



The Sea Captain's Wife: A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century

Martha Hodes

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"What a terrific book! I could hardly put it down....A story of triumph over adversity."?James McPherson

Award-winning historian Martha Hodes brings us into the extraordinary world of Eunice Connolly. Born white and poor in New England, Eunice moved from countryside to factory city, worked in the mills, then followed her husband to the Deep South. When the Civil War came, Eunice's brothers joined the Union army while her husband fought and died for the Confederacy. Back in New England, a widow and the mother of two, Eunice barely got by as a washerwoman, struggling with crushing depression. Four years later, she fell in love with a black sea captain, married him, and moved to his home in the West Indies. Following every lead in a collection of 500 family letters, Hodes traced Eunice's footsteps and met descendants along the way. This story of misfortune and defiance takes up grand themes of American history?opportunity and racism, war and freedom?and illuminates the lives of ordinary people in the past. 47 illustrations.

The Sea Captain's Wife: A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century Details

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From Reader Review The Sea Captain's Wife: A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century for online ebook

Meryl Landau says

I loved this book. Reads like historical fiction of the 19th century working class even though it's a book of history because she had such detailed letters to work with she makes the characters come alive. Highly recommended.

Janilyn Kocher says

Format: Paperback

A captivating read about a New England woman who moved to Mobile right before the Civil War and ultimately married a man from the Caribbean and was partially ostracized from her family because of it. The story has many twists and turns. I like the details about the extended family dynamics and the epilogue. It's a great piece of American history that includes politics, family, economic struggles, and racial divide.

Betsy says

This is a somewhat speculative biography based on letters written by the subject. Unfortunately no letters exist that were sent in reply. There were also periods during which no letters exist, leaving the author to do a lot of speculating as to what actually happened. Although an interesting read, due to the missing information the author should probably have taken a slightly different focus and included more historical information about the era in which the woman lived. Some was included but if this was written more as a sociologic study than a biography I think it would have been better.

Noel says

My 2nd great grandmother was a sea captain's wife and I read the book to see how this researcher plotted her story. I think there is a great danger in falling in love with your own research to the point of turning the story into something that is too long and overly detailed. There were certain writing elements that were very well done, however the actual story of this woman at times got lost in the surrounding details.

GoldGato says

She was a poor female born into a hardscrabble New England family in 1831. Little did she know that she would go on to live a life that would later be examined by a 21st-century author via letters handed down as family heirlooms.

I'm Nobody! Who are you?

Are you - Nobody - too?

(Emily Dickinson)

Eunice Richardson had a harsh early life. Her father was an alcoholic who abandoned his family so he could go live up the way with another woman and his new bag of children. Mother Lois was strong and kept the family together, so Eunice grew up with that Yankee fortitude and spirit which allowed her to get through the years of working in mills and following her working class carpenter husband to the South...just as the American Civil War erupted. Her already rough lifestyle took a downward turn from there, leading her to eventually move back North, even though she had to cross enemy lines. Poverty took hold as she had to compete with the newly arrived Irish who worked for less, thus driving down pay for the local girls.

In time, Eunice married a man of African descent and went to go live in the Cayman Islands. Extraordinary, really. She simply up and married a man of colour at a time when such a thing was simply not done. The poor white woman became wealthier, but became separated by her family by distance and racism.

He may go to that place where they buy brimstone by the wholesale.

"I discovered Eunice in a box of letters." That is the best way to describe the reason Martha Hodes wrote this book, as she completed a years-long quest to find out more about this woman who defied convention, yet was as ordinary as they came. Eunice and her family enjoyed writing letters throughout their lives and it is the overall family history we get to see because of this. At the same time, one of the most momentous historical events of all time was occurring which makes Eunice's adventures even more fascinating.

The amazing detective work of the author was much appreciated by me as I quietly went through the book. I say, 'quietly', because there is tragedy within the family and there is a grudging respect for what these people had to endure just to get through life. *If nothing happens* was a constant phrase within the letters, showing how fragile life could really be.

But mostly, I thought about cemeteries. Tombstones that can no longer be read because of erosion. Shifting earth that causes those same blocks to fall over, never to rise again. When do the next generations stop visiting the dead? Are there any descendants left to even know about the forgotten graves? Without letters of correspondence, how can someone be remembered from days gone by? Perhaps it is better to end one's days at sea. Perhaps.

