

The Curse of Caste; Or the Slave Bride: A Rediscovered African American Novel

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Review

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Collins, Julia C., Andrews, William L., and Kachun, Mitch, eds.. *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride: A Rediscovered African American Novel*. Oxford University Press, \$22.00 hardcover ISBN 9780195301595

An African-American Life in Contemporary Fiction

A Lost Classic

Much to the benefit of literary scholars and students of antebellum American culture, William L. Andrews and Mitch Kachun have reissued Julia C. Collins's *The Curse of Caste; or The Slave Bride*, the earliest published novel by an African American woman yet to be discovered (xiv). As Frances Foster Smith notes in her foreword, this volume represents a literary triumph, for it not only makes accessible Collins's remarkable novel, which originally appeared in installments in *The Christian Recorder*, a newspaper published in Philadelphia by the African Methodist Episcopal Church, between February and September 1865, but it also models a kind of literary sleuthing necessary to reclaim and to understand the lives and letters of people who lived before us (vii-viii). As Smith notes, Andrews's and Kachun's well researched and provocative introduction points astute readers to sources, to questions, and to plausible interpretations so that they might conduct their own quests to research early African American print culture and to uncover lost texts (ix).

Andrews and Kachun concede that Collins left frustratingly little to document her life. Extant sources tell of a small-town school teacher residing in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, who, in April 1864, issued a literary manifesto titled *Mental Improvement* in *The Christian Recorder*. In this, and in a handful of subsequent articles, which Andrews and Kachun include in this reprint edition, Collins espouses cultural black nationalism, calling for improvement of the mind, . . . cultivation and purity of taste, and the acquisition of knowledge (122). *The Curse of Caste*, then, fits with this mission. As the editors point out, Collins's decision to publish in a major *black* venue, so as to reach an extensive

black audience, signaled her commitment to an African American women's fiction that would speak to the needs and aspirations of a black readership (xxxv-xxxvi).

Collins's novel, whose plot the editors summarize in their introduction, centers on Lina, a young quadroon who does not know her racial composition or her status as a slave, and Richard Tracy, the son of a wealthy New Orleans slave owner. Richard had imbibed anti-slavery principles during his travels in the North and, much to his father's chagrin, had come to denounce the institution. Despite his father's protestations, Richard stoutly adhered to his belief that it was wrong for one man to enslave another, and to keep in bondage a human being, having a mind and soul susceptible to improvement and cultivation (21). When Richard discovers his father owns Lina he enlists a friend, George Manville, to purchase her from Colonel Tracy. The couple moves to Connecticut, weds, and spends six blissful months together before Richard heads back to New Orleans to attempt a rapprochement with his father and before Lina dies in childbirth.

Colonel Tracy was no more receptive to Richard's antislavery views on this second visit and, in a fit of rage, disinherits and shoots him. George, who Collins quickly identifies to her readers as a villain whose heart was as black as the shadows of Hades, writes to a recuperating Richard that his wife and child died (22). A black nurse, Juno, raises the couple's daughter, Claire, to adulthood but keeps silent on the child's parentage and her racial identity. After graduating from a prominent female seminary, Claire takes a position as a governess in the home of a wealthy New Orleans planter—that of her grandfather, Colonel Tracy. Claire quickly charms the household, including Colonel Tracy, who moves to reconcile with his son, Richard. She also wins the heart of Count Sayvord, a visiting French nobleman. As Richard prepares to return to New Orleans, Dr. Singleton, a family friend, tells Count Sayvord of Claire's racial identity. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, Claire anxiously awaits Richard's arrival at the Tracy home.

Collins died of tuberculosis before she finished the last chapter of her novel. The editors provide two alternate endings, one which ends tragically and one which ends happily for Claire and Count Sayvord. Both endings are plausible, given internal evidence in the novel. Regardless of how today's readers re-create the novel's conclusion for themselves, the editors conclude, *The Curse of Caste*, so long silenced and forgotten, compellingly transposes the suspense of its unresolved ending to our own era in history, when interracial marriage, though

far more common than in Collins's day, remains highly controversial. How we decide that this novel might have ended in 1865, they note, may well be as a revealing indicator of how we believe the unresolved issues that Collins did not live to work out in fiction should be resolved in multiethnic America today (liii).

Few American novels, Andrews and Kachun point out, were serialized during a time of such fateful transition in U.S. history (xv). The novel spoke to the nation's central concerns and, as the editors suggest, continues to raise questions for contemporary readers. This reprint is a noteworthy literary achievement and a splendid piece of historical detection.

Sarah E. Gardner, associate professor of history at Mercer University, is the author of Blood and Irony: Southern White Women's Narratives of the Civil War, 1861-1937, published by the University of North Carolina Press. She is currently working on a book-length manuscript that examines the politics of southern literature and national book reviews during the first half of the twentieth century.