

The House Girl: A Novel (P.S.)

By Tara Conklin

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The House Girl, the historical fiction debut by Tara Conklin, is an unforgettable story of love, history, and a search for justice, set in modern-day New York and 1852 Virginia.

Weaving together the story of an escaped slave in the pre–Civil War South and a determined junior lawyer, *The House Girl* follows Lina Sparrow as she looks for an appropriate lead plaintiff in a lawsuit seeking compensation for families of slaves. In her research, she learns about Lu Anne Bell, a renowned prewar artist whose famous works might have actually been painted by her slave, Josephine.

Featuring two remarkable, unforgettable heroines, Tara Conklin's *The House Girl* is riveting and powerful, literary fiction at its very best.

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The House Girl: A Novel (P.S.) By Tara Conklin Bibliography

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Author One-on-One: Maria Semple and Tara Conklin





Maria Semple is the bestselling author of *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*.

Maria Semple: Tara, huge congratulations on *The House Girl*. How did this novel come into being?

Tara Conklin: Thanks, Maria. The novel began as a short story that I wrote about six years ago. I came across the term “slave doctor” in a book I was reading and the words made me stop. I became curious as to why a person dedicated to healing would take on such a role. From that initial spark of curiosity, I wrote a short story about a slave doctor, Caleb Harper, and two women appeared in his story. I say “appeared” because that’s really how it seemed to happen – Josephine and Dorothea just showed up and demanded my attention. I couldn’t stop wondering about these two characters and so I started writing separate stories about them, and I just kept writing.

MS: Josephine, a house slave in 1852 Virginia, became one of your narrators. The other, Lina, is a lawyer in present day New York. You practiced law before you became a novelist. Did Lina’s voice come easily by comparison?

TC: No, I actually found Lina’s sections tougher to get right. I think because Lina’s external world is more similar to mine, it was more difficult to imagine her – I kept bumping up against my own experience.

MS: That’s so surprising, that Josephine was the easier voice to get right.

TC: Josephine came to me very organically – I felt that I knew who she was and what she wanted early on in the writing. Her character was inspired by two people: one was an African-American artist named Mary Bell and the other was a former slave, Elizabeth Mumbet Freeman, who lived in my hometown during the 18th

century. Mumbet said that if she could have one minute of freedom, only to die afterwards, she would make the trade. That strength of purpose helped me understand Josephine.

MS: While she's not a narrator, the character of Lu Anne Bell looms large over the story. She's quite mysterious and wonderful. I'm curious if she, too, is partly based on a real person.

TC: No, she is entirely fictional, but I'm glad that you thought otherwise! I wrote quite a bit of back story for Lu Anne that never made its way into the novel: her childhood in Mississippi, how she met Mister, why they fell in love. I see Lu Anne as an essentially tragic figure – I think she wants to break out of the world she's been born into, but she can't quite transcend it.

MS: You were born in St. Croix and grew up in Stockbridge, MA. Did growing up in these two vastly different environments influence you as a writer?

TC: Both places are steeped in history, so they've given me an appreciation for and curiosity about the past and how it helps shape the present. Both places also have substantial ties to slavery. I don't remember much about St. Croix, but I grew up with my parents' stories of the island's racial tension, the horrible legacy of the sugar fields. When I was in elementary school in Stockbridge, I learned about the Underground Railroad and Mumbet (mentioned above), a slave who sued for her freedom in a Massachusetts court and won. These stories really stayed with me over the years.

MS: What are you reading now?

TC: I always have several novels on the go at once – right now I'm reading *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead, *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel and I'm re-reading *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley, one of my all-time favorites.

From Booklist
Conklin persuasively intertwines the stories of two women separated by time and circumstances but united by a quest for justice. When law associate Lena Sparrow is handed a plum assignment—to find the perfect poster child for a class-action suit on behalf of the descendants of American slaves—she has little appreciation for how radically the task will change the course of her own life and destiny. As she searches for a descendant of Josephine Bell, a house girl rumored to have been the actual artist of a series of stunning paintings credited to her white mistress, she peels away layers of both Josephine's past and her own complacency. Retracing Josephine's often-elusive path, she uncovers some troubling facts about her parents and the startling lie that formed the basis of her childhood and young adulthood. Stretching back and forth across time and geography, this riveting tale is bolstered by some powerful universal truths. --Margaret Flanagan

Review
"Assured and arresting...You cannot put it down."" (Chicago Tribune)

It's shelved under historical fiction, but THE HOUSE GIRL reads more like a historical whodunit, and a smart one at that . . . Both Josephine and Lina are intricately drawn characters — fierce, flawed and very real." (Minneapolis Star Tribune)

"[G]rabs you by the bonnet strings and starts running." (Entertainment Weekly)

"This will be the book-club book of 2013." (Marie Claire)

