

HISTORY, MEMOIR, AND NOVEL

a review by

E. Thomson Shields, Jr.

Lynn Domina, editor. *Approaches to Teaching Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* 176. The Modern Language Association of America, 2024.

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Reading *Approaches to Teaching Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, I remembered meeting Jean Fagin Yellin some thirty-five years ago, soon after she had published her 1987 Harvard University Press edition of Harriet Jacobs's 1861 autobiographical *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Using the pseudonym Linda Brent, Jacobs tells about growing up in slavery, including being sexually pressured by her owner; running away to hide in a crawl-space above her freedwoman grandmother's cottage, where she stayed for seven years and could watch her enslaved children through a peep hole; and ultimately escaping to the North. Yellin was at East Carolina University to talk about Jacobs near Edenton, NC, where Jacobs's story began and where Yellin had done research. Yellin told me how the women of the Edenton Historical Commission were very helpful, providing any materials she requested without hesitation while, at the same time, they didn't believe *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to be actual history. They did not deny what *Incidents* illustrated – that slavery had been harsh on enslaved women – but they believed that the experiences written about were fiction and probably by someone who had not been enslaved. Among Yellin's accomplishments in her 1987 edition of *Incidents* was to show that the work was very much about Jacobs's life – and that Jacobs herself had written the book, despite having grown up in a North Carolina that had generally kept its enslaved population illiterate.

Even in an era when Jacobs's text is accepted as historically true and written by Jacobs herself, the work draws people to look at *Incidents* as both history and literature, as autobiography and novel. A major strength of *Approaches to Teaching Jacobs* is its interdisciplinary approach, connecting *Incidents* to historical studies, cultural studies, and literary studies, including the techniques of fiction. An incomplete list of fields identified as being used in the collection's twenty-seven essays includes African American literature; African American studies; American literature; American studies; American print culture; archival studies; Black feminist theory; composition, writing, and rhetorical theory; creative writing; digital humanities; environmental humanities; literature and medicine; modern American and Canadian fiction; multicultural American literature; pedagogy; performance studies; religious studies; social work; Victorian literature; visual studies; women's literature; and women and gender studies.

To bring together these various perspectives, Lynn Domina, the book's editor, opens the collection with "Part One: Materials," an overview of resources available for using Jacobs's *Incidents* in the classroom. The materials Domina discusses include not only teaching editions of Jacobs's book, but also a sampling of excerpts included in several American literature anthologies. "Further Reading for Students" presents contextual works such as Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and Angela Davis's 1971 essay "Reflections on the Black

Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," and Domina rounds out Part One with "The Instructor's Library," an overview of biographical materials, critical essays, background readings, and audiovisual and digital resources related to *Incidents*.

Domina then moves on to the larger section of the book, "Part Two: Approaches." Following her introduction to Part Two, Domina divides the collection's twenty-seven essays into four subsections: "Thematic Approaches," "Intertextual Approaches," "Teaching Strategies," and "Contextual Approaches." Here is where the wide range of valid and revealing approaches to *Incidents* becomes apparent. As Domina points out, not only in the eight essays in "Thematic Approaches," but throughout the collection, "Nearly every essay discusses gender and sexuality, often as those ideas relate to motherhood and the cult of true womanhood." But, Domina continues, four other major themes emerge, each explored in several of the essays: individual autonomy and agency, genre characteristics and expectations, sentimentalism, and Christianity (18). Just as interesting are themes discussed in individual essays aside from the major ones, themes readers may not have considered before. For example, Josh Doty emphasizes the work's medical contexts, in terms of both the nineteenth century as well as more recent questions about racially biased health disparities. Sometimes less considered themes come

out as part of a discussion of a larger theme. Marilyn Judith Atlas highlights the theme of nature as she looks at how Jacobs's text can be seen in part as an exploration of "the art of storytelling," with a narrator who "refuses to be erased and silenced," so that "[a]s the narrative progresses, Brent finds strength in the natural world and faces and slays her demons, becoming increasingly able to inhabit her rightful place in the world as a person, not an object to be owned" (19).

