



Sold Down the River

Barbara Hambly

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Penetrating the murkiest corners of glittering New Orleans society, Benjamin January brought murderers to justice in *A Free Man of Color*, *Fever Season*, and *Graveyard Dust*. Now, in Barbara Hambly's haunting new novel, he risks his life in a violent plantation world darker than anything in the city....

When slave owner Simon Fourchet asks Benjamin January to investigate sabotage, arson, and murder on his plantation, January is reluctant to do any favors for the savage man who owned him until he was seven. But he knows too well that plantation justice means that if the true culprit is not found, every slave on Mon Triomphe will suffer.

Abandoning his Parisian French for the African patois of a field hand, cutting cane until his bones ache and his musician's hands bleed, Benjamin must use all his intelligence and cunning to find the killer ... or find himself sold down the river.

Sold Down the River Details

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Author : Barbara Hambly

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From Reader Review Sold Down the River for online ebook

Rebecca Huston says

Out of all of the series so far, this one has to be one of the strongest and darkest of them. Benjamin January has to confront his own past when his former owner, Simon Fourchet, comes to him asking for a favour. Benjamin, naturally, wants nothing to do with him, but the temptation of five hundred dollars is hard to resist, and he enters a nightmare world on the plantation of Mon Triomphe. Not for sensitive or squeamish readers, but this is a heartbreakin story to read. Very much recommended.

For the longer review, please go here:

http://www.epinions.com/review/Sold_d...

Nilchance says

[more than earned their happy ending. (hide spoiler)]

Sarah Rowan says

This was my favourite Benjamin January book so far. Placing him in the plantation as a field hand brought out a whole different side to his character. I was definitely on the edge of my seat till the end!!!

Dagny says

Another excellent entry in Hambly's Benjamin January series. January, posing as Hannibal's slave, works and lives with slaves on a plantation during the sugar cane harvest to investigate vandalism, murder and attempted murder. Hambly's extensive research and richly descriptive prose continue to bring Louisiana of the 1830s to life.

Nicole Brown says

A tour-de-force of a mystery that explores the realities of slavery on a cane plantation.

<http://nicolewbrown.blogspot.com/2015...>

Hell, thought January, stumbling on blistered feet, aching, his mind curiously clear. What window had the ancients looked through, to see that Hell would actually be a Louisiana sugar-mill on a November night?
--Barbara Hambly (Sold Down the River p 67)

January recalled what the Romans has said, that Death was Freedom for a slave.

--Barbara Hambly (Sold Down the River p 101)

Given the Creole system of keeping land and family together and everyone living and working under one roof, I'm a little surprised there aren't more murders in such households.

--Barbara Hambly (Sold Down the River p 110)

As Cinderella would probably tell you, even a prince who only recognizes your footwear is preferable to a lifetime cleaning out grates.

--Barbara Hambly (Sold Down the River p 111)

You can't defeat the army, he thought. But if you lie quiet in cover you might save yourself and win a skirmish or two.

--Barbara Hambly (Sold Down the River p 125)

How is it women can sit and talk about men, and they get all prickly and hot when they think men are talking about them?

--Barbara Hambly (Sold Down the River p 136)

In the few moments over the past four days when he wasn't sound asleep or wishing he could be, he missed Rose desperately, and, though he felt childish for doing so, missed his piano nearly as much. Missed the godlike logic of Bach, and Vivaldi's wry grace. Missed the peace they brought to his mind and his heart.

--Barbara Hambly (Sold Down the River p 143)

Behind every great fortune there is a great crime, my dear Theo. Surely you know that.

--Barbara Hambly (Sold Down the River p 281-2)

Suzanne says

I love Barbara Hambly's books! Though I don't remember which, I read one or two of her Benjamin January stories years ago, and as usual with my sieve-like memory soon forgot it. Yet shadows of it lingered in my mind until I just had to search until I found the storyline again. I've been delighted in getting reacquainted with January and continuing to share in his adventures. Hambly writes so well, that even knowing that the series continues for many more books, I was still breathless at times during January's escape and capture. I am also enjoying her James Asher series, which is in a totally different vein (pun intended).

