weeping that accompanies murder and untimely death. But over and above all this, *A Picture of Freedom* is a book about the love of learning and a young girl searching for meaning in her life.

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. What is the most important word in Clotee's diary? Explain your choice.
2. After reading *A Picture of Freedom*, what is one thing you learned about slavery that you didn't know before?
3. Early in the diary, as Clotee describes Mas' Henley, Miz Lilly, and life on the plantation, she writes, "If mean was a tree, it would grow tall here at Belmont." What did she mean?
4. If you had been a slave on Belmont Plantation, would you rather have worked in the fields, in the big house, or in the stables? Defend your reasons.
5. How did the author of Clotee's diary let you see this twelve-year-old slave girl getting better and better at writing and reading from the beginning of the diary until the end?
6. Do you think it is worse to offer people gifts and rewards to tattle on their friends like Mas' Henley and Miz Lilly did, or to become a traitor like Missy and Hince when they informed on fellow slaves and on Mr. Harms? Does it matter that Hince's reasons appeared to be more important?
7. As an adult, William Henley wrote a letter to Clotee that said, "Through education Mr. Harms did more to destroy slavery than all the laws on the books could legislate." Why did William think that education is so powerful?
8. Many slave owners believed that the slaves were happy living as they did. One of the arguments that the masters used as proof was that the slaves sang and played music all the time. After reading Clotee's diary, do you believe this argument?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. Make a freedom quilt.
 - First, write about your vision of freedom. This will help you visualize your art for the quilt. Your description should be very specific and detailed.
 - Next, sketch out your idea on paper. Around the border, print a brief explanation of your depiction of freedom.
 - Now, transfer your sketch onto fabric, allowing an extra inch around the outside edge for sewing the pieces together. Don't forget to sign your name!
 - When the quilt is finished, display it proudly where everyone—including visitors to your school—may see it.
 - Publish the Quilt Chronicle, containing the stories of each patch, so that everyone can understand your conception of freedom.
2. In the diary, Uncle Heb told a spider-man story to Clotee and Spicy as they helped him in the garden. Go to the library and find some "Anansi the Spider" folktales from Africa. Select your favorite Anansi tale and create a dramatization which includes information on the background of the Anansi stories. When you have practiced your production, stage a performance for a class of younger children.
3. Patricia C. McKissack says that she used much of the research she and her husband did for their nonfiction book *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters* to help her write Clotee's diary. Read both books. Which book did you enjoy more? Why?
4. Using entries in Clotee's diary as a place to begin, find out more about the slaves' songs and dances. Is any of this music still popular today? Where did the songs and dances come from? Can you find any pictures of slaves singing and dancing? Are there any recordings of these songs available today? Prepare a class presentation on the Sights and Sounds of Slavery. The Library of Congress is a great source for information on slavery.
5. Although Clotee and her friends are characters the author invented, there are several real heroes from American history who are mentioned in the diary: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass. See what you can discover about one of these special people, and share your report with the class.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PATRICIA C. MCKISSACK is an award-winning author of many books for children and young adults. She is the author of two other Dear America books: *Color Me Dark* and *Look to the Hills*. She has also written many prestigious titles with her husband, Fredrick L. McKissack. They are also the authors of the series *The Clone Codes* with their son, John McKissack.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PATRICIA C. MCKISSACK

Readers of Clotee’s diary are treated to wonderful character development. As you turn the pages you can feel Clotee getting stronger; more self-assured; more committed; and more determined as the action unfolds. Yet, you have said, “Finding Clotee’s voice was the most difficult problem I had to overcome.” How did you discover Clotee’s voice and find your way into her character?

Clotee’s voice was difficult for me because I wanted her diary to sound authentic. I couldn’t have her vocabulary too sophisticated, yet I had to give her more command of words than an illiterate person might know in order to tell a good story. Finding that balance was challenging. I achieved it by allowing Clotee’s skills to grow throughout the book. If you’ll note, I sometimes had Clotee misspell words such as clumsy for clumsy; confusing words such as compression for expression, suspicion for suspicion, and abolitionists for abolitionists. Throughout I tried to show her growing, learning, developing her skills so her voice matures naturally.

You’ve written over 60 books for children, and you and your husband have coauthored some of the finest nonfiction for children. Still, *A Picture of Freedom* is your first full-length work of fiction. How did the writing of Clotee’s diary differ from the writing of your other books?

Writing Clotee’s diary wasn’t much different from some of the nonfiction books I’ve coauthored with my husband, Fredrick McKissack. I researched for this book the same way I would a nonfiction book. I wanted Clotee’s story to be believable and the only way to do that was to base it on historical facts. The difference between this story and a biography, for example, is that I was able to control all the action. In biography the events in a person’s life can’t be changed. In this fictional story, I could change events and create characters and invent a whole world in which to place them. I liked that!

How did the research you and your husband did for your nonfiction book *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters* help in the writing of Clotee’s diary?

I used all the “leftover” research from *Christmas in the Big House, Christmas in the Quarters* to create Clotee’s story. Our many trips to Virginia while researching the Christmas book helped me set the stage for Clotee’s diary. For example, I saw the two-story kitchen at Shirley Plantation and the live oak. Other elements are in both books: the Big Times, the use of songs to communicate, and the cake walk.

What did you enjoy most about writing Clotee’s diary?

The most enjoyable part of writing Clotee’s diary was creating a character and then watching her/him become a real person. Clotee, Hince, Aunt Tee, Spicy, the Henleys—all of the characters are fictional, but by the end of the book, they seemed very real to me.

What is one thing you hope young readers will take with them after reading *A Picture of Freedom: The Diary of Clotee, a Slave Girl*?

I hope young readers will realize that while the characters are fictional, the action is real. Slaves were forbidden to read or write, yet they risked their lives to learn. Clotee didn’t realize it at the time, but when she learned how to read and write, she had taken the first step toward the freedom she could not define. Why isn’t education valued to that extreme today?

What is one question you’d like to ask your readers after they have finished reading *A Picture of Freedom: The Diary of Clotee, a Slave Girl*?

Why do you think Clotee saw herself when she wrote FREEDOM at the end? When you write freedom what do you see?

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