



# Wolf by the Ears

*Ann Rinaldi*

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Harriet Hemings has always been happy in the comfortable, protected world that is Monticello. She's been well treated there; no one has ever called her a slave. But that is what she is, a slave of a man who wrote the Declaration of Independence. And there are rumors that she might be more than Thomas Jefferson's slave - she might be his daughter.

Now Harriet has to make a choice - to run to freedom or to stay. If she stays, she'll remain a slave. But how can she choose freedom, if it means leaving behind her family, her race, and the only home she's ever known?

## Wolf by the Ears Details

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# From Reader Review *Wolf by the Ears* for online ebook

## Taylor says

A YA book imagining the diary of Harriet Hemings, confronting emotions and ideas around her family's origins, slavery, racism, freedom. Read this one for book club, and it was fine.

I give Rinaldi a lot of props for writing a book asserting the Hemings-Jefferson connection long before many historians were able to (hell, some still aren't), at a time when suggesting it was still highly controversial. She also writes the issues to a YA-level rather deftly - she seems to know the audience well, and tackles complicated, adult issues in a way that wants younger readers to understand without talking down to them, but also doesn't give them more than they can handle. You can also tell she really did her research.

Still, it feels iffy to me for a white woman to write on the complexities of being biracial and passing, no matter how well-researched. When I gravitate towards a book of my own choosing on these topics, I'll likely choose Nella Larsen's *Passing*, which I hear excellent things about.

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## Ellen says

Despite liking *Time Enough for Drums* and *Hang a Thousand Trees with Ribbons*, I could not trudge my whole way through *Wolf by the Ears*. In this book, Rinaldi attempts to tell the tale of Harriet Hemmings, presumed illegitimate daughter of Thomas Jefferson and one of his slaves, Sally. It seemed as if she tried too hard to dance around the controversy of Thomas Jefferson being a respected father of our country and yet a slave holder who apparently was an adulterer with his "servant." The book also emphasized strongly that the slaves were not called such in polite society, but rather servants. I was uncomfortable with a scene that showed an attempted rape of Harriet as well and never truly understood why that was in there other than to perhaps push her to seek freedom, although it didn't seem to have that effect on the character in a defined way. The book was supposed to draw us in to Harriet's struggle whether or not to pursue freedom away from Monticello, but I felt removed from it because the character vacillated far too rapidly for me to understand what she was thinking.

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## Heather says

Heather Stewart  
Historical Fiction

This is the story of Harriet Hemings who believed she was the illegitimate child of Thomas Jefferson. She is a slave at Monticello but is treated very kindly by the "master". Her mother will not say outright that he is their father. When Harriet turns 21 she will be given her freedom papers and allowed to leave there forever as a free woman. She doesn't want to leave Monticello but she knows that if she stays and Mr. Jefferson dies she may be sold and continue to be a slave. She decides that she will "pass" when she leaves which means she will pretend that she is a white person. Her skin is so pale that it will not be a problem for her. This was a great book that detailed the time period really well. It helped me to understand how things were for slaves back then.

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## Eden says

Harriet Hemings is a slave of Thomas Jefferson's and has been all her life. But she's been well cared for, educated and not worked very hard. In a few short years she'll be 21 and that means she will be free. Harriet doesn't want to go, doesn't want to leave her home. How could she? She loves it there, but Harriet soon realizes taking her freedom will be for the best. And so she begins to prepare for her leaving when she turns 21.

This is a historical fiction book about Harriet Hemings, who historians believe is a child Thomas Jefferson had with his one slave, Sally Hemings.

I've read one other book by this author and thought it was quite a good book. I liked this just as much. The author was able to take a story of a real person from history and mixed fiction along with it and it worked well. Harriet has a very strong voice. Her emotions are right there, all out there for you to feel. She is white and African, she is confused. Is Thomas Jefferson really her father? She doesn't want to leave her home and yet she knows she has to. She has to leave everything behind to fit into the white world.

I feel that I was able to relate to Harriet, being of a mixed heritage myself, sometimes it can be confusing and hard to find your place. Sometimes you think there is no place for you, that you cannot be yourself. I related to Harriet's feelings and her confusion. But, Harriet was strong, too. She had courage and no matter what she would be always Harriet Hemings.

The book was very good. If you like historical fiction, I definitely recommend it.

