



The Secrets of Mary Bowser

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Based on the remarkable true story of a freed African American slave who returned to Virginia at the onset of the Civil War to spy on the Confederates, The Secrets of Mary Bowser is a masterful debut by an exciting new novelist. Author Lois Leveen combines fascinating facts and ingenious speculation to craft a historical novel that will enthrall readers of women's fiction, historical fiction, and acclaimed works like Cane River and Cold Mountain that offer intimate looks at the twin nightmares of slavery and Civil War. A powerful and unforgettable story of a woman who risked her own freedom to bring freedom to millions of others, The Secrets of Mary Bowser celebrates the courageous achievements of a little known but truly inspirational American heroine.

The Secrets of Mary Bowser Details

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From Reader Review The Secrets of Mary Bowser for online ebook

Rosy says

The Secrets of Mary Bowser tells the story of a freed slave who returns to the South to spy for the Union. The reader learns of Mary Bowser's life as a slave who was freed by her owner and then sent to Philadelphia to obtain an education. As the Civil War approaches, Mary finds herself involved in the Underground Railroad, eventually returning to Richmond to spy as a slave in Jefferson Davis's home.

Containing less espionage and more historical fiction, the plot is well-researched but focuses more on Mary's backstory prior to the war. Mary Bowser as a character is an empowered, bold female protagonist, though I thought the first person voice bothersome, almost presumptuous and self serving. Bet Van Lew serves as an excellent foil to Mary as her former owner turned spy partner. Although the pace lagged in certain sections, the novel is full of insightful contrasts of North versus South and black versus white, and really emphasizes how the war was responsible for so much upheaval.

The ending, specifically the last scene, was really cloying and almost ruined the entire book for me. I'd recommend this book to fans of historical fiction but it definitely had a lot of slow moments.

Marialyce says

Well I am finished but the question remains did I finish the book? Well, the answer is no. I just gave it up after reading half of it.

Sometimes no matter how you fight the good fight to enjoy, to learn, to like a story, you just can't. Was it the writing that frustrated me? Perhaps as I found a topic which should have been interesting, well...in a word boring. Could I feel for any of the characters? Again the answer would have to be in the negative. Did I care that this was partially based on fact? Again my answer would be no.

Sometimes you just have to know when to fold them. It comes when you dread to pick up the book and read. It comes when you finally admit to yourself that this is tedium and there are literally tons of books out there that will engage you, enlighten you, and more importantly thrill you. This was not one of them.

So, I have finished this book, well, not in the true sense, but in the sense that I just could not subject myself to one more chapter, one more happening, and of course one more word. Sorry to say that I gave up, but happy to say that I did try.

QNPoohBear says

Mary El was born a slave to the wealthy Van Lew family of Richmond. Mama and Mary El work in the house while Papa works as a blacksmith for an Irishman. Mary El loves Sundays when she gets to see her Papa. Sometimes he buys her presents "just because." She knows she is loved and is proud of it. Mama tries to teach Mary the realities of slavery without dampening the girl's spirit. As the national crisis over slavery heats up, their "young" mistress, Miss Bet Van Lew, starts spouting abolitionist sentiments, much to the

dismay of her family and friends. After Old Master Van Lew passes away and Miss Bet comes into her inheritance, she uses it to buy- and free- her mother's slaves. This includes Mary El and her Mama, but not Papa. His owner won't sell for any price. The law says manumitted slaves have to leave the state within one year or be resold into slavery. Papa won't risk running, Mama won't leave Papa, what will happen to Mary El? Well, Miss Bet has plans for the girl which include a fancy education up north in the city of Philadelphia. Mary is scared to leave home and her family but excited to be free. In Philadelphia, she discovers freedom is not quite what she expected. She learns lessons about race and class prejudice, love, the role of women in 19th century society right along with Shakespeare, Longfellow, Latin and everything else. When war becomes imminent, Mary has a difficult choice to make. She returns to Virginia and uses her education and photographic memory to win the war for the Union and help end slavery forever.

This was a story that I was familiar with. I first read about Mary Elizabeth Bowser in Dear Ellen Bee: A Civil War Scrapbook of Two Union Spies and again in The Spymistress. When I picked this up, I wondered what else I could learn. Since the actual details of her life are scant, the author has to fill in the blanks. Then I wondered how a white woman could write in the voice of a black woman. I would never presume to do it even for all the studying I have done on slavery and the lives of enslaved women. I can't say whether Mary's voice comes across as accurate but it sounds very much like how I, as a white woman, would imagine an enslaved woman would think and speak.

