



Sally Hemings

Barbara Chase-Riboud

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One of the greatest love stories in American history is also one of the most controversial. Thomas Jefferson had a mistress for 38 years whom he loved and lived with until he died—the beautiful and elusive Sally Hemings. But it was not simply that Jefferson had a mistress that provoked such a scandal in both his time and ours. It was that Sally Hemings was a quadroon slave and that Jefferson fathered a slave family whose descendants are alive today. In this moving novel, originally published in 1979 and having sold over two million copies worldwide, Barbara Chase-Riboud re-creates one of America's most powerful love stories, based on the documents and evidence of the day, and gives us a poignant, tragic, and unforgettable meditation on the history of race and sex in America.

Sally Hemings Details

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From Reader Review Sally Hemings for online ebook

Sabrina says

This is a historical novel, very well researched and based on actual events. This book was the most tragic of love stories and an excellent depiction of the life and times of the Jefferson Administration.

I felt very connected to Miss Hemmings but I can't imagine choosing to remain enslaved, even to stay with the man I loved. To watch her children "walk off" the plantation and go on to live as White Americans must have wrenched her heart, knowing that she could never see them again, lest it be revealed that they were actually born slaves. Wow!

It is well documented and the creative license that Ms. Chase-Riboud took could not have been too far off of actual events. Excellent work. I loved it!

Juliana says

This book is ideal for any book club meeting today.

I must have first read this novel back in the late eighties--I picked it up after I read Chase-Riboud's book *Valide* (also good). This is a novel that has stuck with me over the years and I've kept a paperback version around in case I'd get around to re-reading. (I've only recently discovered the joy of rereading. Only Jane Austen warranted an annual rereading, but now that I've hit fifty, it is time to see what other books and authors have held up.)

This book should be re-discovered and the time to do it is now. The themes of slavery, race, sexual abuse of women by men in power...themes we are still arguing about and sorting our way through. Not to mention hypocrisy, mental health, family violence, and maybe the biggest one--the idea of America and our struggle to be the better version of ourselves. Chase-Riboud hits all of these themes with intelligence and insight.

This all takes place in the book through the complicated and hidden relationship between Sally Hemings and Thomas Jefferson. Sally was a slave and the half-sister of Jefferson's wife and bore Jefferson several children. The book time jumps between an older Hemings and Sally, a young woman who becomes Jefferson's mistress in Paris, and then returns home to Virginia to become a mother and the mistress of Monticello, but always, always a slave, whose one job is to ensure her own children will be free.

I visited Monticello this past summer, before the events at University of Virginia and Charlottesville. Having seen the house and plantation up close made the re-reading of this book even more a pleasure as Chase-Riboud's attention to detail comes through. Now because of the events--it is even clearer that we still have housekeeping to do of our own as a country. But isn't only the events in Charlottesville, but also #MeToo and the stories by women of sexual assault and the secrets powerful men can keep, that are touched on by this book. Sally was a victim, but so were all the others that surrounded Jefferson who had to keep the secret or look the other way.

KOMET says

As a general rule, I rarely do re-reads. That's because I have plenty of other books on my TBR List, clamoring for my attention.

But a few weeks ago, the Barbara Chase-Riboud historical novel, "SALLY HEMINGS" came to mind and rooted itself there. I had previously read it almost 40 years ago when I was in high school. While idly checking through Amazon.com, I saw that an updated edition of "SALLY HEMINGS" had been published. I thought that maybe by reading it, I would learn something more about this African American woman and her connection to Thomas Jefferson that had been dismissed by most Jeffersonian scholars and American historians as untrue when the novel was first published in 1979. And thus, I set myself to re-reading "SALLY HEMINGS."

Reading the novel was a rediscovery for me. Most of its details had been lost to me over time. So, I felt very much like I was reading it for the first time. Reacquainting myself with Sally Hemings' life - from her meeting with a census taker in her cabin on the Monticello estate in Albemarle County, Virginia, in 1831 to her journey to Paris as a 14 year old in 1787 with one of Thomas Jefferson's daughters (Maria - who also happened to be Sally Hemings' niece because Jefferson's dead wife was also Hemings' half-sister!; Jefferson in 1787 was the U.S. Minister to France), who was in Hemings' charge --- was a wholly absorbing and fascinating experience.

