



Book Summaries by Deborah Vermaat February 2015

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***The House Girl* by Tara Conklin**

The novel opens in Lynnhurst, Virginia in 1852, when one of the main characters, a "house girl" named Josephine, is struck for no reason by her "Master," Robert Bell. In the clarity of that moment, Josephine decides to again risk running to escape her life as a slave.

The reader is immediately captured in this scene of confrontation where Josephine is described as *"gathering her disparate desires of 'simple things:' to eat a meal when hunger strikes, to smile without thinking, to wear a dress that fits her well, to place upon the wall a picture she had made, to love a person of her choosing (p.11)."* Every second of Josephine's life was owned by another who considered her his property. Even in her hours of sleep she could not find refuge. From this scene I found myself slipping into Josephine's psyche, trying to imagine how it might feel to own no minute to myself with no shoes to wear so I could run away from this tortured life of being tethered to people who were not of my blood or of my choosing.

The author cleverly tells the story of Josephine and her life on the Bell Plantation as the house girl who was taking care of not only the house, but the Missus of the estate, Lu Ann Bell. In alternating chapters, the author also tells the story of a modern day young lawyer, Lina Sparrow, who works at a top law firm in New York City. Lina is chosen by one of the senior law partners at the firm to work on a class action lawsuit for reparations for the institution of slavery in the United States on behalf of one of the firm's clients.

As Lina's search for a lead plaintiff in the reparations lawsuit broadens, she becomes aware of the conflict that has arisen in the art world about whether Lu Ann Bell or her house girl, Josephine Bell, had been the authentic painter of many works of art of the Antebellum South. As she traces the descendants of Josephine Bell in an attempt to find someone who can be the "face" of the reparations suit, she finds herself struggling with revelations about the dark stain of slavery in the United States through the story of Josephine and her oppressors, past and present.

The story of Josephine gives the reader a glimpse of life as a slave, and what it means to be held against your will and separated from those you love. The story of Lina coming to terms with how her life has been affected by her mother's absence in her life points to the need for all of us to be truthful about the events of our shared pasts across the racial divide. Unveiling lessons hidden in our respective pasts allows us resolve racial mistrust and misunderstandings and forge new paths to having compassionate conversations about how race informs our relationships and daily lives.

***The Dovekeepers* by Alice Hoffman**

This fictional novel cleverly tells the story about the siege that took place in 70 C.E. on Masada, a mountain in the Judean desert where nine hundred Jews held out for months against armies of Romans. I had heard about Masada, but as I read this book I was reminded about the sins of omission in my education around how history and culture shape our belief systems. The book is well written and told from the perspectives of four incredibly strong, courageous, and resourceful women. The stories of the hardships and heartbreaks these women bring to Masada are laced with historical accounts of the rise and fall of Jerusalem and the Roman Empire.

Only two women and five children were reported to have survived the massacre of Masada. Hoffman's story is based on the only known account of the siege, written by the historian Josephus. Hoffman creates portions of her story around the artifacts housed in the Yigal Yadin Museum at Masada. The book left me with a burning desire to visit Masada before I leave this life as the courage of a faithful people still rests upon the sanctuary of this fortress in the desert.

***Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do* by Claude M. Steele**

This book is one of a series of books called "Issues of Our Time" written by many of today's intellectual scholars, Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winners, economists, and other authors of influence. Dr. Steele is an American social psychologist and currently serves as the Provost at University of California, Berkeley. One of his areas of expertise is about a concept he coined, "stereotype threat," and its application to marginalized students' academic performance, especially in higher education settings.

Dr. Steele talks about when he first became aware that he was black when he was told he could not be hired as a caddy at a local golf course. After he had waited all day from six o'clock in the morning alongside his white counterparts, he was informed that they did not hire blacks as caddies. This followed other "benchmarks" in his life, such as not being able to swim in the local community pool except on Wednesday afternoons and being able to roller skate at the local rink only on Thursday nights. He realized, after years of similar experiences, he was living in a racialized world, ranked by race, and people who shared his racial identity were placed at the low end of the racial hierarchy.

If being black restricted him from places of recreation and from potential employment opportunities, he began to wonder what else might happen because of his racial identity. His life's work began to take form as he aged into the world of academia, where he saw many promising students of color with the same college entrance exam scores as their white counterparts struggle with academic expectations. He also observed female math students struggling more in comparison to their male counterparts. He postulated that how one evaluates their self-identity is in part based on stereotypes held by society, and people who are stereotyped negatively have difficulty coping with threats to their self image. The result: lower academic performance.

Stereotypes are widely held in American society, but the real danger of stereotypes is that we do not recognize the power they have to keep some down while raising others up. Stereotypes shape who we believe we can trust, who we should fear, who we can better get along with, who we want to share our neighborhood with, who we want on our team, who will be a better renter, mortgage holder, etc. Steele refers to stereotypes as existing in the air like clouds. We all live under these stereotype "clouds" and they can shape our lives and society.

Much of the book is about the different experiments he, and other social scientists, have conducted to test the theory of stereotype threat on different groups of people, based on stereotypes such as athletic ability, innate mathematical ability and general academic performance across gender and race. Steele asks the reader to consider the possibility that young children experience stereotype threat in ways that are potentially developmentally harmful to their academic performance. The narratives we are taught about gender can limit a person's potential throughout their lifetime. The same holds true of narratives about race. We can extend this line of thinking to other narratives on age, disability, first language use and the many other ways in which we carry multiple identities as a student and member of a complex society.

The book is laced with strategies for reducing stereotype threat and enhancing student performance. One of the ideas Steele postulates is for the core curriculum in schools to include in-depth material reflecting the history and perspective of multiple groups in American society. I have come to realize over the past few decades the value of being able to see ourselves represented in positive ways as partners in founding, shaping and influencing a shared history of our "United" States. If our history books and our electronic media reflect more honest recollections about how our great nation was built on the backs of some for the benefit of others, I believe the result would go a long way in protecting the self-worth of many and impart a renewed sense of belonging to a just society. This book should find its way onto your "must-read" library shelf, especially if you are an educator.

About the Author

Deborah V. Vermaat graduated from Rutgers University with a major in Sociology and a minor in Criminal Justice. She worked with a non-profit organization throughout the 1990's to provide training and resources in the field of conflict resolution for staff and students in schools in New Jersey and Delaware. She was an active member of the Camden County Human Relations Commission from 1993-2000, serving as Secretary/Treasurer, a member of the Education Committee and Bias Crimes/Crisis Intervention Team. She currently serves as a volunteer mediator for the Municipal Court Mediation Program in Camden County. Ms. Vermaat can be contacted via e-mail: debbie.vermaat@gmail.com