Sara says

I had mixed feelings until a bit more than 3/4 of the way from the end. I liked Benjamin and also many of the other characters, but there were so MANY characters to keep up with (and not always very distinctively portrayed) that I started just ignoring the ones who didn't merit more than a mention. I found Benjamin's choice to go undercover as a slave to be relatively credible, given his character as a person who wants to right wrongs, his mother's manipulation, and his need of money to break free from her. What I didn't find too

credible was his ability to survive undercover. To me there were far too many hints at his real identity - he didn't always speak like the slave he was pretending to be (did slaves, even those educated in Latin, speak credible phrases in spontaneous conversation with their masters, even kindly ones? Hambly does mention in her endnote that yes, some masters were extremely kind...but even so...). And the notion of putting a different colored bandanna on this extremely obvious tree near the water - well, who on earth wouldn't notice that and wonder why? But never mind. The book's pacing suffers from too many atmospheric adjectives, larded in too frequently. Every time Ben goes into the cane fields, do we need a description of the moon, the light, the soil, the way it feels, etc. etc. etc. Some editing could have helped.

When the real narrative drive begins, it's a bit late - some will have already given up. I was glad I lasted, because this part was clear and spare and really good. I also loved the ending. Poignant and well-handled. So - I was ready to give three stars but upped it at the end.

I knew very little about slavery in Louisiana and what the cane growing and harvesting involved. This was very interesting and well-done, as was the depiction of the differences between town life and country plantation life near the river and the bayous. I also never realized that a real distinction was made at the time (the 1830s) between Creoles of French lineage and "Americans," even free whites. Depictions of voodoo and the way it interacted with Christianity in these early slave times, before the 1840s camp meeting revivals took hold, and the way the ring shouts (to mourn the dead) and the field hollers evolved from remembered snatches of African music were also really good.

So I am hooked enough to investigate the first of the series, *A Free Man of Color*, which is considered to be the best.

Rachel says

The best Benjamin January book so far, I think. As with all the books in this series, the mystery is less important than the setting, characterisation, and unflinching consideration of a racist society. To me, this novel is the boldest so far, and the most emotionally compelling.

The initial set up for this idea - that Benjamin would willingly go undercover as a slave - is hard to swallow, even with Benjamin's well-established sense of justice. But if one accepts that, the novel that follows is compelling in its depiction of plantation life: its drudgery and relentless brutality.

Now, I'm a white woman, and so is Hambly. I'm sure there's stuff she gets wrong, both in terms of history (this isn't a period I know outside of fiction) and in terms of talking about race. But I think she's the only white writer I've read who has been able to write about American slavery in a way that fully accepts white complicity at all levels of society in a racist system. None of her sympathetic white characters - Hannibal, Shaw - are exempt from this. No matter how likeable they are, they benefit from racism. It's rare to find a white author who really addresses this.

robyn says

As the January series goes on, the setting for each story changes; in this story, January travels incog to the estate of his old master to discover just who is trying to kill the old man. It's a real treat. An entire series set amidst the cruelty and uncertainty of living as a slave on a sugarcane plantation would be hard to take, but seeing it from the outside is not only bearable, it's hugely interesting. Having met whites and free-coloreds of every stripe, now the series spends serious time with the slaves.

As always, the writing and attention to detail is riveting. The plot hangs together pretty well - in some of these, I get lost in a welter of detail and complexity, not that I mind. And the climax is hugely exciting.

PS. I love Shaw. Hambly's great with secondary characters; she deploys them with a sparing hand, and always leaves me wanting more. Her homegrown Leatherstocking makes a good, if brief, showing in this one.

Kim says

I had a hard time buying into the premise of this book: that Benjamin January willingly goes "undercover" as a slave on a sugar cane plantation to find a murderer/saboteur. He does it for the freedom the money would give him and to keep innocent slaves from being killed for something they didn't do. But I had a hard time believing someone who was a slave as a child and then freed would willingly put himself in such a position, with so little motivation. To save someone he loved, yes, but, I don't know. So I was a bit disconnected from the plot at the beginning. But the depiction of slave life was well done and the suspense gripping towards the end. The vivid characters among the slaves really stood out as well. At the end of the book, I cried, so I guess I didn't remain detached after all. Not a perfect novel, but ultimately a very good one.

Rachel Brown says

Slavery shaped Benjamin January's life; he and his sister Olympe were born slaves, before his mother was purchased as a mistress. It's been a prominent part of the background of previous books. But it takes center stage here, when the man Ben least wants to meet again—Fourchet, his cruel previous owner—offers to hire him to go undercover as a slave on his plantation, to investigate a murder and possible brewing slave rebellion.