In the hands of an inept writer less knowledgeable on the subject of slavery and its place as a deeply entrenched fixture in the life, culture, and economy of early America, this novel could have ended up as an overworked melodrama. Chase-Riboud takes the reader on a wide-ranging journey through Sally Hemings' life and the lives of the slaves on Jefferson's estates, as well as many of her family members -- both black and white. She also provides an in depth look at Thomas Jefferson in terms of his relationships with his family and slaves that also reinforce what is known of the historical Thomas Jefferson from people who knew him (e.g. John & Abigail Adams, their son John Quincy Adams, the painter John Trumbull, and Aaron Burr). I especially liked learning something about the lives of the children Thomas Jefferson had with Sally Hemings. This is a novel I recommend to anyone who not only enjoys a good, engaging story - but also is open to learning a more complete history of the impact that slavery and racism had in the lives of several of the 'Founding Fathers' from the very inception of the United States as a democratic republic in 1789.

One more thing worthy of mention: There is also an Afterword in which Chase-Riboud goes into some detail about the struggles she experienced in writing "SALLY HEMINGS" and trying to get it published in 1979. She also enlightens the reader about the efforts of many of America's Jeffersonian scholars and historians of the early Republic years to discredit Chase-Riboud, her novel, and the possibility that an intimate and longstanding relationship existed between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. (Since January 2000, the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation has accepted the findings of a DNA study, "combined with multiple strands of currently available documentary and statistical evidence that Thomas Jefferson fathered Eston Hemings, and that he most likely was the father of all six of Sally Hemings's children appearing in Jefferson's records.")

Rita says

I finished reading Sally Heming last night. It was a truly exceptional work. There was a lot of research that went into the writing of this book. It's common knowledge, I believe, that our third President, Thomas Jefferson, had a 38 year affair with his young house slave, Sally Hemings. This author, Barbara Chase-Riboud, told us about his life, his trips, his love for Sally and brought us to his death.

Cee Martinez says

July 4th of this year found me separated from fireworks and backyard barbecue, alone and in my livingroom with the laptop, and a History Channel marathon of The American Revolution. While running wild on Twitter and Facebook, I got to know better the editor of the brilliant new ezine, Specter Magazine, a Mr. Thomas D. DeMary II. I don't recall the exact details of the twit-conversation any longer, but the end result was that he had to pony up and buy me a book of my choosing off Amazon.com.

Seeing as it was July 4th, I went Founding Father themed, and chose a title related to Thomas Jefferson. A paperback novel by Barbara Chase Riboud about the controversial enslaved mistress of Mr. Jefferson, Sally Hemings.

I've always been fascinated by Sally Hemings, the young one quarter African slave-girl who became the 15 year old mistress of Thomas Jefferson while he was stationed in Paris--Sally serving his daughters Martha, and Maria. She was the half-sister of Jefferson's dead wife Martha Wayles, and by all spoken accounts (for no portrait of Sally Hemings is known to survive) a beautiful young woman and the spitting image of her half sister. The fact that she was the aunt of the girls she was slave to, half sister to the dead Mistress of Monticello, and bound concubine of Thomas Jefferson whether she liked it or not seemed to sum up to me the epitome of slavery's absurdity.

The legend of the Hemings scandal, a huge story at the time Jefferson served as President of the United States, and chronicled by her own son Eston Hemings in an autobiography, faded over the decades. Covered in dust and the eventual sainting of Jefferson into a flawless man of marble.

This novel, I was pleasantly surprised to find, meticulously researched and wonderfully written, chips away the marble and granite of the beloved Thomas Jefferson, and breathes life into the breast of a slave girl who had only previously been immortalized in rude poems and brushed aside as a figment of legend.

The novel opens with a census taker in 1830 Virginia meeting an aged but still beautiful Sally Hemings, a freewoman living near the grounds of Monticello with two of her sons by Jefferson. The book almost lost me at the gate when the paragraphs breathlessly worship at the altar of Sally's "white" beauty. Great emphasis is devoted to her unlined skin, though she is past 50, her ivory complexion, her ebony hair and golden eyes that glow like a gemstone. Descriptive passages like this can sometimes leave me cold, as if to say the only woman worth writing about is one that never ages and is impossibly beautiful. I was afraid that this novel would go the way of a lurid romantic bodice ripper.

