



DEAR AMERICA

*The Diary of  
Clotee, a Slave Girl*



*A Picture  
of Freedom*

PATRICIA C. MCKISSACK

SCHOLASTIC INC. • NEW YORK

While the events described and some of the characters in this book may be based on actual historical events and real people, Clotee is a fictional character, created by the author, and her diary and its epilogue are works of fiction.

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*Honoring Lizzie Passmore  
my great-great-great grandmother  
who dared to learn and teach*



*Belmont Plantation,  
Virginia*



*1859*



Slaves aine s'posed to know how to read and write, but I do. Miz Lilly would fall down in a fit if she knew I had made myself a diary like the one she's got on her bed table. It don't matter to me that hers is all wrapped in fine satin and got ribbons and beads on it and mine is just made up of papers I found in the trash and keeps tied together with a measure of yarn. It's a diary just the same. Mine. And I aim to write in it whenever I get a chance.

I got to be real particular and make sure nobody finds out though, 'cause if my mas'er finds out I would fall under the whip. Time and time again I done heard Mas' Henley swear that if he catches his slaves with learnin' he'll beat the skin off us, then sell our hides to slavers from the Deep South. He got the law on his side, too. Anybody found teachin' a slave in the state of Virginia can be sent to jail. Sure! Wonder why the white folks is so determined to keep us from knowin' things? What are they scared of?

Cain't help but laugh a little bit when I think of what Mas' Henley would think if he knew I could read better than his boy—and that it was his own wife that had teached me!

It's near dark. Pray Lord, don't let nobody find my diary hid behind the loose brick in the outside chimney wall, back of the kitchen. Hope it can stay dry and safe until I can sneak away to write again.

### *Next mornin', first light*

I got up extra early and churned the butter for breakfast and helped out in the kitchen the way Aunt Tee 'spects me to every mornin'. That give me a little time to practice my writin' at my spot by the big tree out behind the kitchen. Sunrise is a good writin' hour – when all is still and quiet.

I want to tell somebody 'bout all the things I done learned for the past three years. Words got magic. Every time I read or write a word it puts a picture in my head.

Like when I write H-O-M-E I sees Belmont Plantation and all the people that live here. I sees the Big House where Mas' Henley, Miz Lilly, and William stay, livin' easy. I sees the separate kitchen with the attic above it where I sleep along with Aunt Tee, Uncle Heb, and Hince. I sees the Quarters where my friends live, and beyond their cabins, the fields and orchards where they work.

I sees Aunt Tee cookin' at the fireplace, and the stables where Hince takes care of Mas' Henley's prize racin' horses, and the gardens and grounds that Uncle Heb makes pretty. Home. That one li'l word shows me all of that.

Mas' Henley thinks he owns everything here at Belmont, but he don't own all of me – not really. I know, he can tell me to come and I got to come. When he say do this, I better do it or he'll put the whip to my back. But I done learned that he cain't tell me what to think – and feel – and know. He look at me every day but he cain't see what's in my head. He cain't own what's inside me. Nobody can.

### *Few days later*

It rained all the long, long day. Everything is dampish and sticky. I wondered if my diary stayed dry in its hidin' place. No need to worry, the stone covered it well.

### *Next day*

It rained again today. When it rains hard, the field slaves don't have to work. But our work in the



kitchen goes on all the time – no days off.

Aunt Tee say I'm lucky, gettin' picked to work in the Big House. I aine so sure. Livin' right under Mas' Henley and Miz Lilly aine so easy to me. We got to do their biddin' all hours of the night and day. But field work is hard – hard on your back, and in the summer, the heat is smothery. I guess what it comes to is bein' a slave aine no good no matter where they got you workin'.

### *Next day*

I just wrote T-R-E-E. I see my tree – the live oak behind the kitchen where I come to write whenever I can slip away. I put a “s” on tree and now the word is trees. The picture in my head turns to the apple orchards. In spring, the apple trees are filled with bright, white blossoms. I close my eyes and see the same trees in the green of summer, and full of good-tastin' apples in the fall. I love playin' with words – puttin' letters in and takin' letters out and lettin' the pictures change.

