

BOOK CLUB KIT

"A narrative of such courage and resourcefulness it seems too dashing to be true. . . . Ms. Woo is so skilled at spinning it out, that at times it's a genuine nail-biter." —*THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

MASTER SLAVE

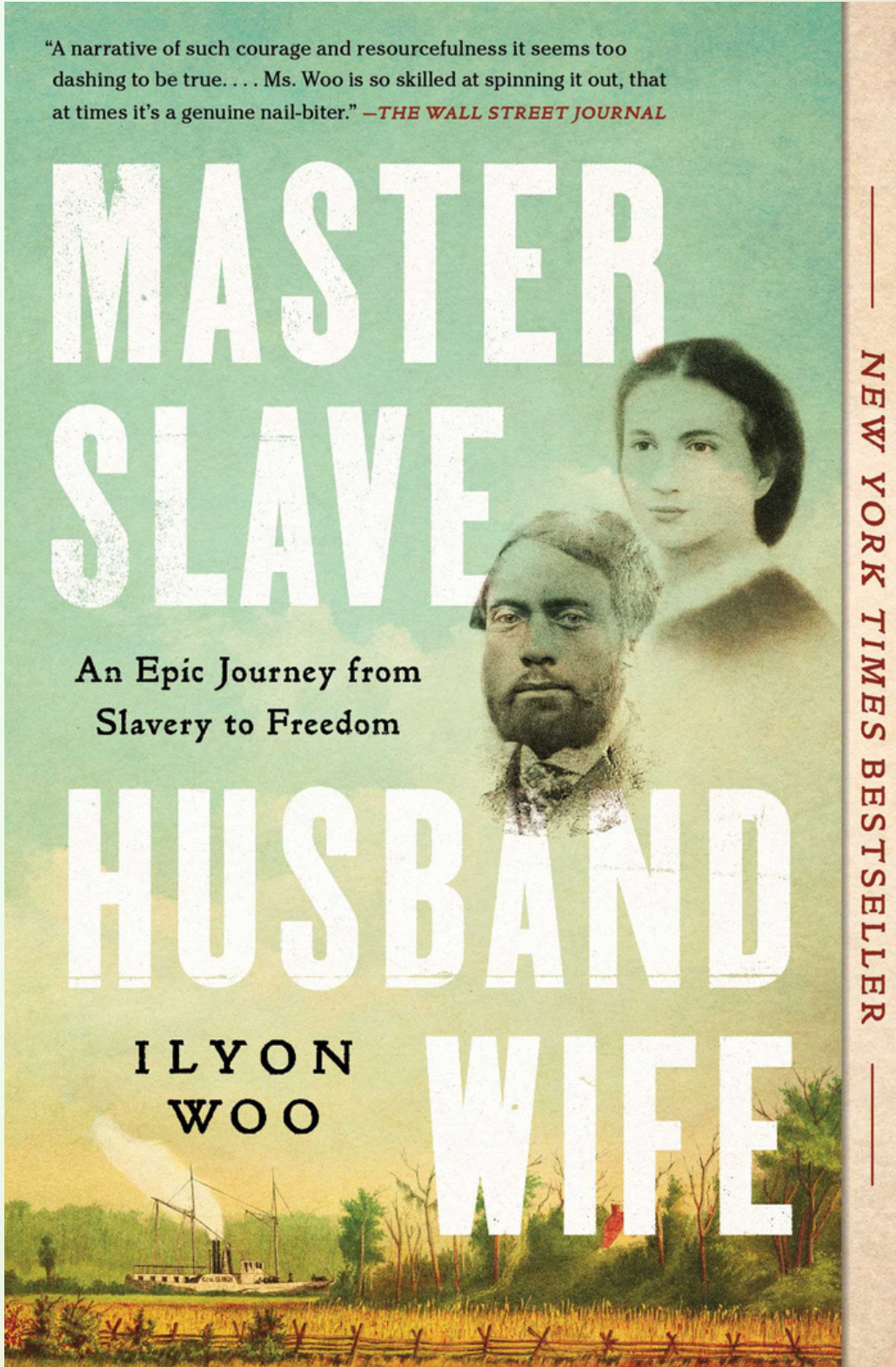
An Epic Journey from
Slavery to Freedom

HUSBAND

ILYON
WOO

WIFE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



ILYON WOO is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Master Slave Husband Wife: An Epic Journey from Slavery to Freedom* and *The Great Divorce: A Nineteenth-Century Mother's Extraordinary Fight Against Her Husband, the Shakers, and Her Times*. Her writing has appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, and *The New York Times*, and she has received support for her research from the Whiting Foundation, and National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Antiquarian Society, among other institutions. She holds a BA in the Humanities from Yale College and a PhD in English from Columbia University. Connect with Ilyon at ilyonwoo.com and @IlyonWooAuthor on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#).



