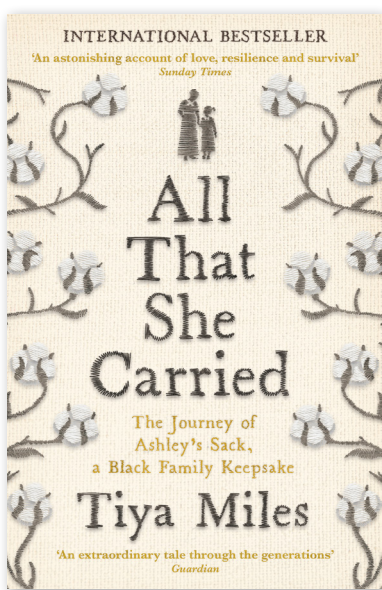


All That She Carried

The Journey of Ashley's Sack, A Black Family Keepsake

by Tiya Miles



PLOT SUMMARY

A renowned historian traces the life of a single object handed down through generations to illuminate the lives left out of the archives.

In 1850s South Carolina, Rose, an enslaved woman, faced a crisis: the imminent sale of her young daughter Ashley. She quickly packed a cotton bag with a few items. Rose and Ashley would never be reunited, and, decades later, Ashley's granddaughter Ruth embroidered this family history on the sack in spare, haunting language.

Harvard historian Tiya Miles traces these women's faint presence in archival records, and, where archives fall short, she turns to objects, art and the environment to write a singular history of the experience of slavery and the uncertain freedom afterward. In her efforts to uncover the lives of people who were then considered property, Miles gives us a poignant story of resilience and love passed down against all the odds.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

In *All That She Carried*, Miles uses the motif and symbolism of cloth as a research approach – researching the story of Rose and Ashley ‘along the bias grain’ - a term by Marisa Fuentes, referring to ‘the angled line across a swath of material where a natural give already exists.’

In explaining this approach, Miles says:

‘This method devised by a woman historian takes up cloth as a metaphor, describing a practice of reading documents to access the lives of enslaved women as if these papers were bolts of fabric. In the stretch of the cloth exists a certain kind of gleaning, and, in that gleaning, a more capacious kind of knowledge’ (p300).

In this way, Miles uses the literal material of Ashley's Sack as an ongoing metaphor and research method with which to investigate it as

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an important historical artefact, and the women’s lives that it touched. Not only that, but she recognises the relevance of fabric, embroidery and sewing as both symbolic of union and connectivity, and as particularly ‘female’.

‘With cloth as surface and embroidery thread and needle as tools, (Ruth) framed this survival tale as a women’s story, claiming feminine space for her foremothers and for herself at a time – the early 1900s – when the value of Black womanhood was still widely denigrated in American society. She must have shared a sense of the cross-cultural symbolism that fabric carries as a metaphor for tying, weaving, knotting and binding people together’ (p234).

In this way, Miles invents a way to be able to traverse the apparent silence of the usual historical archives and find Rose, Ruth and Ashley’s stories in the fabric of the environment, of art and of objects, telling a poignant and compelling story and making a patchwork of the history that always should have been there.

DISCUSSION POINTS

One of the major issues that Miles highlights in *All That She Carried* is the difficulty in finding any archived evidence for the study of Black women in history, apart from the accounts of ‘slavery apologists and plantation diarists’ (p302).

Miles says ‘evidence, or the lack thereof, presents a particular challenge for the study of Black women, women of colour and women on the whole as groups that have been socially disempowered and therefore often overlooked by the keepers of records and the intellectual architects of archives’.

Ashley’s Sack, therefore, presents historians such as Miles with a wonderful artefact of Black history, but remains an incredibly rare find. The rarity of the sack provokes the question, what other artefacts existed and then lost? What would those artefacts tell us about the experiences of Black women and of slavery?

Further, if a culture had thousands of items that had once belonged to enslaved Black women – and if we now valued them in the same way that we have traditionally, for instance, valued paintings by white men – how might our present culture be different? Would Black women be valued differently? What might change? What number of new historical investigations might be possible?