“Conklin ... is a skilled writer ... who knows how to craft a thoughtful page-turner ...We’re glued to the pages.” (Seattle Times)

“A sorrowful, engrossing novel in which the pursuit of justice serves as a catalyst to a more personal pursuit for truth . . . Through Josephine and Lina’s journeys, THE HOUSE GIRL is also a meditation on motherhood, feminism, loss, and, ultimately, redemption.” (Pittsburgh Post-Gazette)

“Conklin’s research blends subtly into the background while successfully rendering a picture of the complex tensions inherent in 1850s society...A historical novel that succeeds in giving voice to the voiceless.” (Winnipeg Free Press)

“Skillfully executed and packed with surprises, this novel of the ways in which art saves our humanity is an engrossing do-not-miss adventure.” (Shelf Awareness)

“Conklin’s sensitive, deft handling of complex racial and cultural issues, as well as her creation of a complicated, engaging story make this book destined to be a contender for best of 2013.” (School Library Journal (starred review))

“Riveting.” (Ebony)

“A seamless juxtaposition of past and present, of the lives of two women, and of the redemptive nature of art and the search for truth and justice. Guaranteed to keep readers up long past their bedtimes.” (Library Journal (starred review))

“Luminous . . . The rare novel that seamlessly toggles between centuries and characters and remains consistently gripping throughout . . . Powerful.” (BookPage)

“Infused with ominous atmosphere and evocative detail...a dramatic montage of narrative and personal testimonies that depicts the grotesque routines of the slave trade, the deadly risks of hte Underground Railroad and the impossible choices that slaves and abolitionists faced.” (Washington Post)

“Conklin persuasively intertwines the stories of two women separated by time and circumstances but united by a quest for justice...Stretching back and forth across time and geography, this riveting tale is bolstered by some powerful universal truths.” (Booklist)

“Rich and surprising...will make hearts ache yet again for those who suffered through slavery as well as cheer for those--Conklin and Lina--who illuminate their stories.” (Cleveland Plain Dealer)

“Tara Conklin’s wise, stirring and assured debut tells the story of two extraordinary women, living a century apart, but joined by their ferocity of spirit. From page one, I fell under the spell of THE HOUSE GIRL’s sensuous prose and was frantically turning pages until its thrilling conclusion.” (Maria Semple, author of Where'd You Go, Bernadette)

“The House Girl is a heartbreaking, heartwarming novel, ambitious, beautifully told, and elegantly crafted. Tara Conklin negotiates great vast swaths of time and tribulation, character and place, with grace, insight, and, simply, love.” (Laurie Frankel, author of Goodbye for Now and The Atlas of Love)

“THE HOUSE GIRL is an enthralling story of identity and social justice told through the eyes of two indomitable women, one a slave and the other a modern-day attorney, determined to define themselves on

their own terms.” (Hillary Jordan, author of Mudbound and When She Woke)

“There’s so much to admire in THE HOUSE GIRL -- two richly imagined heroines, two fully realized worlds, a deeply satisfying plot -- but what made me stand up and cheer was the moral complexity of these characters and the situations they face. I’m grateful for this transporting novel.” (Margot Livesey, New York Times bestselling author of The Flight of Gemma Hardy)

“THE HOUSE GIRL stands as both a literary memorial to the hundreds of thousands of slaves once exploited in the American South and a mellifluous meditation on the mysterious bonds of family, the hopes and sorrows of human existence, and the timeless quest for freedom.” (Corban Addison, author of A Walk Across the Sun)

“Tara Conklin’s powerful debut novel is a literary page-turner filled with history, lost love, and buried family secrets. Conklin masterfully interweaves the stories of two women across time, all while asking us to contemplate the nature of truth and justice in America.” (Amy Greene, author of Bloodroot)

“A thoughtful work of fiction about freedom, love, and the continued price for former slaves with modern descendants. Conklin creates a convincing case of an unrecognized injustice with a novel that is both legalistic and artistic...A story of personal and national identity that you won’t want to miss.” (Bookreporter.com)

“Exquisite...Conklin takes us down a curious rabbit hole that drops us before a looking glass of uncomfortable truths about race, power, art, family, law and ethics...One of those books in which there’s not one, two or three, but about ten good parts you’ll want to read and reread.” (Essence)

“Absorbing...[Conklin] buttresses her legal savvy with strong historical research. She also has a fine way with a story.” (Daily News)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Scott Ridgway:

In this 21st hundred years, people become competitive in every single way. By being competitive today, people have do something to make these people survives, being in the middle of the particular crowded place and notice by surrounding. One thing that sometimes many people have underestimated this for a while is reading. That's why, by reading a e-book your ability to survive boost then having chance to remain than other is high. For yourself who want to start reading any book, we give you this kind of The House Girl: A Novel (P.S.) book as basic and daily reading book. Why, because this book is usually more than just a book.

Samuel Tapp:

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Roberta Nieves:

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