A CONVERSATION WITH ILYON WOO

How do you describe the book to others?

The story of Ellen and William Craft is truly one of the most inspiring love stories of all time—on so many levels. It's for this reason that I first named the book *MASTER SLAVE HUSBAND WIFE: An American Love Story*, and I confess I'm still somewhat attached to that subtitle!

It's a love story foremost about Ellen and William Craft, but many other kinds of love live here too. There's love between a parent and child—this was the first love that both Crafts experienced, deeply, before they were forced apart from their family members. William's enslaver sold off his parents and siblings one by one, before he was ten years old. Ellen's first enslaver, who was also her biological father, gave her away as a wedding gift to his daughter by his legal wife, when Ellen was eleven. There's also love between extended family members; love within a community; love for country; and an even more expansive love, as the Crafts evoked divine guidance, and took their story around the world.

We are said to live in an era of divisions that harken back to the years before the Civil War. Abolition has become a new keyword. The teaching of history, the preservation of monuments, the legacy of slavery, are all hotly contested. In this time, I believe the Crafts' love story is exactly what we need.

Actually, if I could be even more precise, I might call this as an American jung story. Jung is a Korean word, with no equivalent expression in English. It might be translated as attachment or love, but it is a cast iron connection, accumulated in layers, sometimes despite oneself. This is not a "love" of fairy tales and sunsets. Indeed, in some cases, it can be coexistent with loathing. But it is a powerful connection that endures. And that's what the Crafts had with each other, but also, differently, with the United States of America: a deep and abiding, complex connection.

Why did you decide to write a book about the Crafts? What drew you to the subject?

I first encountered the Crafts through their own written words. While the couple was essentially in exile overseas, and still trying to raise funds to free family members who remained in bondage, they published *Running A Thousand Miles for Freedom*. I read this narrative in graduate school, in Robert O’Meally’s seminar on the “Literature of Passing,” a wonderful course. The first reading was indelible. The voice was heartbreaking, at times cool, other times impassioned, but also shockingly funny. It was unlike anything I’d read before or have read since.

The journey seemed beyond believing, and the Crafts provide an unusual and at times tantalizing amount of detail, just enough to make you want to know more. They include information such as this, delivered through William’s voice: “My wife’s first master was her father, and her mother his slave, and the latter is still the slave of his widow.” I wanted to know: Who was Ellen’s mother, and what happened to her? How and why did the Crafts choose to put their lives on the line and escape slavery when they did? How had they gotten the idea for their escape? Who were the people around them, what was their world?

I didn’t exactly set out to write a book. What I really wanted was to read a story about the Crafts, not write it. But I kept thinking about them, and then curiosity got the better of me, and I started digging, scratching at the ground located by other scholars. Pushed a little, and then it was as if an opening came into the floor, and that push gave way to a space, and the space became a room and the room became a house—of history, and of story, which I knew I had to both excavate and report.

Was there anything that you learned about the Crafts that surprised you?

I was surprised at every turn! But just to share a few discoveries: I was surprised by the clothing details. I learned, for instance, that Ellen Craft wore spurred boots, and that the clothes she wore for the famous picture, where she appears in gentleman’s clothes, were not the actual clothes she wore on the journey.

I learned that the Crafts were at one point a “rifle shot” away from the Georgian slave hunters who were sent to Boston to capture them, and I could pinpoint them all on a map. I learned that the Crafts received offers to have their freedom “bought” with payments to their enslavers. Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown were both legally emancipated this way. But the Crafts refused to have their freedom purchased, not even “for two cents,” as William said. And just one more—I was surprised at how the Crafts maintained contact with their families, and especially how they reconnected with their mothers.

What was the most interesting source you worked with?