The story itself is intriguing at times. The middle section reads like a grown up version of Addy Learns a Lesson: A School Story. There is a little too much telling at times. The author packs the book so full of events that it's hard to include Mary in all of them. I think Mary's role is a little too much to be believed by the end of the war. Not that she couldn't do what she did, but that she was the only one relaying all that information affecting the outcome of the war. That seems a little implausible. I would have preferred the author to focus on certain key events and not cover the entire history of the war with every single event that happened.

The relationship plot is very good. It shows how money and family history affected African Americans' perceptions of themselves and other African Americans. Money and social class outweighs race in their view, which is really fascinating. Mary also learns about expectations for traditional Society wives versus the way she was raised to think of herself and her own ideas about the future. She discovers just what kind of relationship she wants and it's a great one. I really liked the domestic scenes and seeing how she relates to the men in her life.

Mary is certainly an unsung American hero even if she didn't do half of what she does in the novel. She put her very life on the line for the greater good. She's an appealing character. Her emotions feel very realistic. As a young child she sounds like a spoiled and loved child who thinks highly of herself. She grows up a lot but remains true to herself. She never backs down though she has moments of doubt. Her relationships with other characters help form her personality and direct her actions. I really liked her.

Miss Bet, Elizabeth Van Lew, doesn't fare as well from the point-of-view of Mary as she does in her own story (The Spymistress). She's single-minded, spoiled, contrary and very blind to anything but her own agenda and beliefs. I took exception to her crazy act since it has not been proven that she ever acted crazy. I was a little upset at first that she was such a stereotypical, two-dimensional character but she too grows a bit. Her mother comes across as something of a villain at first- a typical slave owner. She also has her own growing up to do in old age and becomes more sympathetic. I wondered whether she just accepted the status quo or if she was really such a hard woman.

There are some invented characters to round out Mary's world in the second section. Some of the characters

are based on real people and none of them are all that appealing. I disliked Theodore and his actions when Mary was insulted. I was surprised she continued to see him after that. His mother, aunt and cousin were awful. I loved Mary's friend Hattie and her loving family. She provides a good contrast and shows what an ordinary free black woman's life was like in Philadelphia. I greatly admire her father. I especially love Wilson Bowser. He is a man of principle, good sense and passion. He knows what he has to do and is firm in his beliefs. He is a very kind and loving man while still being strong.

In the final section, the Davis family appear as major supporting characters. They're all awful, especially Varina. Varina is spoiled, selfish and needs a good slap herself. She also needed a better nanny. I know she was raised to be a typical "belle" and Mary Lincoln was also difficult but Varina is supposed to be the villain here and really has no other role and shows no growth. The servants are two dimensional and stereotypical as well.

I guess this is a good place to start if you don't know the story. I really liked parts of it so I guess my rating is more like **3.5 stars**. The long war stories and two-dimensional supporting characters keep me from giving it a higher rating.

Sue says

This is a very interesting story of one young woman's life in and out of slavery and also as an active participant in pro-Union espionage in Richmond, Virginia during the Civil War. Mary Bowser's existence has been authenticated as has that of her prior owner, an ardent abolitionist who freed her own slaves and also participated in espionage in the city during the war. So why am I still left with a somewhat unsettled feeling as I read?

I read historical fiction frequently. In fact it is one of my favorite genres. But what is this book? It is well researched history with a very large component of fiction. For some reason, I am uncomfortable with this book, even while enjoying reading it. Perhaps I would have been personally happier if it had been written as pure historical fiction with an afterward relating it to Mary Bowser. Or maybe I just ate something that disagreed with me and made me ornery this week.

Kate says

Bear with me for a moment.

One of the best tools used in the management of forests is prescribed burns - where parts of the forest, thick with understory, dried needles, and combustible materials are set aflame. If done properly, the resulting environment is richer, safer, and healthier for new growth and wildlife habitats. If done poorly, well, it all goes to hell.

I read a lot. Since I was four, I have basically read anything that my eyes fell upon. There are a lot of ideas, details, and random bits of information in my head (including this bit about forest management).