The nine essays that make up the section "Intertextual Approaches" continue the exploration of themes in *Incidents*, but now by juxtaposing *Incidents* alongside an assortment of other texts. These include historical docu-

ments, such as the advertisement Jacobs's enslaver, James Norcom, posted when Jacobs escaped to her grandmother's attic crawlspace, as suggested in the essays by Eric Sterling and by John Hay. Norcom's advertisement can be compared to the version Jacobs attributes to Dr. Flint included at the end of Chapter Seventeen in *Incidents*, reworked both for thematic emphasis and to retain her anonymity. And both Norcom's original and Jacobs's revised advertisements can be compared to other "runaway slave" ads, setting up the conventions, especially the language, of the "runaway slave" genre. Other suggested intertextual readings include putting *Incidents* alongside 1850s antebellum African American novels, such

as Harriet E. Wilson's *Our Nig* and *The Bondswoman's Narrative* by Hannah Bond (using the name Hannah Crafts), as John Hay suggests. But Hay goes on to also suggest reading *Incidents* alongside three mid-nineteenth century fictional autobiographies – Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Herman Melville's *Typee* (1846), and Fanny Fern's *Ruth Hall* (1854) – each of which raises questions about the line between fiction and real life. Amina Gautier tells about teaching *Incidents* alongside late twentieth- and early twenty-first century neo-slave narratives in a course on narratives of slavery, including Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* (1990), Edward Jones's *The Known World* (2003), and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016). Kimberly Southwick-Thompson pairs *Incidents* with Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army member Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1988), allowing students to "recognize how long injustices like those that twenty-first-century social justice movements fight against have existed, despite these injustices' many different masks" (124). Jericho Williams even pairs *Incidents* with Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894) to examine themes of slavery and childhood alongside issues of mixed literary genres.

Interestingly, while comparisons (and mostly contrasts) between Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and Jacobs's *Incidents* come up elsewhere in *Approaches to Teaching Jacobs*, Douglass gets only brief mention in the section "Intertextual Approaches" – another sign of how this collection shows *Incidents* can be seen and taught from numerous perspectives. And not only in this section, but in the entire collection, John S. Jacobs's autobiography, *A True Tale of Slavery*, by Harriet Jacobs's brother and serialized in the London weekly newspaper *The Leisure Hour* in 1861, gets only one brief mention.¹

While classroom examples are found throughout *Approaches to Teaching Jacobs*, the seven essays in the section "Teaching Strategies" highlight how specific pedagogical tools have been used to teach themes and literary forms in *Incidents*. For example, Alex W. Black discusses how he brings out the defining features of melodrama – "sensational plots, and its exaggerated characterization" (141) – presenting the genre of melodrama in a positive rather than derogatory light and using its features as an entree for students into the themes, plot, and characters of *Incidents*. In her American literature survey classes, Susanna Hoeness-Krupshaw prompts students to think about Jacobs in

the context of early nineteenth-century American literature by having students break into groups to role-play as Jacobs, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau participating in a television talk show. It is an assignment that works well both in face-to-face classes and in synchronous online sections, she reports (139).

The point about in-person and online classes highlights that, since the call for submissions to this volume went out in 2019, the essays were written during the COVID-19 pandemic when many if not most instructors were having to move classes online. And a number of excellent online sources are given throughout this section. So, for example, while Carrie Johnston focuses on an in-person archival assignment using bills of sale for enslaved African Americans in the Wake Forest University archives, she includes online sources she used when she moved the course – and assignment – online in the Fall of 2020. And Kristin Moriah, who teaches at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, focuses on how she brought in the Black geography of Jacobs's life in Edenton, NC, as COVID moved her class online. She includes topics such as the geographic misinformation believed by much of the town's African American population. Ultimately, Moriah focuses on



RIGHT The Norcoms' shared grave marker, James (inscription showing on the left) and Matilda (on the right); photographs by Claire Shields

¹"A True Tale of Slavery" is a condensed version of John S. Jacobs's autobiography. Recently the recovered 1855 version of John Jacobs's full narrative, *The United States Governed by Six Hundred Thousand Despots: A True Story of Slavery*, ed. Jonathan D.S. Schroeder (U of Chicago P, 2024), has been published (after the essays in *Approaches to Teaching Jacobs* were written). Serialized in the Sydney, Australia, newspaper *The Empire*, one of the interesting differences between the 1855 and 1861 versions is that in the earlier publication, John Jacobs gives full names, especially of enslavers/owners, while in the 1861 condensed version, only initials are given, such as Dr. Norcom being identified as Dr. Norcom in 1855 but only as Dr. N---- in 1861 – and as the pseudonym Dr. Flint by Harriet Jacobs.



through to upper-level college seminars. The visual includes the visual imagery in Jacobs's text as well as the graphics used in both proslavery and abolitionist pamphlets, advertising, etc. And Lorraine Dubuisson tells about teaching *Incidents* in the wide-ranging context of a senior-level college survey on "Literature by Women," covering women writers from the Middle Ages to the present day.