Discuss whether you think there is a continuing disinterest – socially, culturally and academically – in the lives of Black women today, and, if so, how this might be perceived. Are we, for instance, platforming and celebrating the work, research and creative output of as many Black

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women as white women – or of men in general? And how do other intersectionalities layer our perceptions even further, such as class or disability?

QUESTIONS

What did you think of Louisa Piquet’s story (p154) who risked a terrible beating for money to buy a dress? Can you imagine what the power of a ‘normal’, pretty dress – and not the rough fabrics slaves wore – might have represented to an enslaved woman?

How did you feel when reading about how Rose and Ashley would have been separated? And when thinking about the US government in recent times separating undocumented migrants from their children? (p191) Are we a more caring society now?

In the visual essay ‘Carrying Capacity’ in *All That She Carried*, Michelle May-Curry and Tiya Miles curate a number of contemporary artworks which help read Ashley’s Sack as a piece of art as well as a historical object. What were your thoughts regarding these artworks? Did any of them move you or especially interest you? Why?

What do you think was the significance of the hair that was included by Rose in Ashley’s Sack?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tiya Miles is the author of three multiple prize-winning works in the history of early American race relations. She is currently Professor of History and Radcliffe Alumnae Professor at Harvard University.

Tiya lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts with her husband and three children. She is an avid reader of feminist mysteries and a passionate fan of old houses.



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NEXT STEPS

In her Introduction, Miles says: '[the sack] filters a light of remembrance on the viewer's own familial bonds, leading any of us to ask what things our own families possess that connect us to our past and to wonder what we might gain from the contemplation of that connection' (p7). Do you have any family heirlooms that are meaningful to you? How do those items connect you to your past? Who did they belong to, and do you know what significance they held to that person? Can you do some research by talking to older relatives and finding out more about the item?

Inspired by Ashley's Sack, look at some online how-to guides to help you embroider a family motto, memory, image or other significant message onto a piece of material. You could look at traditional quilting techniques, where different members of a family make quilt squares and join them together, or embroider (or cross-stitch, knit, crochet or even make a tapestry – all traditionally viewed as 'women's crafts') something meaningful to you onto a cushion cover, bag, throw or another medium altogether! Let your creativity and emotion guide you. ■

If you enjoyed this book...

RECOMMENDED READS

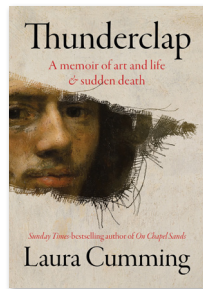
In *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits*, Tiya Miles reveals that slavery was at the heart of the Midwest's iconic city: Detroit, and not just reserved for the southern states.

In *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive*, Marisa Fuentes creates a portrait of urban Caribbean slavery in this colonial town from the perspective of women whose stories appear only briefly in historical records.

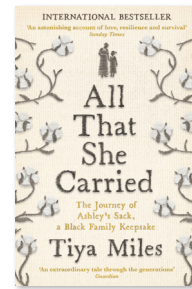
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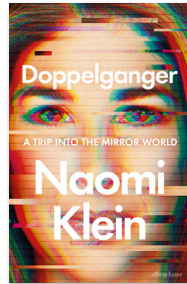
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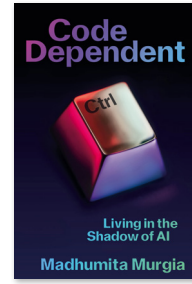
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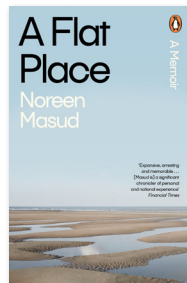
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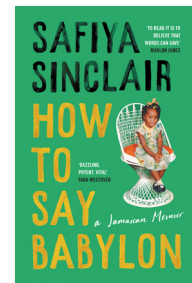
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