

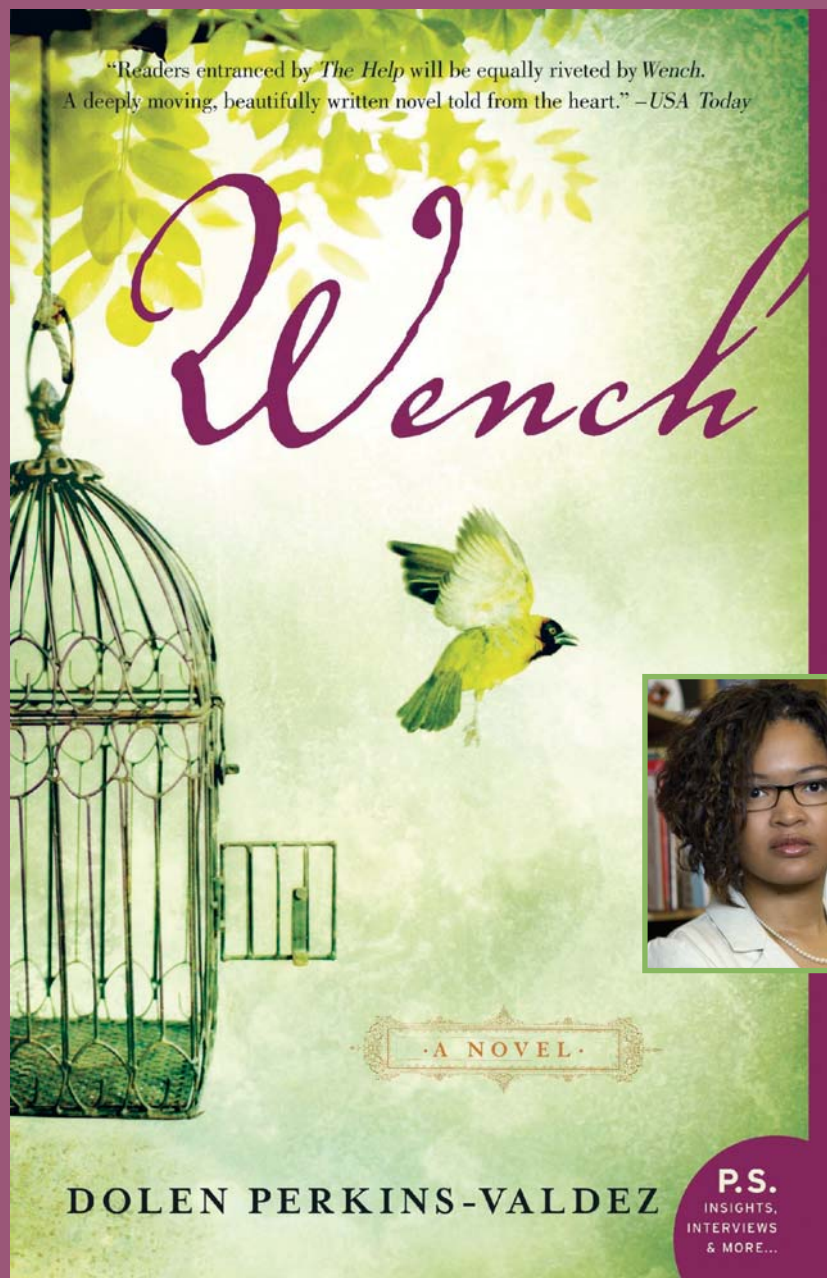
SANTA MONICA

CITYWIDE READS

JOIN A 2011 CITYWIDE BOOK CLUB

FEBRUARY 14
THROUGH
MARCH 12

For free public book discussion groups and other events, check the Santa Monica Citywide Reads website at www.smpl.org/cwr, call 310.458.8600, or visit our blog at www.santamonica-citywiderreads.blogspot.com




SANTA MONICA PUBLIC
LIBRARY



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Santa Monica
Public Library




AN **Amistad**
PAPERBACK. AVAILABLE AT
LIBRARIES AND BOOKSTORES.

