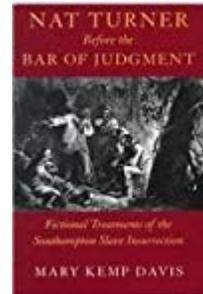




Mary Kemp Davis. *Nat Turner Before the Bar of Judgement: Fictional Treatments of the Southampton Slave Rebellion.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999. xiv + 298 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2249-5.



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Waiting For Nat

Perhaps it is not surprising that writers of fiction are as drawn to the lives of slave rebels as writers of nonfiction are discouraged from undertaking their biographies. Historians for the most part prefer literate subjects who leave behind diaries and letters and documents that may be used to reconstruct their lives and behavior. Consequently, while political figures like Thomas Jefferson have inspired occasional works of fiction, such as Max Byrd's *Jefferson* (1993), they have inspired more scholarly biographies and monographic treatments than even the most intrepid bibliographer can count.

Conversely, enslaved revolutionaries pose obvious problems for even the most intrepid researcher. Although militant slave leaders tended to be literate, few left behind much in the way of a documentary trail. Their words come down to us second-hand, filtered through the biased pens of court reporters, county magistrates, and rural attorneys like Thomas Gray. Because so little is known about much of their early lives, bond rebels lend themselves to fictional recreations; as novelist William Styron said of Nat Turner, it was an inviting task to concoct the life of "a man about whom so little was known"

(p. 243). Gabriel enjoyed fictional cameos in Marion Harland's *Judith: A Chronicle of Old Virginia* (1883), Mary Spear Tiernan's *Homoselle* (1881), and Gore Vidal's *Burr* (1973) and finally got his own novel in Arna Bontemps' powerful *Black Thunder* (1936). Denmark Vesey, or his fictional son Dred, was reborn in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* (1856) and John O. Killens' disappointing modern novella, *Great Gittin' Up Morning* (1972). Toussaint Louverture was richly drawn in Madison Smartt Bell's *All Souls' Rising* (1995). But it is General Nat, who transformed angry talk into a bloody revolt, who truly stalks the pages of American fiction. In this sophisticated and thoughtful study, Mary Kemp Davis, a Professor of English at Florida A & M University, demonstrates how fictional recreations of Turner have changed from 1856 to 1986.

In fact, Davis's story begins not with the 1856 publication of George James's *The Old Dominion*, but rather with an ingenious discussion of how Governor John Floyd made a conscious attempt to control the public discourse regarding Turner's revolt. Aware of the way in which an Albany newspaper had painted Gabriel in

heroic terms, the governor hurried to impose his version of “this murderous Bandit” (18) on the public record before northern abolitionists could claim him as one of their own. Shortly thereafter, attorney Thomas Gray published in pamphlet form his purported interview with the jailed Turner. As Davis points out, Virginia law did not allow enslaved defendants to testify at their own trials; the words hastily scribbled down by Gray—who clearly added his own editorial comments—unfortunately comprise the best extant window into Turner’s motivation. Indeed, Davis’s discussion of Turner’s trial and the mixed reception of Gray’s pamphlet is far richer and more insightful than that provided by Stephen Oates in what remains the standard nonfiction account, *The Fires of Jubilee* (1975).

Although southern writers trotted out numerous novel-length rebuttals to Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), General Nat came off surprisingly well in nineteenth-century fiction. He first emerged in G.P.R. James’s *The Old Dominion* (1856). An Englishman fond of Sir Walter Scott’s genteel historical romances, James regarded unwaged labor as inimical to southern capitalist development. This is not to say that James was a closet Garrisonian; Bessy, his strong-willed heroine, comes to embrace both masculine guidance and Virginia tradition. But as in the case of Pauline Carrington Rust Bouve’s *Their Shadows Before* (1899), Turner emerges more as a charismatic preacher than a sexually-confused murderer.

That depiction, curiously, appeared only in the allegedly-more enlightened mid-twentieth century. Of all these accounts, it is William Styron’s 1967 award-winning novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, that generated the most popular attention. (Kempe’s extensive footnotes in this chapter reveal that Styron also generated more scholarly attention than he probably desired.) Styron’s work was the only account to generate a book-length rebuttal, *Ten Black Writers Respond* (1968), as well as a lively exchange of letters between Eugene Genovese and Vincent Harding in the *New York Review of Books*. In the best section of the book, Davis suggests that Styron’s characterization reveals more about his own inner conflicts than it does about antebellum Virginia. Reread today, thirty-two years after its publication, one is both impressed anew at Styron’s often-brilliant artistry of prose and aghast at his bizarre sexual imagery. Given the traditional assertion that what slave rebels really wanted was neither freedom nor justice but white women, Styron, a native Virginian, should have understood that his depiction of Turner as a bachelor whose sexual longing for Margaret Whitehead ended only with her murder was

sure to draw fire. According to Styron, Turner spent the morning before his execution fantasizing about making love with Margaret while, ahem, masturbating “with tender stroking motions (247).”

Perhaps wisely, Davis declines to wade into the often intemperate debate that followed, except to note the curious fact that Styron, who openly embraced Stanley Elkins’ concept of slavery as a totalitarian system, was vigorously defended by Eugene Genovese, whose impressive body of scholarship has revealed little use for the concentration camp theory of slavery. In some ways, Styron was lucky in his critics, most of whom revealed even less of an understanding of American slavery than he did. (Critic Mike Thelwell, for example, took Styron to task for not repeating the myth that Virginia planters deliberately bred their slaves for resale to the lower South.) Styron, however, played into their hands by suggesting that so little documentation regarding Turner existed that one could read over every single extant document in a single afternoon, a theory that was given the lie in 1971 when Henry Tragle published his massive compilation of documents, *The Southampton Slave Revolt of 1831*. At the very least, Tragle’s digging showed how wrong Styron was when he insisted in *The Nation* that “not a shred of contemporary evidence” proved that Turner had a wife. (The Richmond *Whig* mentioned Nat’s marriage to Cherry, who with their son Gilbert Turner was sold away after the revolt.)

Readers accustomed to historical monographs may find literary criticism an acquired taste. Davis’s characters are discussed in the present tense, as if they yet live—which perhaps they do, as fictional characters. Davis, whose prose is lively and often witty, occasionally lapses into jargon; this historian, at least, had no idea what an “Ur-text” was and was mystified by the alliterative “triangulate the trial trope.” Moreover, many historians will wish that Davis paid more attention to context. Only in passing, for example, does Davis mention that Bouve’s novel appeared only three years after the infamous Plessy v. Ferguson decision. Other pertinent information is buried in the footnotes, which, however, are correctly placed at the bottom of each page. Still, one should not have to consult the notes to discover that Bouve was born in Little Rock to Virginia parents and privately educated in Luray, Virginia, which certainly had an impact on her depiction of General Nat.

These are minor quibbles. Unlike Maggie Sale’s recent discussion of fictional treatments of seagoing slave revolts, *The Slumbering Volcano* (1997), which was marred

by endless mistakes, Davis is as comfortable with historiography as she is with literary criticism. As Davis's fine study makes clear, Nat has not yet received his fictional due; perhaps Davis should next try her eloquent pen at a Turner novel!

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