Sticking with it, however, paid off beautifully. Very swiftly Chase-Riboud takes the story of the infatuated census taker and the ageless Sally and smashes them together with a hard unflinching look of the the subject of slavery, race despite skin color, and Sally's complete embracing of her own identity as a woman of

African heritage. Sally is an ageless doll at the opening, but that impossible beauty is quickly stripped away, as she begins to shed the skin of her emotional enslavement to the memory of Thomas Jefferson and Monticello.

Told from a variety of viewpoints, but mostly through Sally's, the novel jumps back and forth in time, and with great skill creates a Sally Hemings that is full blooded and real. One feels great sympathy for the fifteen year old Sally in Paris, beautiful and naive, and overcome with the love that Jefferson offers. Freedom from slavery in Paris is within her grasp, but adolescent infatuation is a stronger force that binds her to Jefferson and condemns her to a lifetime of slavery returned to Virginia. At no point is she a helpless, dim-witted concubine mistress as popular tales of the time had her. She is an intelligent, assertive, graceful woman who runs Monticello, and deftly dodges the venom sent her way by Jefferson's oldest daughter Martha.

Jefferson is shown as both the intelligent, innovative man he is famous for being, but his flaws are also not skimmed over. His inability to spend or save money properly, the hypocrisy of his idea of a free America but yet allowing slavery to fester and spread, and his selfishness in binding Sally Hemings and her children to him without ever giving them anything more than his curt acknowledgment.

This book is an important one, controversial at the time for its unflinching look at slavery, race relations, and the fallibility of a Founding Father.

Read the modern paperback edition of this book as it has an afterword by the author in it, detailing the pains she took in research, and the pain she endured upon publication of the book for being an African American woman who would dare pull back the curtain on the boudoir of an American Icon.

And I highly recommend everyone go and check out Specter Magazine at <http://www.spectermagazine.com/>

KOMET says

I read "SALLY HEMINGS" as a high school student in the early 1980s. At that time, this novel (many of whose elements are based on a true story) was considered controversial. There were many Jeffersonian scholars, historians, and several descendants of Thomas Jefferson who did not want to believe, much less acknowledge, that Jefferson had had relations with one of his slaves and fathered 6 children. I avidly read this novel, enjoyed it, and feel that it helped stimulate further my then budding interest in historical fiction.

Joyce says

This was a fascinating historical fiction novel about Sally Hemings, the slave mistress of Thomas Jefferson. Her mother had been a mistress before her and Sally's father had been a white plantation owner which resulted in her being a light-colored mulatto who could have passed for white in her appearance. Sally became sexually involved as mistress to Thomas Jefferson when she was 15 years old after she accompanied Jefferson's younger daughter, Polly, to Paris, France. During her 2 years in Paris, she was educated in all the ways of a high society lady and could have chosen to go free there since in Paris, slavery was not recognized. However, she became pregnant with her first child while there and according to the author, Sally grew to

love Thomas Jefferson in such a way that she could not bring herself to leave him. Upon their return to the United States, once again she could not bring herself to request her freedom and remained his mistress until he died. She bore him 8 children, 2 of whom died. Thomas Jefferson never remarried after his first wife, Martha, died. From this story, it would appear that he loved Sally deeply. However, he broke promises to her in spite of his love.

In addition to the story of their relationship, the novel also gives a unique perspective on Jefferson's life from the time he wrote the Declaration of Independence, his years before becoming President and after his presidency. It was also fascinating reading about other people in history---John and Abigail Adams, Aaron Burr, James and Dolly Madison, James Monroe, Meriweather Lewis of the Lewis & Clark expedition, Lafayette, and others whose lives entwined with that of Thomas Jefferson.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone who enjoys historical fiction and early American history.

Jacqueline says

Well written and well crafted.