WELCOME

Welcome to the ninth annual Santa Monica CITYWIDE READS program. This community reading program encourages people who live, work in, or visit Santa Monica to read and discuss the same book at the same time in discussion groups and special events held around the city.

This year's book is *Wench* by author Dolen Perkins-Valdez. *Wench* follows the stories of four enslaved mistresses – Lizzie, Reenie, Sweet and Mawu – over the course of three summers in pre-Civil War America. Taken by their masters on holiday to Tawawa House, a summer resort in Ohio, the women encounter free blacks and whispers of the abolitionist movement and are forced to consider their lives, their positions back home, and their hopes and dreams for the future.

Wench is available from the Santa Monica Public Library or your local bookstore. Please plan on attending one of the many free, public events being held around the city from February 14 to March 12.

I hope that your participation in CITYWIDE READS is a rewarding experience that brings us together as a community through literature.



Greg Mullen, Library Director
Santa Monica Public Library

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"I am inspired by people who perfect their craft, whether it be world-class tennis players, jazz musicians, dancers, or visual artists. That singular attention to expressing one aspect of our existence, sustained over a lifetime, is awesome to watch."

Dolen Perkins-Valdez
[blogcritics.org/books/article/interview-dolen-perkins-valdez-author-of/]



Dolen Perkins-Valdez was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee, and attained her undergraduate degree at Harvard. She returned home to Memphis to pursue her MFA in Creative Writing, then moved to George Washington University for her Ph.D. studies in American Literature. She is also a former University of California President's Postdoctoral Fellow at UCLA in African American Studies. She is the author of *Wench*, which was published by

Amistad/HarperCollins in 2010 to critical acclaim. Dolen's fiction and essays have also appeared in *The Kenyon Review*, *StoryQuarterly*, *African American Review*, *PMS: PoemMemoirStory*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, *Richard Wright Newsletter*, and *SLI: Studies in Literary Imagination*. In 2009, she was a finalist for the Robert Olen Butler Fiction Award. Dolen currently lives in Washington, D.C. with her husband and daughter. She is working on her next novel.

RECOMMENDED READS

***Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, written by Herself* by Harriet A. Jacobs**

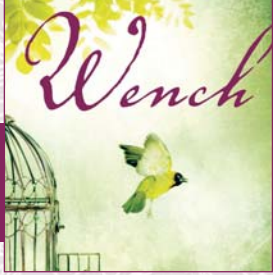
Similar in impact on its subject and setting to Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, describing her life as an enslaved girl in North Carolina, has long been considered a seminal work of slave narrative. First published in 1861, Jacobs' book was among the first slave accounts written by a woman and is still considered a feminist classic a century and a half later.

***Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese**

Comprehensively researched, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's examination of life inside slavery-era plantation households provides an illuminating look into the daily lives of enslaved women and the white mistresses they served.

***The Help* by Kathryn Stockett *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* by Heidi Durrow**

Two very different novels, *The Help* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* were both nominated by community members for Citywide Reads 2011, and selection committee members were struck by how, like *Wench*, they examined issues of race and womanhood in complex and compelling ways. *The Help* is the story of black maids in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi, who band together with a young white woman to tell their stories to the world. *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* is the story of a 1980s biracial teen, who is forced to question her cultural identity when a family tragedy turns her world upside down. (See special events for separate book discussions of both of these books.)



ABOUT THE BOOK

wench \ˈwench\ *n.* from Middle English “wenchel”: a girl, maid, young woman; a female child.

Set in the decade prior to the Civil War, Dolen Perkins-Valdez's *Wench* is a fictional look into the lives and relationships of four enslaved mistresses – Lizzie, Reenie, Sweet and Mawu – who meet across the course of three summers at Tawawa House, a summer resort in Xenia, Ohio. Brought to free land by their Southern masters, the four very different women share their lives and build friendships, while the temptation of escape and freedom dangles tantalizingly and frighteningly before them.

