



Voices
from the
Gaps

Three Rediscovered Novels

by Frances E.W. Harper

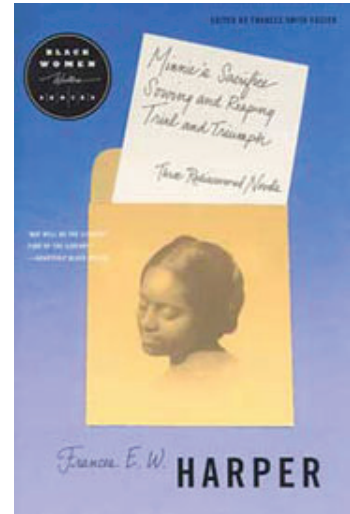
More Trial, Less Triumph

“The three novels collected in this volume represent a major discovery in American literary history,” according to Frances Smith Foster, a professor of literature at the University of California, San Diego, and the editor of *Three Rediscovered Novels: Minnie’s Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, and Trial and Triumph*, written by the late Frances E. W. Harper (1825-1911). Foster originally set out to research and write an article about Harper, an African American author, poet, orator and social reformer of the mid-nineteenth century, for a Feminist Press series on “lost” or undervalued writers.

Prior to Foster’s research, Frances E.W. Harper was cited as the author of at least eight books of poetry, a short story, “The Two Offers” (1859) and a novel, *Iola Leroy* (1892). What Foster fortuitously uncovered through determined research, years of digging, and a bit of luck, are an additional three novels, written by Harper and published in serial format for the Afro-Protestant periodical, *The Christian Recorder*, between 1869 and 1877. From an historical perspective the *Three Rediscovered Novels* are “a major discovery.”

As Foster explains in her introduction to these reprinted texts, only four or five novels are documented as being published before *Minnie’s Sacrifice* (1869), and fewer than two-dozen novels are acknowledged as being written by African Americans before the twentieth century.

Harper’s work adds significantly not only to the literary canon of the nineteenth century, but is more importantly among the first works conceived and written by a black author for and about a black audience. The common themes that Harper focuses upon throughout these texts served a concomitant purpose in the Reconstruction era - to debunk the common yet erroneous stereotype of “the inferior, subservient Negro,” as well as to promote the ideals of temperance, morality, internal fortitude, Christianity, and ethical conduct, within the African American community.



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While the political and idealistic goals of these novels may provide compelling historical significance, as modern fiction, these short novels move like flat-footed soldiers. The plot of *Minnie's Sacrifice* is littered with idyllic yet ultimately implausible characters, as well as a disruptive narrative style, that is indicative of the conventions used throughout *Sowing and Reaping* and *Trial and Triumph*. The two protagonists of *Minnie's Sacrifice* -- Minnie Carpenter and Louis Le Grange -- unrelated and unknown to one another, are the offspring of white masters and black slaves. Both children, though biracial, look more white than "colored."

As a result of their ostensibly "pure" lineage, Minnie and Louis are adopted by white parents and led to believe that they are Anglo Americans. The narrative revolves around the realization and adjustments that both Louis and Minnie must endure, as they align racial identity with biological heritage. Both must decide whether to maintain their social privilege as whites or to renounce their Anglo upbringing, in order to help their fellow African Americans rise above the confines of slavery and racism.

Minnie and Louis eventually "do the right thing," as is the case with the majority of Harper's protagonists. The simple, seemingly painless process by which Louis realigns his racial identity is unconvincingly and neatly resolved in a few short, dismissive paragraphs. Louis, as a teenager who still believes that he is "pure" white, volunteers for the Confederate Army. However, on the eve of his first military engagement, Louis' black grandmother, who he believes to be his nanny, informs her grandson of his mixed racial lineage. She warns Louis that if he continues in service to the Confederates, he will be killing his "own people."

In response to this shocking news, Harper tells us that Louis feels, "like a mariner at midnight on a moonless sea." He is rightfully distraught. Yet eight lines later, Louis has handled his emotional crisis, charted a new course for his life, and is now "convinced that he is allied to the Negro race." This quick, sitcom-like resolution to a life altering and psychologically charged decision paints Louis as a flat, unconvincing character and reduces the credibility of Harper's narrative. Louis' oversimplified conflict is indicative of the superficial treatment that each of Harper's characters receives, throughout the three texts. In seeking to send an unmistakable message to the African American community about respectable behavior and "doing the right thing," Harper limits the depth of her own stories.



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In developing Minnie's character, Harper ultimately creates the pinnacle of perfection, a woman who visits with the poor and disenfranchised by day and sews clothes for destitute and orphaned children by night. There is no end to her kindness or consummate behavior. Louis also quickly converts from his Confederate alliances to become a paragon of truth and virtue within the African American community. Similarly, in *Sowing and Reaping*, subtitled a "Temperance Story," protagonist Belle Gordon is a woman who treads upon the moral high ground, saving sinners from the perils of alcohol and renouncing all intemperance, not simply, as she states "because I think it vulgar, but because I know it is wicked."

In the mid-nineteenth century, these consistent and highly moralized portrayals of acceptable behavior were purposefully crafted to deliver a transparent message about the virtues of Christian living and the evils of alcohol. However, for audiences in the twenty-first century, the one-dimensional, holier-than-thou veneer of Harper's protagonists propels them into insufferable perfection. The characters like Minnie and Belle, who Harper seeks to elevate, become predictable and base constructs. By painting her characters as individuals devoid of human error and weakness, there is little that transforms them into much beyond Harper's own platitudes.

In addition to Harper's simplistic characters, there are inconsistencies in the narrative structure that interrupt the flow and delivery of the stories. Throughout the first four chapters of *Minnie's Sacrifice*, Minnie and Louis are introduced to the reader in a consistent and effective third person, omniscient perspective. However in Chapter V, Harper switches abruptly to a first person acknowledgement of herself as the author, and as us of readers. She writes, "Before I proceed any further with my story, let me tell the reader something of the Le Granges, whom I have unceremoniously introduced." She continues to compromise the description and action of the narrative with phrases like "Let us now return to Minnie's friend. . ." or "When we last left Louis. . ." In marking the passage of time through this literary convention, Harper inextricably interjects her presence and voice into the novels. She no longer remains an unobtrusive observer and instead becomes more like a pesky neighbor, continually knocking on your door and asking to borrow a cup of sugar. Without consistent boundaries for the reader and the author, the novel jumps from formal to informal, engaging to conversational; the resulting fictional structure is ultimately compromised.



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At the end of the *Three Rediscovered Novels*, in the text of *Trial and Triumph*, Frances E. W. Harper tells her readers, “I have essayed to weave a story which I hope will serve a deeper purpose than the mere amusement of the hour, that it will quicken and invigorate human hearts and not fail to impart a lesson of usefulness and value.” In the mid-nineteenth century, Harper gave hope and voice to many newly literate African Americans, who had lived to see the end of slavery, but who would face indefinitely the insidious effects of prejudice and institutionalized racism. While Harper may have created compelling drama for the readers of *The Christian Recorder*, in the Twenty-first Century, the simplistic conventions, shallow characters, and inconsistent narrative structure of these rediscovered novels remain more trial and less triumph.

Reviewed by Kristi Benson