One of my most dependable, yet unpredictable sources for Eureka moments was newspapers. Almost as soon as they arrived in the North, the media jumped on the Crafts and their story, reporting with feverish admiration as the couple embarked on a speaking tour to galvanize Americans, town by town, against slavery. And they learned to capitalize on this attention. Through the media coverage, they were effectively able to send word down to the South that they had made it. Of course, this also sent word to their enslavers of their location, which became especially perilous once a vicious new Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1850, and they would pay a price.

What was amazing for me to uncover, though, was the conversation that happened between the Crafts and “their people,” as they called them, through time and space. The irony is that this communication was facilitated through enemy sources. One interesting thing about newspapers in this period is how they would print and reprint articles, often without attribution. Put that reporting in chronological order, with reference to locale, and a fascinating story emerges.

One Georgia newspaper, for example, reported on how “Negroes” were caught listening to the scandalous Northern news—news about the Crafts—as it was being read aloud at the center of town. What this communicates to us, today, is that when the Crafts were speaking on the national pulpit they had gained from the media, the enslaved in their home community heard them. We see through such interactions how the Crafts speak, intentionally or not, to the world they left behind.

You discuss how the Crafts fled from the US to the UK to become “truly free.” What are some of the cultural differences that they experienced?

One of the strangest and most remarkable differences for them, as William Wells Brown, Frederick Douglass, and others also experience before them, was the normalcy—of not being looked at, singled out, of being seen as an ordinary human being. It’s William Wells Brown who recalls watching William walk down the street and register amazement that no one is staring at him.

At one point, in Edinburgh, the two Williams cross paths with a White man who walks arm in arm with two Black women, and Craft—who can’t believe that no one finds this remarkable—makes a joke to Brown that they’d be moving a lot faster than that if they were in Georgia. Racists would surely drive them out of town. Brown retorts that you could say the same thing about Philadelphia or New York. But Brown knows what his friend is saying and experiencing in that moment. He’s talking about the feeling of being both seen and unseen in novel ways, of being seen as a person, as a man.

You mentioned how much of your research in America was made possible by British observers. Tell us about your research process and your approach to uncovering new facts.

Thank goodness for the British, especially the complainers! For all the wonderful detail they provide regarding specific scenes of their travel, the Crafts give a very bare bones account of the journey itself. They may recount the terror of Ellen being seated on a train next to her enslaver's good friend, but they don't waste their breath telling you what was outside the window, what the physical experience of travel was like.

That's where foreign observers came in handy. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Crafts' escape route—from Charleston all the way up to Boston—was a popular tourist route, especially for foreign visitors. And for those who could afford to do this "grand tour," writing about the travel was the thing to do. Publish it—even better. So even though the Crafts did not describe in minute detail what they passed en route, we have lavish accounts by others who did.

The British travelers were my favorite, as they'd complain about the route in minute detail. About the sites. About the food. About being expected to share a comb or a toothbrush. Hygiene. Tobacco juice splattered all over the floor was especially revolting to them, though it was something that American travelers took for granted. And in so complaining, they would bring to life the pungent, minute, forgotten details of a world in which we, too, are foreigners.

I read these accounts alongside intricate guidebooks, complete with train schedules and railway maps. Such guides were necessary because travel at this time—especially along the route the Crafts took from Charleston to Philadelphia—was incredibly complex, involving a bewildering succession of switches from steamships to trains to omnibuses to ferries and more. Some of these railway maps appear grotesquely veined. Which is why the Crafts' accomplishment—of being able to travel these routes without guides, without being able to read—is all the more amazing.

Through the prism of these combined sources—the Crafts' narrative, the foreign narratives, the maps, and more—I was able to figure out all kinds of details, such as when and where they stopped, exactly where they passed through, and what they would have seen along the way. This work is tricky, because the available perspectives are so specific and limited, replicating an existing skew in the archives. It's a restricted group of people who had the privilege in these times of recording their views and then having them preserved. I couldn't choose who was behind the camera, so to speak. And very often I'd wish they'd move the camera, but sometimes, just sometimes, they'd point to exactly what we need to see.

What would you like readers to take away from *Master Slave Husband Wife*?

I hope readers will come away with a deeper appreciation of the Crafts as American heroes. The Crafts challenged our nation, then, as they do now, to see that we are one nation, for better or for worse. There are no easy dividing lines here, between Black and White, North and South. This is not a story where enslaved people achieve freedom by crossing a magical line into the free states of the North and live happily ever after. It's not enough for the Crafts to reach the North, because slavery is a system in which the entire nation is complicit.