The idea for *Wench* came to Dolen Perkins-Valdez from a biography on African American writer and civil rights leader W.E.B. DuBois. In a short footnote, the biography mentioned that Wilberforce University, where DuBois taught for a brief time, was built on the former grounds of a summer resort called Tawawa House. Founded in 1851 by lawyer and politician Elias P. Drake as a hot springs resort, Tawawa House quickly gained infamy as a vacation spot popular with Southern slave

holders and their enslaved mistresses. The resort remained open for only four years before being sold to missionaries who would found the university that became Wilberforce. Perkins-Valdez was struck by the historical footnote and began to wonder about the stories of the women who accompanied their masters. The end result is the novel we will read together for Santa Monica Citywide Reads 2011.

Wench was first published in January 2010 by Amistad/HarperCollins. *USA Today* called the book “deeply moving” and “beautifully written.” *People* called it “a devastatingly beautiful account of a cruel past.” *O, The Oprah Magazine* chose it as a Top Ten Pick of the Month, and the novel quickly became a book club favorite. Most recently, *Library Journal* picked *Wench* as one of its Best Books of 2010, and NPR dubbed it one of the most discussable book group novels of 2010.

SLAVERY IN AMERICA TIMELINE

- 1581** – Spanish settlers in St. Augustine, Florida, import the first African slaves onto American soil.
- 1662** – Virginia law decrees that children of black mothers “shall be bond or free according to the condition of the mother.”
- 1705** – Declaring that slaves are real estate property, Virginia lawmakers allow masters to bequeath slaves, as well as to “kill and destroy” runaways.
- 1775** – The American Revolution begins; Anthony Benezet founds the world's first abolitionist society. (Benjamin Franklin becomes its president in 1787.)
- 1784** – Congress narrowly defeats Thomas Jefferson's proposal to ban slavery in new territories after 1800.
- 1793** – The United States passes the Fugitive Slave Act, which outlaws any efforts to impede the capture of runaway slaves.
- 1794** – Eli Whitney patents the cotton gin, converting cotton into a cash crop for the South and creating a huge demand for slaves.
- 1808** – The United States bans the importing of slaves from Africa, but smuggling continues.
- 1831** – Virginia preacher Nat Turner leads a two-day slave uprising that is quashed, leading to his own hanging and harsh restrictions on slaves.
- 1849** – After fleeing slavery, Harriet Tubman returns south at least 15 times to help hundreds of others escape.
- 1852** – *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel about the horrors of slavery, is published to wide acclaim and brisk sales.
- 1857** – The Supreme Court hands down its infamous Dred Scott decision, which states that blacks can never be citizens and Congress has no authority to outlaw slavery in any territory.
- 1860** – Abraham Lincoln is elected President; South Carolina is the first rebel state to secede from the United States.
- 1861** – The Civil War begins.
- 1863** – On January 1, in the Emancipation Proclamation, President Lincoln decrees that all slaves in rebel territory are free.
- 1865** – The Civil War comes to an end; slavery is abolished via the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution.

THANKS TO

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FOR SUPPORTING BOOK DISCUSSIONS AND PROGRAMS AND TO THE FRIENDS OF THE SANTA MONICA PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR THEIR ONGOING SUPPORT FOR CITYWIDE READS.

SPECIAL CITYWIDE READS EVENTS

Special Screening: Alex Haley's *Roots*

Mon – Sat, February 14 – 19 | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium
Based on Alex Haley's autobiographical novel, *Roots* made history with its frank portrayal of the slave experience in America. Parts one through five of this miniseries will screen, Feb. 14th – 18th at 4pm, and will conclude with part six on Feb. 19th at 1pm.

An Afternoon with the Cast of *Roots*

Sat, February 19 at 3pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium
Journalist and author Janice Rhoshalle Littlejohn leads a discussion on the cultural impact of *Roots* with cast members LeVar Burton, Louis Gossett, Jr. and Lynne Moody. A book sale/signing follows.

An Afternoon with Dolen Perkins-Valdez

Sat, February 26 at 2pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium
Author Dolen Perkins-Valdez presents an engaging reading and discussion of *Wench*. A book signing will follow.