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## Lisa says

3 1/2 stars. Not the most compellingly told story, but a totally engrossing part of American History. I think I spent as much time searching and reading on the internet for more information as I did reading the actual novel. This is the fictionalized story of one of the real children of Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemmings. They had six children together, but he never publicly acknowledged the relationship, for obvious reasons. These children were only 1/4 black, Sally's father was white. They had the choice of leaving Monticello and 'passing' as white as long as they never disclosed their heritage. A terrible choice that many have struggled to make throughout history.

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## grace says

"We have the wolf by the ear and feel the danger of neither holding or letting him loose."

- Thomas Jefferson, Monticello, 18 July 1824

To me, this book was kind of inspirational. I was impressed with how strong Harriet was as a character. I loved that she was such a meaningful female protagonist and that her devotion to Jefferson came so naturally. Jefferson was a very intriguing character, especially since history has a way of immortalizing our presidents and "famous people", it was good to see him as a person who made mistakes and had flaws and was "real". This book made historical events and moments in time that are just moments to us and turned

them into something that actually had an impact on how people saw their world then. If that made any sense at all.... Anyway, I loved how real Harriet's struggle felt and how all her choices really affected her outcome. And truthfully, one of the main reasons I enjoyed this book is because I kind of fell in love with Jefferson's Monticello and the harmony that surrounded it.

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## **Massanutten Regional Library says**

**Lisa, North River patron, June 2018, 4 stars:**

This work of historical fiction is told from the viewpoint of Harriet Hemings, daughter of Sally Hemings (and very likely fathered by Thomas Jefferson). I was fascinated by the irony of Harriet being a slave at Monticello while also very likely being the daughter of the owner of the estate. Throughout the book, Harriet longs to know if Thomas Jefferson is her father; she thinks of him as being very accomplished and wise but also quite kind and reasonable in his treatment of his slaves. As Harriet approaches the age of 21, she has a difficult decision to make--should she remain at Monticello to be near her mother and other loved ones, try to pass as white in society (which would mean marrying a white man and leaving behind her family and heritage), or make her way in the world as a young black woman? The story allows us to learn of the conflicting emotions and thoughts which weigh so heavily on her mind as adulthood approaches.

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## **Casey says**

Very well written and so sad that Harriet Hemings was treated as a slave though she was mostly white. It just shows how far the 'masters' of the time had convinced themselves that slavery was right. They were such hypocrites. Saying white blood was the best, while many of the white men were sleeping with their slaves and producing children who were a part of both worlds but belonging to neither. It's horrid. But the book was great.

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## **Leslie says**

This book is a historical fiction book about a slave girl, Harriet Hemmings, at Monticello (Thomas Jefferson's plantation). She is the slave daughter of Thomas Jefferson. (The author says that Thomas Jefferson had several children with a slave woman after his wife died, but I haven't looked into history to know if this is true or not.)

The author creates a very interesting character in Thomas Jefferson. He is portrayed as someone who does not like slavery or even believe in it, but he owns many slaves. He inherited about 130 of them when his father-in-law died. He is portrayed as a man of principles yet lives as a hypocrite. He says, slavery is holding a wolf by the ears, you can't let it go or you can't continue to hold it. I respect Thomas Jefferson very much, and it is hard to understand his position and motives. I don't know what to think of the man, except what I know to be true. He is one of the founding fathers of this country and he and others risked their lives to provide me with the freedoms that I enjoy everyday.

One of my favorite quotes in the book is when Harriet's mother told her the following: "Times get bad. Sooner or later, for everybody. Those times all you can do is just go on lighting the fire and keeping the

family fed and keeping everybody from killing each other. There's more of those days than I like to tell you about. Seems like you are always losing. But you're not. You keep lighting the fire and feeding the children and stopping everybody around you from killing each other and you're winning." The reason why I can relate so much is because sometimes the only thing you can do in life is simply endure. If you can endure you are succeeding. That is just part of life. Enduring counts for a lot in the end.

This was a pleasant read. I really like the main character, the courage and strength that she shows in the end. She does what she does for all the slave women before her, as difficult as it is. I am just not sure what to think of the portrayal of Thomas Jefferson.

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### **Deb says**

This was my first Ann Rinaldi book. It was sooo good that I have gone on to read every book of hers I can find. It is written with youth in mind. Many of her books tell the back story to famous men's lives through their daughters.

