

BOOK CLUB KIT

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

As someone who's come of age in a time of both remarkable progress and intense backlash, I've often wondered how this period of American history will be remembered. But even more than that, over the years, I've become curious about other eras like this one—the volatile middle moments in between the most heroic, familiar high points of the American story. In the decades between the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the abolition of slavery with the Civil War, so many battles for freedom were fought and sometimes lost, yet remain widely unknown. When our collective memory leaves out those transitional moments, or sands down their rough edges in service of the American myth, too often the stories of people outside the halls of power—women, enslaved people, Black Americans—are lost in the process.

With my novel, *All We Were Promised*, I wanted to unearth the history of one such transformative middle moment, and capture the agency and ingenuity of the Black women and men who helped shape Philadelphia and the ascendant abolitionist movement in the 1830s. I started writing this story five years ago, back when I was working in downtown Philadelphia, and often visited historical landmarks on my lunch break. Of course, there were the familiar ones like the Liberty Bell, and Independence Hall where the Declaration was signed. But as I dug more into the city's history, and the history of the Black community and abolition there, I learned about one landmark I'd never heard of, and would never be able to visit: Pennsylvania Hall.

Pennsylvania Hall was a grand meeting hall built in 1838 with the support of an interracial coalition of abolitionists, and sat right in the shadow of all the Philadelphia monuments that symbolize the Revolution and freedom. But, just four days after opening, the hall was burnt to the ground by a pro-slavery mob that went on to ransack other parts of the city, which was home to the country's largest free Black community during that period.

Somehow, the story of Pennsylvania Hall has gone largely untold. Of course, for an aspiring historical fiction author like me, it was fertile ground for the imagination. As I worked to build a story around this largely unknown history, I imagined three young Black women who could offer a window into the social context that built and ultimately destroyed the hall, and into the many different shapes of Black life in antebellum Philadelphia, from the ballrooms of the elite to the household drudgery of working-class domestics, and even the urban slave quarters of a girl brought to the city in chains. I hoped to capture not only their struggle for freedom, but also the moments of joy and normalcy women like Charlotte, Nell, and Evie might have found in between the outbreaks of danger: the sewing of a beautiful dress, a quiet conversation with a dear friend, the taste of a delicious meal, and even the surprise of falling in love.

At its core, *All We Were Promised* is the story of their friendship, and how in learning to trust each other across lines of difference, women like them not only transformed their individual lives, but helped breathe life into a movement for freedom.

Together, they embody the historical echo of Toni Morrison's powerful exhortation: "If you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else."

In the midst of our own extraordinary times, I offer this book to you, and hope you come away inspired not only to shape your own freedom, but to find a way to bring others forward alongside you.

Thank you for reading. With gratitude,

Ashton Lattimore

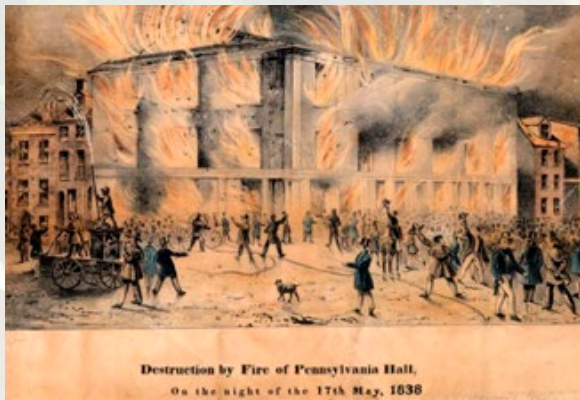


Photo © Joy Masi

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was your biggest takeaway from *All We Were Promised*? Talk about the thematic meaning and symbolism of the title. What is the “all” at the heart of this novel?
2. Talk about what freedom looks like for Charlotte, Nell, and Evie in Philadelphia. How does it live up to, or fall short of, what they imagined? What is each of them willing to risk to be—and remain—free?
3. Discuss the novel’s narrative style. What storytelling techniques, from foreshadowing to cliff-hanger chapter endings, kept you turning the pages? You may choose to share some of your favorite lines of dialogue, characterizations, or descriptions as well.
4. The White Oaks plantation is at the dark heart of *All We Were Promised*. Discuss the ways in which this landscape functions as a character, or even a character witness, in this novel. How do Charlotte and her father, as well as Evie and even her mistress, reckon with it?
5. What does *All We Were Promised* have to say about the nature of tragedy and triumph, betrayal and forgiveness, in a family? Between friends? In an entire nation?
6. This novel brings to life a time of social injustice and racial tensions in pre-Civil War America. Take a moment to reflect on how far we’ve come from that era until now—and/or the ways in which our country continues to struggle with the issue of race to this day.
7. Several of the characters in *All We Were Promised* have disagreements about the best way to push for social change and fight against unjust laws. What does the novel have to say about civil disobedience, lobbying, philanthropy, and other strategies, and how do those debates resonate in the present day?
8. *All We Were Promised* explores the experiences of women who defy societal expectations and norms. What challenges did the female characters in this novel face that their male counterparts did not?
9. If you had the chance to ask the author one question about *All We Were Promised*—about the inspiration for her story, the writing process, or her personal background—what might it be?
10. We are taught, as young readers, that every story has a moral, or a lesson about our humanity that is ultimately revealed. What did you learn about the world or yourself after reading this book? And do you have any questions that still remain?