Every once in a while (less frequently as I get older/read more), a book comes along that sets my brain afire and the resulting ideas are richer and more complex than before. This book was my prescribed burn for all of

the books I have read and things that I have thought about slavery and race in America.

I cannot even begin to tell you all of the new things that I am thinking in this little ole review, but after you read it, let's absolutely talk.

There was only one false note for me in the entire thing: the Forrest Gump treatment of the early to mid-Civil War period. For those chapters, Mary Bowser was everywhere important and making all of the most important decisions. Because this book is based on a real person of which we only know a few solid details, I chose to overlook that treatment and consider it the author introducing a few of the many possibilities for what could have actually happened. It was sort of like a brief Choose Your Own Adventure book (of which I always read all of the variations anyways).

Stop reading this review and go read the book already.

Cynthia says

Remedy to “The Help”

“The Secrets of Mary Bowser” is a page turner. The setting is antebellum Virginia, Mary is born a slave but is set free, and she heads north but later chooses to return to Virginia in order to spy for the Union during the Civil War. Mary Bowser was a real person however, since few details are known of her activities Leveen let’s her imagination run free, since the author’s area of specialization is American History she bases the action on that knowledge. The very best part of the book is that it’s written from an African American perspective. Mary’s motivation for her brave acts is to make her life, and others who are still enslaved, better. They act in their own behalf. This is in contrast to the perspective in “The Help”. Don’t get me wrong I LOVED “The Help” but it was so refreshing to read an African American’s perspective. There’s lots of history here. You’ll find yourself being reminded and/or reading more details about historical happenings such as the race riots that occurred in the North when whites attacked blacks because they resented feeling forced to fight a war to free southern blacks. Then, as the war wears on in the South, and whites were either dead or already fighting Jefferson Davis was faced with arming slaves to fight which contradicted the South’s stance that the slaves were children who needed whites to tell them what to do. And Mary was in the heart of all this, pulling strings of her own as well as keeping Lincoln informed.

Though there’s lots of history this is also a personal story. We read about Mary’s early childhood with her nuclear family and later about the many friends she meets in the North, we learn about their work in the Underground Railroad, and what life was like in the North before the war. It’s a coming of age story with the Civil War as backdrop. This is Leveen’s first book. I can’t wait to see what she comes up with for her second. So many contemporary books are short on plot. This is not the case with “The Secrets of Mary Bowser”.

4.5/5

Barb says

I loved this book and that's a pretty rare thing for me. I tend to be rather finicky about my fiction and most of what I do read doesn't thrill me. This did. The author's research on the period and her skill as a writer come shining through in this well told and emotional story.

Mary Van Lew Bowser, born a slave in Richmond Virginia, was freed as a young woman then sent to a private school in Philadelphia at the insistence of her former owner's daughter. Years later Mary returns to Richmond and is able to serve the cause of abolition by becoming a spy in the household of Jefferson Davis in the Confederate White House.

I've read several novels and non-fiction works on the topic of slavery and this is a very different account from what I've previously read. The author successfully paints a portrait of slave life as complicated and dangerous and informs the reader about the many crazy, unjust laws in Virginia during the period before the Civil War: If slaves freed in Virginia were still living there a year after gaining freedom they would be resold as slaves, any slave who left Virginia to get an education could, by law, never return, and free blacks could not rent out any dwelling to slaves.

One of the issues I hadn't read about before was the prejudiced attitudes of some free blacks against former slaves and slaves. I thought that was really interesting and depicted very convincingly. The author also focused on how some abolitionists seemed more focused on the pathos of slavery rather than the real people who experienced slavery.

The author does a wonderful job bringing the period and historical figures to life. At one point in my reading I was so engrossed in the life of Mary Van Lew and her struggles that I forgot she would become a Union spy.

This is an excellent story, well written and engrossing.

I highly recommend this to anyone interested in this period of American History.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Mary Bowser was a real person, a freed slave who spied for the Union during the Civil War. She was highly educated, but played the "ignorant darky," posing as a slave in the home of Confederate president Jefferson Davis. Letting the white people believe she was illiterate allowed her access to the war correspondence on Davis's desk. She had a photographic memory, so she would memorize the information, then convert it to code to be sent north to the Union leaders.