We see this not only when slave hunters travel up from Georgia, but when members of the Massachusetts judiciary, the US Secretary of State, and everyday Bostonians do all in their power to assist in the Crafts' recapture—when the US President himself resolves to uphold the new Fugitive Slave Law that would return them to bondage. At the same time, we see a rising tide: of a multiracial coalition of citizens who rise up, in defiance of all cost, to fight for the Crafts and others to be free, to do right.

Above all, the Crafts themselves model for us the resilience, the courage, the creative vision required to move forward and live out the true meaning of the creed that helped inspire their pursuit of freedom, and so many others: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Open the book and you'll see many faces—black-and-white portraits in the endpapers, identified in image credits. Which are your favorites? If you could read a book about one of these people, whose story would you most want to read?
2. MSHW opens with an “Overture”—why? Why not start at “The Cottage”?
3. How did William and Ellen Craft’s childhood experiences prepare them for their 1,000-mile journey out of Macon and beyond?
4. Two women shape Ellen Craft’s childhood in profound ways: first, her mother Maria, but also the woman she was made to call “Mistress,” Eliza Cleveland Smith. What does Ellen learn from each of them?
5. How did the Crafts’ performances of the roles of master and slave evolve throughout their 1,000-mile journey? How did Ellen adapt as a “master,” and how did William change in his role as a “slave”?
6. The Crafts’ original plan was to go to Canada. Instead, they choose to join William Wells Brown on the abolitionist lecture circuit. What were the risks, and why did they choose this path? What do they learn from Brown?
7. Compare the Crafts’ 1,000 miles from Georgia to Philadelphia to their second 1,000 miles journey on the abolitionist lecture circuit. How are these “performances” similar, different?
8. Imagine yourself in America in 1850, North and South. Would you have supported the “Great Compromise,” with its Fugitive Slave Act? Why or why not? Can you picture the other side?
9. One early reader suggested cutting the portraits of Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Daniel Webster, and Harriet Martineau. What purpose do these snapshots serve?
10. A “world turned upside down” is a refrain throughout the book. How are various worlds turned upside down in the wake of the Crafts’ actions?
11. The story of the Crafts’ lives is full of twists and turns to the very end. How are their later choices like or unlike their earlier ones? What do you think motivated them?
12. Discuss the title. How does the Crafts’ relationship with the terms Master Slave Husband Wife evolve throughout the story?
13. The book’s original subtitle was *An American Love Story*. What are the love stories in the book? Do you prefer the existing subtitle or the old?
14. The author raises this question in the intro: “What is it about this unforgettable story that makes it so difficult for us, as a nation, to remember?” What is your answer?
15. It’s been said that we must go back to the years before the Civil War—the years of this book—to find a time when America was so divided. What can we learn from the Crafts’ story today?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Media

- [CBS Sunday Morning](#)
- [NBC 10 Part 1](#)
- [NBC 10 Part 2](#)
- [ABC News Live Prime](#)
- [Good Morning America](#)
- [Morning Edition](#)

Reviews

- [Publisher's Weekly](#)
- [Kirkus](#)
- [Library Journal](#)
- [Booklist](#)

Best of the Year

- New York Times: [The 10 Best Books of 2023](#)
- Smithsonian Magazine: [The Ten Best History Books of 2023](#)
- O, The Oprah Quarterly: [The Best Conversation-Starting Books of 2023](#)
- New York Times: [100 Notable Books of 2023](#)
- TIME: [The 100 Must Read Books of 2023](#)
- NPR: [Books We Love 2023](#)
- Chicago Public Library: [Must-Read Books of 2023: Nonfiction](#)
- Washington Independent Review of Books: [Our 51 Favorite Books of 2023](#)
- Amazon: [Top 20 Biographies & Memoirs](#)
- The New Yorker: [Best Books of 2023](#)

Awards

- Kirkus Awards / Finalist
- Carnegie Medal / Longlist
- Goodreads Choice Awards / Nominee
- New England Book Awards / Finalist

If you decide to adopt *Master Slave Husband Wife* for your book club, we would love to hear about it! Please let us know by emailing us at marketing@simonandschuster.com or post on social media using the hashtags **#SimonBooks** and **#MasterSlaveHusbandWife**.

Thank you for your consideration.

Your friends at Simon & Schuster