It's the last thing Ben wants to do. But he needs the money. More importantly, if he doesn't do it, the slaves may well end up suffering even more. (A major theme of the book is that even people who are living in horrible conditions often still have a lot left to lose, and desperately cling to what little they have.) And so Ben ends up back on the plantation, thirty years after he left. Though his act of (largely) altruism is intended to make sure the status quo doesn't get even worse rather than to literally rescue anyone, it reminded me of Harriet Tubman returning to the scene of her worst nightmares to take others to freedom.

Hambly doesn't stint on the physical horror of slavery, but focuses more on the psychological aspects—families ripped apart, human beings treated as non-human, and the pervasive terror coming from the knowledge that one's master can do absolutely anything to you or your loved ones at any time. It's also one of the best depictions I've come across of how people work to keep their humanity, maintain loving relationships, and find moments of happiness and humor in the absolute worst imaginable circumstances.

While I hesitated to recommend *Fever Season*, I would definitely recommend this if you can cope with the setting. The overall mood is way less depressing, because the story is more action-based, Ben has more inner strength and hope, and there's more emphasis on relationships. Not to mention a way more uplifting ending. And a fair amount of secret banter between Ben and Hannibal, who is impersonating his owner. The action climax is a bit incongruous given the relentless realism of the plantation life that makes up most of the book, but as an action climax, it's spectacular. Abishag Shaw has a smallish but absolutely wonderful part in this;

sadly, Rose is barely in it. Hopefully she'll be more prominent in the next book.

This is a very dark book (due to inherent qualities of the subject matter, not due to cement truck plot twists), but also one where the bright spots shine very brightly by contrast. It has the most moving and happiest ending of any of the books so far. Where many novels are fantasies of empowerment, in some ways this is a fantasy of justice. It's explicitly stated to be limited to the characters we meet (and not all of them), not to mention being fictional. But it's satisfying nonetheless. In real life, some slaves did escape, and some masters did meet well-deserved bitter ends. That was the exception rather than the rule, of course. But sometimes it's nice to read about the exceptions. When you're dealing with devastating injustice, both now and then, you need hope as well as rage.

Lynn Wilson says

I really enjoyed the first book in this series "A Free Man of Color" but the subsequent two that I have read have felt tedious. If you truly love historical fiction, and you are interested in the complexities of Creole society in Louisiana, you might like this book. But I just kept feeling more and more miserable as the tale dragged on.

Kara says

Hambly moves the setting from New Orleans to a plantation outside of the city run by Benjamin January's old master. The man hires January as a spy, to pretend to be a field hand and find out who is sabotaging things on the plantation and if there is going to be a revolt.

January, naturally, has a lot of emotional baggage with this man and the time of his life when he was a slave. He's forced to face a lot of demons head on while solving a murder and trying, with his hands, sometime literally, tied behind his back, to stop more murders.

Hambly doesn't sugarcoat a single moment – this is slavery, and it is WRONG. And she details every horrific, bloody, ghastly, unjust minute of it.

The ending felt a little Disney-ish, but that doesn't mean I wasn't up way too late as I tore through the pages, eyes riveted to the text, anxious to see who would live and who would die, who would die a slave and who would die free...

Jamie Collins says

Like the blurb says, Benjamin Janvier agrees to go undercover on a sugar cane plantation in order to uncover the perpetrator of deadly sabotage and outright murder.

I suppose that once you have accepted that the educated and cosmopolitan Janvier willingly stays in New Orleans, where he is treated as something sub-human, instead of returning to Europe, then it's not too much of a stretch to believe he'd go undercover as a slave on a freaking plantation. I mean, Janvier gives his reasons - he needs the money, and the plantation slaves will suffer even more than usual if the culprit isn't caught - but still, damn. To willingly live out his worst nightmare?

Nevertheless, I like Hambly's writing very much, and it's absolutely fascinating to see this piece of history through Janvier's eyes.

Margaret says

This is the fourth in Hambly's historical mystery series about Benjamin January, free man of color in mid-19th century New Orleans. I really liked the first two and was less enthralled by the third, but *Sold Down the River* absorbed me utterly from start to finish.

Hambly engages very directly with the life of slaves, as January assumes the disguise of a slave in order to investigate mysterious happenings on the plantation he belonged to until the age of seven. There have been sabotage, arson, and murder, and if January cannot discover the culprit, all the slaves on the plantation will suffer for it, beyond their daily experience of humiliation and hurt. The previous novels, all set in New Orleans, were dark in their depiction of black people's lives in that time and place; this one is even darker, searing yet evoking the courage and fellowship of the slaves as well as the horrors of their lives.