THE HISTORY BEHIND THE NOVEL



Destruction by Fire of Pennsylvania Hall.
On the night of the 17th May, 1838

PENNSYLVANIA HALL

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF GREATER PHILADELPHIA

Pennsylvania gained a reputation as the birthplace of American abolition soon after the American Revolution, but that status caused unrest as debates over slavery grew contentious in the antebellum years.

The tension led to a number of riots, one of the most notable being the 1838 destruction of Pennsylvania Hall, a meeting place for antislavery groups on Sixth Street about two blocks north of Independence Hall.

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PHILADELPHIA FEMALE ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY

In December 1833, a group of 21 women—both white and Black—met in a Philadelphia schoolroom to found the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (PFASS). Within a year they had collected funds to run their group, subscribed to anti-slavery publications, established a school for African Americans, and begun to promote the boycott of goods manufactured by slaves. They also began lobbying for emancipation, collecting thousands of signatures and sending petitions to Congress. In 1836, the PFASS held its first fair, selling baked goods, needlework, art pieces, and pottery with anti-slavery designs to raise funds for the abolition movement and the emerging Underground Railroad.

ACT FOR THE GRADUAL ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

MOUNT VERNON

The Gradual Abolition Act of 1780, the first extensive abolition legislation in the western hemisphere, was passed by the Pennsylvania General Assembly on March 1, 1780.

The act permitted Pennsylvania slaveholders to keep the enslaved individuals they already owned unless they failed to register them annually. At the same time, the act provided for the eventual freedom of individuals who were newly born into slavery.

MEET THE CHARACTERS

CHARLOTTE VAUGHN

(goes by "Walker")

Previous name was Carrie Murphy. 19 years old. Tawny brown skin, wide-set mahogany eyes, coily black hair. Once an enslaved lady's maid, now a reluctant housemaid to her father James and a gifted seamstress. Rebellious but guarded, with a strong sense of duty. Inspired by Cosette from *Les Misérables*.

ALEXANDER MARION

Early 20s. Golden-brown skin, bushy red-brown hair, tall. Up-and-coming journalist and civil rights advocate from a wealthy catering family, writes for *The Pennsylvania Freeman*. Longtime friend of Nell. Inspired by historical figures like Robert Purvis and James Forten, along with Laurie from *Little Women* and Marius from *Les Misérables*.

EVIE MURPHY/ JACKSON

16 years old. Acorn-colored skin, dark, deep-set eyes, button nose. Enslaved lady's maid to Kate. Clever, quick-tempered, and determined. Inspired by Kizzy from *Roots*.

NELL GARDNER

21 years old. Short and slight, with deep brown skin and cottony black hair. Open-hearted, activist-minded, and organized, but somewhat naive. Daughter of a wealthy family, and burgeoning abolitionist with the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Inspired by historical figures like Sarah Mapps Douglass and Margaretta Forten, and Jo from *Little Women*.

JAMES VAUGHN

Previous name was Jack Murphy. Early 40s. Cream-colored skin, mahogany eyes, wavy brown hair. Once an enslaved carpenter, now a white-passing furniture-maker. Ambitious, cautious, and private. Inspired by Jean Valjean from *Les Misérables*.

DARCEL BOUDIER

Late 40s/early 50s. Deep bronze skin, round balding head, short and stocky. Cook and aspiring caterer, immigrated from Haiti as a child as an enslaved refugee from the revolution. Gruff, perceptive, and ambitious. Inspired by historical figures Peter Augustine and Robert Bogle.

KATE (JACKSON) MURPHY

Nearly 30 years old. Pale skin, stringy brown hair, grayish eyes. Former mistress of White Oaks plantation and wife of Elias Murphy, now penniless widow posing as a never-married woman. Keeps Evie as a slave. Needy and manipulative. Inspired by Missy Anne from *Roots* and Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

DARCEL'S BUTTERMILK BISCUITS

INGREDIENTS

2½ cups all-purpose flour
2 tablespoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon sugar
8 tablespoons unsalted butter, chilled
1 cup buttermilk, plus extra as needed
3 tablespoons salted butter, melted to brush over finished biscuits

INSTRUCTIONS

Cut the unsalted butter into roughly 1-inch cubes and place them in the freezer for at least 20 minutes. Preheat the oven to 425°F.

Combine the flour, baking powder, sugar, and salt into a large mixing bowl.

Add the chilled butter to the flour mix. Transfer to a food processor, and pulse up to 8 times, until the mixture resembles rough crumbs. (To skip the food processor and do this the old-fashioned way, you can cut the butter into the flour using a fork, a pastry cutter, or even a butter knife.)

Return the mixture to the bowl and pour in the buttermilk. Start with 1 cup and stir with a fork. If needed, add more buttermilk, about 1 tablespoon at a time, until all of the flour mix is incorporated into the dough. Stir until the dough forms a slightly sticky ball.

Turn the dough out onto a floured surface and use a floured rolling pin to roll it into a rough rectangle, about an inch thick. Fold it over and gently roll it down again. Repeat 6 times.

Gently roll out the dough some more, so that it forms a rectangle. Cut dough into biscuits using a floured biscuit cutter. Use any scraps to form a new rectangle and cut additional biscuits.

Place biscuits on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper, and place in oven. Bake until golden brown, approximately 10 to 15 minutes.

Melt the salted butter in a saucepan and brush the melted butter over the finished biscuits once they're out of the oven.