James says

Around page 247, I read this line coming from Sally Hemings, "A feeling almost of elation filled me. We had the power of love on our side. We were stronger and better than the monstrous iniquity we had sprung from." It was at the moment that this novel officially "jumped the shark" (although there were some pretty bad moments earlier in the book) from historical fiction to sappy, over-sentimentalized storytelling. A shame since it did seem rather solidly researched.

Lisa Kelsey says

A little rough going in the beginning, well-written but not spectacular and the structure isn't perfect, but definitely worth reading because it is so insightful. Really brings home the "banal evil" of slavery and has given me a better understanding of the south. Interestingly, I don't think it was particularly insightful into Jefferson's character, but that perhaps was not the intent of the author.

One of the interesting historical details is the inclusion of the George Sweeney murder trail. Sweeney definitely murdered his uncle, George Wythe a prominent judge and signer of the Declaration of Independence, but walked away a free man because a crucial witness happened to be a black woman and was not allowed by law to testify against a white man. Someone should write that story!

Lisa James says

I have always been interested in Jefferson as a person, not as much as a President, although that may sound strange. He was conflicted, as evidenced in his stand on slavery, being against it in principle, yet unable to

divest himself of the ones he had. The story of Sally's life, as told here, even though a work of fiction, does play on the known facts of her life, & could almost BE biographical in nature. I was glad to see all of the rumors finally put to rest by DNA evidence that revealed that the Hemings clan's descendants ARE in fact related to the great man. I don't understand why there was all the secrecy to begin with, it was no secret that the masters of the plantations & their sons often had slave mistresses that bore their children.

Ashley says

Just couldn't get into it. It's so full of historical opinions, perspectives, and personal thoughts that seemed false to me.

Natalie says

For all its flowery prose and seemingly passionate subject matter, this book fell flat for me. What drew Sally and Jefferson together? I still don't understand, other than the sexual relationship between white master and black slave being commonplace in that time. I found that the characters lacked dimension. Sally vacillates between being fervently in love with and despising Jefferson (as she should). But I didn't feel any reason for her changing emotions. I understood logically why she would be angry at Jefferson for his choices regarding her children, or why she and Martha were at odds, but I couldn't connect with her at all on an emotional level. The changing narration perspectives were confusing. Why does Sally get first person narration in some portions, but in others, her happenings and feelings are exposed by an omniscient third person narrator? Why is it important that we understand a single portion of a chapter from Harriet's point of view? This book was well written, and obviously well researched. But it didn't leave me wanting to learn anything more about its protagonists, and I feel that as a historical fiction novel, it should have. I was happy to finish this one and I don't believe I'll be picking it up again.

Gail Holman says

I have been struggling with my white privilege and have been reading history to find my place in the story. I'm glad I read this novel for its content and interpretation of events. Reads more like history than a novel. Can't imagine the idea of owning another human being, much less rationalizing it in any way. The scars of those days continue to run deep in our culture. When and how will it end?

Karen says

An incredible novel, and the best example I have yet encountered of the historical fiction genre, or "faction". The author grounded as much of her work as possible in primary source documents (sources disclosed at the end of the work) and filled in with imagination what remains unknown in the historical record. The fact that this work was conceived more than 20 years before DNA tests virtually confirmed the premise that this book is written on (that Thomas Jefferson had a long term sexual relationship which more probable than not resulted in 6 living children with the enslaved half-sister of his dead wife) speaks to the author's ingenuity and boldness. At the time it was published, this work flew in the face of the historical establishment who did

not want to entertain the possibility (at least publicly) that the 3rd and revered president of the United States managed to live a hypocritical and much frowned upon lifestyle, despite the presence of rumors that heavily circulated during his lifetime.

It should be noted that not all entities are yet willing to buy into this preponderance of the evidence. On a July, 2007 visit to Monticello my tour guide addressed the Thomas/Sally issue by stating that there was in fact a good deal of evidence that it was Thomas' brother Peter Jefferson who had fathered Sally's children. I feel that when the Monticello foundation and mainline historians (Joseph Ellis, for example) finally cease to view human actions that do not necessarily coincide with the expected societal ideals, both modern and historic, as "scandals" the historical record and interpretation thereof will finally yield the complex nature of human relationships and actions.
