

She Came to Slay: The Life and times of Harriet Tubman

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Review

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Dunbar, Erica Armstrong. *She Came to Slay: The Life and times of Harriet Tubman*. New York: 37ink, 2019. 176 pp. Cloth. \$23.99. ISBN: 9781982139599.

For an extraordinary historical figure, Dunbar offers an accessible and multidimensional biography of Harriet Tubman Ross and renders her as a complex “a true boss lady, a superhero, and a warrior” in *She Came to Slay* (xii). Organized chronologically, Dunbar opens with a discussion of Tubman’s grandmother Modesty who “planted a seed of resilience in her progeny that would blossom even in her absence (6-7).” Acknowledging the scant archival record, Dunbar establishes the familial roots contributing to Tubman’s fortitude and character. Although offering freedom to her daughters and granddaughter in his will, Pattison’s daughter and her husband, however, ignored this provision. Death, however, enabled Rit to find love and marry Ben Ross, enslaved person owned by her owner’s second husband (13). Their enslavers’ financial issues threatened the Ross family. After the sale of her sister, Harriet “prepared her for her future role as rescuer-in-chief of members of her family (16).” She also experienced the brutality of slavery. By the time she reached adolescence, Dunbar contends that her body became a “sinewy machine of muscle and strength;” but one regularly inflicted epileptic seizures, visions, and severe headaches following a head injury (22).

In exploring her self-liberation, Dunbar demonstrates how her marital issues and threat of sale motivated her flight. Precarity defined her first marriage, especially following her failed legal suit to enforce Pattison’s will. When her enslaver dies, Harriet flees with the assistance of local Quakers and demonstrates her exceptional bravery. Concerns over family left behind, according to Dunbar, caused her to assume a familiar role as caretaker and rescuer of her family and others. The included maps of her various routes to the south and back to Philadelphia and Canada reveals her repeated risks taken for others. While this is most likely familiar to readers, Dunbar illuminates the less familiar seasonality of Tubman’s rescue work: she earned wages in the summer, traveled in the fall, and liberated individuals in the winter. In the process, she rightfully earned her reputation. As an abolitionist, Dunbar shows how Tubman supplemented

limited income by speaking publicly. This cemented her relationship with powerful individuals and reputation. Following John Brown's raid and his death, Tubman performed her last rescue, recovered in New York during the secession crisis, and predicted the fiery end to slavery.

During the Civil War, Dunbar contends that Tubman earns her "Bawss Lady" status while simultaneously offers insights onto her self-awareness of her privilege in comparison with slave refugees. She distributed aid but had to build trust among the South Carolina freedpeople in the Port Royal experiment. As a nurse, she provided medical care to the sick and dying. She never received wages for this essential service. As a scout, she created a team of local intelligence operatives among freedmen, scanned the Combahee River, located naval bombs in the Combahee River, and developed military strategy for 300 black soldiers who served under Col. Montgomery's command. This raid exemplified Tubman's leadership and Civil War service. More comfortable around soldiers than slave refugees, according to Dunbar, Tubman followed the Massachusetts 54th Regiment and cared for the wounded after Fort Wagner. The final days of the Civil War saw Tubman tirelessly working without pay in the various James River hospitals.

After the Civil War, Dunbar unflinchingly details her financial struggles, including a decades-long fight for backpay, a personal loan received from William Seward, and her inability to work following a railroad racial incident. She also hires Sarah Bradford for publishing her memoir; however, Dunbar contends that Bradford proved "completely ill-equipped to produce the memoir that Harriett deserved (117)." In spite of several personal losses, Tubman marries her second husband who was a Civil War veteran. "Setbacks, however, never defined her," Dunbar concludes (122).

Following her second husband's death, Tubman shifted to racial uplift and women's rights activism. More importantly, Tubman filed and received a widow's pension, and after several decades, financial restitution for her own Civil War service. With this money, she opened home for the elderly and poor in Auburn, NY. Upon her 1913 death, Dunbar shows how she received full military honors at her funeral and later recognition for racial uplift work.

In addition to the accessible prose and meticulous research, Dunbar employs several infographics and visual culture throughout the biography. Since Tubman never acquired literacy, these visual sources persuasively convey Tubman's historical significance, leadership, and appeal as a "a symbol of power, strength, and honor (136)." Dunbar's decision to include these

materials further cements the biography's appeal to diverse audiences of academic and non-academics desiring an introduction to the historical African American figure.

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