

Women's Prize for Fiction

2020

25

2003 WINNER

PROPERTY BY VALERIE MARTIN

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Valerie Martin is the author of eleven novels, including *The Ghost of the Mary Celeste*, *The Confessions of Edward Day*, *Trespass*, *Mary Reilly*, *Italian Fever* and *Property*; four collections of short fiction; and a biography of Saint Francis of Assisi entitled *Salvation*. She has been awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, as well as the Kafka Prize for Mary Reilly and the Orange Prize for *Property*.

PLOT SUMMARY

Valerie Martin's *Property* delivers an eerily mesmerising inquiry into slavery's venomous effects on the owner and the owned. The year is 1828, the setting a Louisiana sugar plantation where Manon Gaudet, pretty, bitterly intelligent, and monstrously self-absorbed, seethes under the dominion of her boorish husband and his relationship with her slave Sarah, who is his victim and his unwilling mistress. Exploring the permutations of Manon's own obsession with Sarah against the backdrop of an impending slave rebellion, *Property* unfolds with the speed and menace of heat lightning, casting a startling light from the past upon the assumptions we still make about the powerful and powerless.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

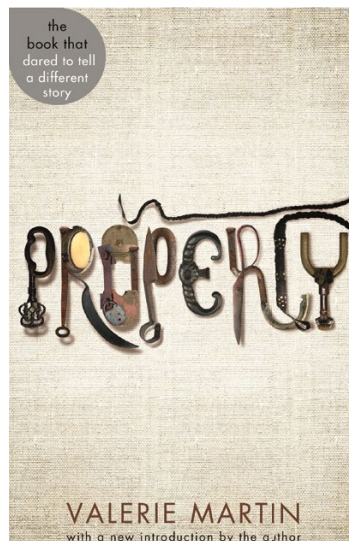
Property is a book that shocks the reader because it depicts the horrors of slavery, and is even more shocking because its narrator is a white woman

who believes that slavery is right and natural and shows no sympathy towards the men and women who are slaves.

The opening pages of the book show powerfully that Manon's husband, Charles de Gaudet, is even more corrupt, cruel and perverse than Manon, actively demeaning young boys before physically abusing them. This show-don't-tell method is hugely effective in establishing how we feel about the characters and the world they live in.

This episode sets up all the conflicts later in the book, giving us the

rationale for why the slaves rebel and attack the house; it shows us the man who rapes and abuses his wife and the female slaves under his roof, and the singular lack of concern shown by a powerful white man for the bodies and souls of those he considers to be less than human. Ultimately, the violence that is described in the first few pages echoes through the book until it rings loud in Charles' violent death. It also establishes Manon as a woman who watches the abuse taking place and, though she may find it distasteful, seems to find the perversity rather than the idea that humans should not be mistreated because of the colour of their skin repugnant.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Having grown up the daughter of a slave owner (though she falsely distinguishes between the ‘good’ behaviour of her father as plantation boss and the various ‘bad’ behaviours of her husband and other slave owners), Manon is ignorant of the horror in which we now regard slavery as a whole.

Yet Manon, though hugely racist, cruel and part of the ruling class of her time, is also a prisoner in her role as wife and woman in the American South at the time the book is set. She isn’t a slave, but she has to endure non-consensual sex and sexual abuse because there is no way out of her marriage other than her husband’s death.

Do Manon’s experiences make her a sympathetic character in any way? Because of what she has experienced, is her treatment of Sarah better or worse than her husband’s?

QUESTIONS

Manon ends the novel not having changed the way she thinks about slaves. Is it a satisfying ending? Should we expect more of her, given her upbringing and experiences?

What do you think of Sarah as a character? What do you think about what she says at the end about drinking tea at the table?

Is Joel the best of the male characters, or is he as bad as the rest?

What scene shocked you the most in the book? Why? How did you feel when you read it?



“ PROPERTY TAKES A VERY SPECIFIC, DATED SUBJECT AND MAKES IT UNIVERSAL. IT LOOKS AT RELATIONSHIPS OF POWER AND OWNERSHIP AMONG PEOPLE LIVING IN A SYSTEM WHICH IS MANIFESTLY EVIL. YET THEY ARE ORDINARY, OFTEN GOOD PEOPLE. THEY ARE BEING DAMAGED BY THEIR SYSTEM, YOU CAN SEE IT DAMAGING THEM, AND YET THEY NEVER QUESTION IT ”

AHDAF SOUEIF,
CHAIR OF JUDGES 2003

NEXT STEPS

Choose a scene from the book – possibly the rebels attacking the house, Charles’ funeral or Sarah plotting her escape – and write it from Sarah’s point of view. Sarah’s point of view will be a nuanced one: she is a slave and the mother of two of her slave owner

master’s children, as well as a woman subject to sexual abuse. How might her feelings toward her children affect her decision-making? How does Sarah feel about Manon’s husband, and what does she think of Manon herself? Do any of these events make Sarah feel free? Is it possible for Sarah to ever be free?

Alternatively, you could write some unsent love letters from Joel to Manon, or imagine a romantic correspondence between them. Joel is restricted by money and can’t afford to get romantically involved with Manon, but there is an obvious chemistry there. Given that we don’t really have sympathy towards either of them, can you write convincing love

letters between two reasonably unpleasant characters? How would Joel’s ‘voice’ come across on paper? How would Manon address him in letters? And, would things stay reasonably polite, or get very suggestive?

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

THE COLOR PURPLE BY ALICE WALKER

GONE WITH THE WIND BY MARGARET MITCHELL