By showing the variety of themes in *Incidents* and the various texts *Incidents* can be read alongside, as well as

the numerous ways the work has been successfully taught, *Approaches to Teaching Jacob* is a useful work for anyone thinking about how to interpret Jacobs's autobiography. Even so, there are a few limitations to the work. The most significant one is that while Jean Yellin's historical work is given a good deal of credit and is cited throughout, Yellin's edition of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is omitted in the discussion of editions available for classroom use. At the same time, while several editions aimed specifically at classroom use are noted, the Norton Critical Edition is given precedence over others, not only by being discussed first, but by having

specifics connected with Jacobs and Edenton. For example, how does Jacob's surveying her world through the lens of her peephole affect the way she sees the world, or how can using a brochure map from the Historic Edenton State Historic Site alongside *Google Maps* help students see that the Norcom home Jacobs had escaped from and the attic of Molly Horniblow's cottage she escaped to were just one block apart.

Approaches to Teaching Jacobs finishes with three essays in the section titled "Contextual Approaches." This final section, as Domina notes, "focuses primarily on the context of the student, that is, the course in which the text is

taught" (17). Heidi M. Hanrahan tells about teaching *Incidents* in part of an Introduction to Gender and Women's Studies class taught by an interdisciplinary team (a historian, a sociologist, and a literature specialist). The course includes a service-learning component, which Jacobs's text is part of. As Hanrahan writes, "since *Incidents* invites – in fact, demands – an engaged, activist audience" (169), by the end of the course, "students did see themselves as agents of change, people who could do the kind of work Jacobs calls us to do" (173). Melissa J. Lingle-Martin tells how she has focused on the visual in teaching *Incidents* at various levels, from high school students

all the essays cite the Norton for passages from *Incidents*. An explanation of why the Norton Critical Edition was chosen for citations, and a discussion of what audience, especially what classroom audience, each of the mentioned editions might be best for would be useful. For instance, I generally used the Yellin edition when teaching upper-level undergraduate and graduate classes because not only does it provide good historical context, but its extensive notes – even if somewhat overwhelming – model for advanced students the sort of data needed to make academically sound claims. At the same time, I've used inexpensive editions like the Dover Thrift Edition (\$6.00 for the paperback, 99¢ for the eBook) in lower-level classes where I want to save students money and have them focus on the text first, using class time to provide context.

I will admit that in part I may be emphasizing Yellin's edition because it is where the map of Jacobs's Edenton used by Moriah was originally published, having been drawn by a staff member of the North Carolina State Archives for the 1987 edition.² From there it was picked up by the Historic Edenton State Historic Site for its brochure. And Moriah's essay hits home for me because I moved to Edenton almost twenty five years ago. When I walk through

town, I think about how the historic homes I pass would fit into Jacobs's life – was that house there when Jacobs was born? built while she was growing up? built during the seven years (1835–1842) that Jacobs lived in her "loop-hole of a retreat"? Or was that house not part of Jacobs's life in Edenton at all? Some of the most important structures in *Incidents* no longer exist. Both Molly Horniblow's and Dr. Norcom's houses have long since been torn down, the sites of each now parking lots – the Horniblow cottage is the back-door loading area for a local hardware store, and the Norcom house site is a parking lot for the local Baptist Church.

Moriah's Canadian students imagine Jacobs's Edenton through *Google Maps* while I physically walk the places, yet I am also imagining Jacobs's and Edenton's history and geography. By including a large variety of perspectives, *Approaches to Teaching Jacobs* highlights both the factual history in *Incidents* Yellin brought out starting in the 1980s as well as how Jacobs's nonfiction uses techniques more common to writing fiction. *Approaches to Teaching Jacobs's Incidents* in the Life of a Slave Girl gives teachers and general readers a sense of the line that Jacobs doesn't just walk, but crosses over, back and forth, throughout her autobiography. ■



ABOVE Maritime Underground Railroad marker in Edenton, NC., providing a self-guided walking tour of Harriet Jacobs's time in Edenton (1813–42); erected by North Carolina Civil War Trails and National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom; photograph by E. Thomson Shields, Jr.

² As Moriah notes, this map is no longer available directly on the Historic Edenton State Historic Site website. However, aside from being in Yellin's 1987 and 2009 editions of *Incidents*, a version can be found by starting from the Historic Site's main page, clicking on the "History" tab, and from there following the "Harriet Jacobs" link, which goes to the separate *Harriet Jacobs website*, at which point, after clicking on the "Maps" tab at the top, one can scroll down to the section "Self-Guided Tour of Harriet Jacobs's Edenton Years" and find the "self-guided tour brochure" link, which will bring up the map in a pop-up window, scrolling down to see the map's legend.

ABOVE James Iredell, Jr. Law Office, next to site of Molly Horniblow's house; photograph by E. Thomson Shields, Jr.