I admit it took me a bit to get into the book, and I didn't always agree with the author's conclusions, but it was an adventure nevertheless and a job well done.

Book Season = Autumn (forgotten graves)

Janellyn51 says

I found this book incredibly interesting, but at the same time kind of dry. I thought maybe the author repeated things too much, in order to flesh the book out. However, it was well researched. The book did much to explain how things were in New England during the industrial revolution. You don't tend to think in terms of the first settlers having so much land, and so many kids that as parcels get split up upon death and bequeathed to thier lot of children...that by the time the mid 1800's rolled around, people didn't have much to leave kids and unless girls married well....it wasn't pretty, particularly for a widow and two kids. The civil

war stuff was interesting, and I guess it's just not that surprising how a family would react to a white girl marrying a black guy. I for one, am happy that poor old Eunice got a few years of being let off the poverty hook and being happy and content.

Pat says

I liked the narrative when the author used the writings of Eunice Connolly to tell the story. It did not have enough of the race she undertook, which was the reason I read the book, so that was a little disappointing. It is a great reference on the life of a woman in that location and time frame.

Mary says

Liked the book, forgot to write why.

bob says

Very interesting story. If you like history you will enjoy this one.

Crystal says

The author added historic excruciating detail between the letters written by Eunice & her family. I tried, but I just couldn't finish the book.

James says

An interesting history but a bit thin in spots, the actual romance between Smiley and Eunice is hidden in the folds of time with the letters probably destroyed by relatives. Good bits about New England mill towns and Mobile along with the Cayman's and an unusual woman who went her own way in a time that was considered beyond the pale.

Stacey says

I've started this book because I went to a lecture at the Navy Museum, where Martha Hodes spoke on the topic of love and race in the nineteenth century, as exemplified by this exceptional woman, who lived an unconventional life and defied racial categorization...

The rest of it was just as incredibly interesting. What a life story!

Melissa says

The power of archives - one woman's unique life hidden in a group of letters and papers acquired for their connection to the Civil War. Hodes digs into the life Eunice Richardson Stone Connolly - a lower class white woman in New England who marries a carpenter, moves to the South right before the Civil War, leaves him when he joins the Confederate army and moves north with her two children, lives on the brink of ruin relying on the charity of family and community until she learns of her husband's death and marries William "Smiley" Connolly - a well-off sea captain from Grand Cayman, who also happens to be a colored man, thus setting her apart from some members of her own family.

While most of the book relates to Eunice's life before marrying Smiley, it is their relationship and the consequences that are the most intriguing to me. Eunice's brother, Henry, fought for the Union, yet disowned his favorite sister over the matter. Hodes notes that it was easier for him to mend the Union/Confederate divide during reconstruction than to reconcile his sister marrying a person of color. His actions illustrate how quickly slavery being the reason for the Civil War were overshadowed by the issue of state's rights, etc. And while many in the North fought to protect the Union, there was not necessarily a desire to overcome a separation between black and white.

As a side note - their story illustrates the social construction of racism and identification of race. In the United States, Eunice was a white woman, Smiley was a black or colored man and their marriage was forbidden socially if not legally. One black ancestor meant that you were black, no matter what your physical complexion was. Compared to Grand Cayman which divided its population into various grades in between black and white and "colored" was closer to white than black. Another difference was that the higher a person's class, the "whiter" they were considered by society. Fluidity in a person's race.

Hodes ends her work by sharing her journey in tracing Eunice and meeting descendants of the Richardson and Connolly families! Way cool to see the connections being shared with modern generations. A worthwhile read!!

Jennifer says

Can a book be both interesting and boring? I don't know, but that's how I would describe this one. It reads like 300 pages of a history book about only one person and the people and times affecting her. I didn't get quite through it all but I'm moving on.

Alice says

The story of a pretty normal white Yankee woman who lived through the Civil War and struggled with poverty. But, then the story changes, and she marries a colored man from the West Indies - something white women just did not do! The book was well researched and well written; and especially timely given the recent news articles about a white woman who has passed herself off as black for years. Turns out, that was fairly common for white women who married black men during the Jim Crow years since it was illegal for people to marry across color lines. And, in the eyes of society she couldn't be considered white anymore,

since she was no longer "pure". This American attitude was contrasted with the family she found in the Caymans where everyone was all mixed up (race-wise) and nobody cared what you were (yet still valued pale skin over dark).