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### **Olivia says**

I didn't *love* it, but I liked it! Rinaldi is basically always good. :D

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### **Gale says**

#### **ESCAPING THE VELVET TRAP**

Narrated in the first person by Harriet, daughter of the slave, Sally Hemings of Monticello, this story presents serious historical fiction at the YA level. Meticulously researched by author Rinaldi--who excels in this genre, the book was inspired by a quote from the author of the acclaimed Declaration of Independence. Jefferson himself agonized over the institution of Slavery, describing it as a wolf by the ears, which the country could not handle safely, yet without which the South could not survive economically. At no point in this novel does the Master admit to fathering five children by his devoted slave, Sally. Nor does anyone find even a scrap of paper in his extensive library admitting a relationship other than "Owner" status on his part. So why then does 19-year old Harriet feel in her heart that he is-or might be-her father?

Sally has planned, worked and dreamed for years of her daughter's departure from Monticello--the only world the girl has ever known. Still will not leave as a freed slave, who would not be allowed to remain in Virginia, but rather as a privileged white girl. She needs much preparation to PASS into the white world with safety; of course this means turning her back on her home and family--calling for great sacrifice on the part of both proud mother and brave daughter. This is what some light-skinned slaves have attempted, but it requires constant vigilance against slips of behavior, language and tremendous internal fortitude.

How can naïve Harriet deny her own heritage and ignore the degrading conditions of her fellow slaves who are tortured or humiliated in the white world? How can she endure total separation from her beloved mother, Sally, and her dear old Mammy Ursula--with her good (and bad) voodoo?

No matter where Harriet will find herself in the white world--even with her dear protector who has promised to help her escape and Pass--she will carry intense memories of Jefferson and Monticello. What is the exact price of Freedom? Alas, she will have the rest of her life to ponder this philosophical dilemma in her secret heart. How can she live a lie, even to save her virtue and to make a good life for her future children? How can she turn her back on those dearest to her? What is the best way she can serve the cause of her enchained people in Virginia? Will the Master let her depart without one private word of paternity, for her ears alone? This book is very interesting, with serious sociological matters for students to ponder, either individually or as a class during Black History Month. Harriet's story will haunt readers' understanding of the root of the Civil War.

(October 25, 2011. I welcome dialogue with teachers.)

Was this review

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### **Jaclynn says**

This was my favorite book in the 5th grade. Historical fiction about one of the light skinned children of Thomas Jefferson and slave, and her "passing" in the white world.

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### **Mara says**

**Cover Blurb:** It looks dated, the girl in the front does not at all look how I imagine Harriet. She looks more Hispanic or Latino descent than African; her features aren't right.

**What I Liked:** Like all of Rinaldi's female characters, Harriet is a strong protagonist, doesn't have an attitude, is intelligent, and feminine without being weak. I was able to appreciate her struggle, thus her indecision didn't get as annoying as it could have.

**What I Disliked:** While I liked Harriet well enough, she was perhaps the least "connectable" out of all the protagonists in Rinaldi's books that I have read. It wasn't because of her situation or anything like that; there was just a slight something lacking in her personality. A slight something that I aggravatingly cannot entirely pinpoint, but it was there, making Harriet just slightly less than she could have been.

**Believability:** Rinaldi does her research, of course; it's part of why I love her books so much. And Rinaldi presents very believable reasons for, if Thomas Jefferson had children by one of his slaves, why he couldn't claim them.

**Writing Style:** Good, as always. I liked how it was told in a loose-journal style. There weren't daily entries, but monthly ones, with just the month and the year. And never once did the story feel like it was slandering Thomas Jefferson - Rinaldi says in her Author's Note that that is not the intention of the story, and I believe her. It felt like a work of fiction; an interesting "what if" that is possible, but there is not 100% historical backing for it, and the Author acknowledges this. The views and opinions expressed in the story also felt like the characters' opinion, and not something the Author was forcing her characters to voice for her. The only negative thing I have to say about writing choice is the pace of the story. It was kind of slow, there was no real climax. Taking Liberty is somewhat similar, and I wish the pacing of Wolf by the Ears had been more

like that; then it would have been better.

**Content:** Blunthead tries to rape Harriet (pg. 88-89), but nothing comes of it, and the Author doesn't offer details about the event.