The first half of the book covers Mary's life before the Civil War, first as a slave in Richmond, Virginia, then as a free person in Philadelphia, where she was sent at age 12 for her education. When the war began, she chose to return to Richmond, risking everything to serve the cause of freedom. The second half covers that Civil War period. Mary Bowser was incredibly brave for one so young, working with the Underground Railroad as a teen and then as a spy in her early twenties.

If you like to use fiction to fill in the gaps in your knowledge of history, this book is worth a little patience in the reading. I recommend looking at the bonus material in the back of the book before beginning the novel. It

provides valuable context, and there are even some photos of buildings and people important to the story.

Readers who prefer strict adherence to fact in their historical fiction should note that this is an imaginative reconstruction of Mary Bowser's life. Records were not kept of the lives of black people, so the author took what little was known and used her expertise as a historian to fill in the rest. At the back of the book, Leveen does make clear specifically what is known and what had to be imagined.

Judy says

A compelling storyline of a young girl born into slavery whose mistress sends her to the North to be educated and to obtain her freedom. Mary Bowser returns South to be near her enslaved father and proceeds to play a significant role in the emancipation of slaves through her employment as a maid at Jefferson Davis's home. This is a nice story if you can suspend reality and just kick back and enjoy. If not, it will be difficult, as believability is strained at many junctures such as (view spoiler) Also, the historical aspect of the story is suspect in my judgment due to the Union's entry into Richmond with handsome soldiers wearing nice, clean uniforms being one of the glaring oversights in research. I know the Confederate soldiers did suffer more from hunger and lack of warm, intact clothing, but there were plenty of hungry, tattered Union soldiers also. However, having said that the image of Richmond's slave population being freed by the Union soldiers was a nice picture and taken in its fictional context somewhat acceptable.

Robin Miles' narration of this 16 hour, 25 minute book was decent although not exceptional. I wouldn't recommend the book for its narration, but certainly wouldn't criticize her narration either. It was just middle-of-the-road, neither excellent or poor.

So, overall, I found the book pleasant and would only recommend to my friends who are looking for a purely fictional escape.

Rina says

This book was neither good nor bad. It existed. I'm sure other people with different expectations or that don't have the same pet peeves will probably like it.

If I had to pick, I liked the first half of the book better. But, really, it doesn't matter because the whole book is exaggerations and embellishments. Even ignoring facts that were already researched and replacing them with fiction. I don't care for "inspired by a true story" and I don't think I ever will because its really just fiction trying to attract people with a modicum of truth behind a whole pile of imagination. I'm not insulting imagination. I think it's great. Just not when its masquerading as if it is based in truth.

I also just found the book to be a series of interesting moments with filler in between. Relatively speaking, the life Mary had as a slave was not as bad as the kinds portrayed in books focused on plantations. I expected to see that type of cruelty and suffering. Also, the transition into free life in Philadelphia was a story I hadn't read before, though I assume plenty exist. For that reason, I found the first half of the book interesting.

Objectively, the second half of the book was probably more eventful. However, I expect war to be eventful and, relative to that expectation, not all that much happened. Except the last five or so pages, which

(SPOILER ALERT) can be summarized as RICHMOND BURNING, SMOKE INHALATION (IGNORE THE CIVIL WAR ENDING), "OH, HEY MR. LINCOLN!"

Diane Barnes says

3.5 stars. A well-written, compelling book that captured the sense and atmosphere of Philadelphia and Richmond, both before and during the Civil War. The author pointed out the racial prejudice that existed in the North, as well as the cruelty of slavery in the South. The novel was based on the real Mary Bowser, who was a Union spy who worked as a slave in the Richmond home of Jefferson Davis, hiding the fact that she was a freed slave who could read and write.

Lois Leveen admits that some things were omitted from this story, and many more things imagined because of the lack of written history about Mary Bowser. But she did her research, and it rings true.

Camie says

Based on the true story of Mary Bowser a young house slave who was freed and sent north to Philadelphia by Bet the daughter of the wealthy Van Lew family of Richmond. Though she and her mother were both freed her father was owned by another family and was not, so the decision was made that her parents would stay and Mary would go it alone on the journey. Later as the Civil War heats up, she will jeopardize her freedom and her life by returning to Virginia to help her ailing father and to aid Bet Van Lew with the growing abolition movement. According to a brave and brilliant plan she is able to pose as a house slave in the Confederate White House of President Jefferson Davis. Because of the general assumption that slaves were illiterate , and treated as if they were almost invisible ... Mary is able to discover and pass on incredible amounts of information to others helping the Union command. Though the book is well written it's a sad fact that much of the book had to be imagined as there were simply very few actual records kept regarding slaves as well as women during this time in history. It's still a good read about a heroine who should finally be recognized. It seems almost stranger than fiction that even as the confederates learned their secrets were being leaked they never considered the true source of how it was happening even a remote possibility! June pick - On The Southern Literary Trail 4.5 stars

Diane S ? says

I have read many novels about slavery and the Civil War but what sets this novel apart from others is that it encompasses so much and so it so well. That Mary was an actual person and that the letters and newspaper articles were factual just adds to the wonderful telling of the story that unfolds. This novel shows both sides of the slavery issue, what both white and black abolitionists went through as well as how blacks were treated in the Northern states that had already outlawed slavery. Loved the characters of Mary, her mom and Dad and Bets, a white woman who risked much in Virginia, for the abolishment of an institution she found unjust. Loved reading this story and would loved to have met many of these people.

Kathy says

Great historical fiction. It grabs your interest from the start, and keeps it. Based on the life of a real person, Mary Bowser, who was born a slave in Virginia, and freed by her owner. She was sent north to Philadelphia for an education, where she became involved with the Underground Railroad. When the Civil War was imminent, she went back south to spy on Jeff Davis in the "Gray House" for the duration of the war.

Although it is all about black and white relations, there are no truly black or white characters. The slave owners are not all totally evil, and the slaves are not all pure and good. And relations are even more complicated among the free people.

One of my favorite parts was the critiques of UNCLE TOM'S CABIN at the "colored" Philadelphia's Gilbert Lyceum lecture hall. I also appreciated the use of the word "colored". Although I have always thought it was a stupid term, it was the polite word that people used in those days, so for the sake of accuracy, that's what any of the people of the time would say.

There is no lecturing on furniture or clothing styles, but you quickly pick up information about what people are sleeping on, and what different people are wearing. Half the fun of historical fiction is learning about a different way of life. The other half is a great story. This book has both to perfection.

Jane says

Where I got the book: ARC from LibraryThing Early Reviewer program. Expected publication date is 5/15/12.

This novel seems to be generating some buzz, so I was quite pleased to get a chance to be an early reviewer. It is based on historical truth, in that there really was a former slave called Mary Bowser who in some way helped her former owner, Bet Van Lew, and an associate named Thomas McNiven send information about Confederate plans to Lincoln and his generals in the Civil War.

As almost nothing else is known about the real Mary, Leveen is free to imagine Mary's story based on what is known about the lives of slaves and free coloreds in the era. And she does a thorough, professional job of it, giving Mary a voice that is distinctly 19th century (to the point where modern readers may have to use a dictionary in places) and carefully incorporating historical events into the narrative.

It's hard to find fault with a book that is well written and edited, meticulously researched and based on a fascinating topic. But I'm going to anyway. I found myself thinking that this is exactly the kind of novel New York loves: the writer has writing credits, academic and literary credibility, and a platform. She's a Serious Writer (whereas I am the first to acknowledge my amateur status). Am I suffering from a case of sour grapes? I hope not.

My problem with this novel is that it just didn't catch fire for me. It should have done: there was so much there, so much incident and life-threatening situations, life and death and love and all the rest. And yet I found it extremely easy to put down after a few pages (and the word 'boring' was beginning to float around

my skull at about the two-thirds mark, although I really don't want to apply that label as I think many readers will love this novel). The problem, for me, was that at times the novel took on that dramatized-textbook feel that you get when the writer has really taken pains to get the thing historically accurate. When we moved more into Mary's story, I was happy enough: Leveen handles dialogue well in these sections. And then Mary would be listening to a conversation between real-life historical figures, and the whole thing would become a bit stilted, especially as it was necessary for these characters to explain what was happening.

Call me a philistine, but I'd rather have had something livelier and less historically elucidating. *The Secrets of Mary Bowser* functions really well as a historically accurate corrective to the *Gone-With-The-Wind* romance of devoted servants and noble masters, but (whisper it low) I re-read GWTW until the covers fell off, but I won't do the same to Mary.

Nevertheless, an interesting read which will be enthusiastically received by the writing establishment. I predict NYT bestseller status.