**Conclusion:** As said earlier, there is nothing terribly climatic about it. But it's realistic. I do, however, wish the story was longer, and had more build-up.

**Recommended Audience:** Fans of Ann Rinaldi, naturally, and consequently historical fiction fans. This is a girl read, though guys who don't mind dress descriptions and the like might like it as well.

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### **Jane Irish Nelson says**

I read this some time ago, and enjoyed it then. But unfortunately, it did not hold up on re-reading. Perhaps partly because I know more about the history it is (supposedly) based on — and perhaps also because in the years since it was written new discoveries have been made regarding Thomas Jefferson and the Hemings family.

The story is told from Harriet Hemings point of view, in a journal given her by Jefferson, and covers the last two of three years she lives at Monticello. The author is using Harriet's situation to explore the topic of alienation, but Harriet comes across more as an angsty teenager. I had a hard time grasping the characters of any of the people in the book, even Harriet. And several of them are portrayed in ways, or do things, that are counter to the historical record. I had hoped to be able to recommend this book as a companion to Jefferson's Sons, but I can't.

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### **Katie Hanna says**

*"T'se part of this place. But you ain't.*

*"You, chile, is part of somethin' else. Somethin' new. Out there.*

*"Go. However you wants. For all of us."*

EXCUSE ME WHILE I GO CURL UP IN A CORNER AND CRY.

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### **Jonathan Bradley says**

Um, it was good. It felt much quieter than the other books I've read; in terms of plot it was very placid, with almost all the action taking place inside Harriet's head. This was a feature of *A Break With Charity*, as well, but it shares with *Time Enough For Drums* an ever-precipitating social crisis unfolding in the background.

It would be worthwhile, I think, to read this alongside *The Hemingses of Monticello* — which I haven't read.



At times I found myself unable to trust the history quite so readily as I did with *Drums* and *Charity*; I think Rinaldi's portrayal of Jefferson was fascinating, but I don't know whether it was accurate. Rinaldi wanted to take some gloss off him, but was she still swayed by his gargantuan presence in American cultural life? Slavery for Harriet and her mother was portrayed very gently, and while I don't know if this is accurate (hence the value of the Gordon Reed book as an adjunct), but sometimes it seemed very cozy. There were moments that I thought it was quite apparent the book was written by a white woman — though, to her credit, Rinaldi's replication of AAVE is much improved in this one; she gets the syntax wrong in *Charity* or *Drums* (I forget which).

I wonder if the story would have worked better without the large shadow of the Jefferson and Hemings relationship looming over it? The emotional arc of the story is excellently drawn and would have been thus were it about an entirely fictional slave woman on an imagined early 19th century plantation in Virginia. I suppose Jefferson's presence allows Rinaldi to explore the tension between his philosophies and his private life, but I'm well aware of those tensions, and I don't think Wolf added anything to them. Then again, were I thirteen and being introduced to these ideas for the first time, I might be more invigorated by their novelty.

So... very enjoyable, but not as uncomplicatedly so as the other two I've read. *A Break With Charity* is probably my favorite thus far.

Also, despite there always being A Boy, he was more marginal to this one than in either of the others: a (very charming) means to an end who appears briefly and even might not be an ongoing part of Harriet's life for long after the novel's last page. The men who play a much larger role (other than the ever-present TJ) are big brother Beverley — who reminded me a lot of the big brother in *Drums* — and the slave gardener Thruston, who seems most significant as a romantic interest that can never develop even into a initial stage, precisely because the characters lack the liberty to properly consider it, let alone pursue it.

[orig. from comments]

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### **Rebekah Higley says**

I enjoyed it.

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### **Mary says**

Interesting read; especially after having read *America's First Daughter* last year. Different perspectives of part of the same story.

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### **Bridget R. Wilson says**

Written before the conclusive DNA testing that proved Thomas Jefferson did have children with his slave Sally Hemings, Rinaldi's book explores the struggle of Sally's daughter Harriet to understand who she is. She is a light-skinned slave. There are rumors that the master is her father. Her freedom is guaranteed at age 21, but does she dare to take it? Her options are to stay on the plantation where she surely will be married to another slave, to leave the plantation as a free nigra, or to leave the plantation and pass as white.

If you're interested in the controversy over Jefferson and Sally Hemings, this is a riveting read.

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