Bonus Book Discussion & Author Talk:

Heidi Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky*

Thur, March 3 at 6pm | Main Library, Multipurpose Room
Like *Wench*, Heidi Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky* tackles issues of race, womanhood and personal identity. A special 6pm discussion of the book will be followed at 7:30pm by an author talk with Ms. Durrow in the MLK Jr. Auditorium.

Bonus Book Discussion: *The Help*

Wed, March 9 at 7pm | Main Library, Multipurpose Room
A discussion of Kathryn Stockett's novel about black maids in 1960s Jackson, Mississippi. In many ways similar to *Wench*, *The Help* has captured the attention of readers worldwide.

The Clayton Collections Alive

Sat, March 12 at 3pm | Main Library, MLK Jr. Auditorium
Join Larry Earl, Jr., Interim Executive Director of the Mayme A. Clayton Library and Museum for *The Clayton Collections Alive*. Step back in time to meet African American poet Phillis Wheatley, and learn about the struggle for civil rights from the collections housed within this amazing local resource.

RESOURCES

Dolen Perkins-Valdez's Website

The author's website includes information on the writer and background information on *Wench* and its setting, Tawawa House. www.dolenperkinsvaldez.com

Slavery and the Making of America

A 2005 documentary series by PBS on the history of slavery in America and its impact on American culture. The library owns the four-hour program on DVD (306.362 Slavery), as well as its companion book by James and Lois Horton (973.0496 Horton). The PBS program website is also rich with information, recorded slave memories and links to other resources for anyone interested in researching the topic. www.pbs.org/wnet/slavery

The Mayme A. Clayton Library & Museum (MCLM)

In the early 1960s, Librarian Mayme A. Clayton, Ph.D., began collecting documents, books, photographs, films and memorabilia chronicling the experience of Americans of African descent. Dr. Clayton collected everything from rare books, to movies, to handwritten slave records. In 2006, the MCLM found a permanent home in Culver City, where researchers may access and study its rich resources. www.claytonmuseum.org

BOOK DISCUSSIONS

Trained volunteer facilitators lead these free public book discussions. No registration is required.

Wednesday, February 16 at 7pm

Montana Branch Library, 1704 Montana Avenue*

Saturday, February 19 at 12:30pm

First AME Church, 1823 Michigan Avenue

Tuesday, February 22 at 7pm

Fairview Branch Library, 2101 Ocean Park Boulevard *

Saturday, February 26 at 11am

Café Bolivar, 1741 Ocean Park Boulevard
(no permit required for street parking on Saturday)

Monday, February 28 at 1:30pm

Senior Recreation Center, 1450 Ocean Avenue*

Saturday, March 5 at 11am

Ocean Park Branch Library, 2601 Main Street *

Monday, March 7 at 2pm

Tudor House, 1403 Second Street

Saturday, March 12 at 1pm

Main Library, 601 Santa Monica Boulevard *

*City of Santa Monica facilities are wheelchair accessible. To request a disability-related accommodation, call Library Administration 310-458-8606 (TDD 395-8499) at least 5 working days (Monday-Friday) in advance.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Dolen Perkins-Valdez has acknowledged that *Wench* is a provocative title. Why do you think she chose it? How do you feel about her title choice?
2. Four enslaved women – Lizzie, Mawu, Sweet and Reenie – lie at the heart of *Wench*, but Lizzie is the author's viewpoint into their lives. Compare and contrast their stories. Why do you think the author chose Lizzie as the core character?
3. Describe the relationship between Lizzie and her master, Drayle. Lizzie states that she loves him, but do you believe this to be true? Does he love her?
4. Drayle's wife, Fran, is a complex character. Who has the upper hand in their marriage? Are there ways in which she and Lizzie are similar?
5. Lizzie is a house slave. In what ways is this position a benefit or detriment for her?
6. Lizzie's relationship with Mawu follows a crooked path. How do they feel about each other in the beginning of the novel, and in the end? Why does Lizzie reveal Mawu's plans to escape?
7. What role does the Quaker woman, Glory, serve in the story? What role does Phillip serve?
8. *Wench* is set in the decade prior to the Civil War. How does your own knowledge of what lies on the horizon affect your reading of the story?
9. What does freedom mean to Lizzie, Mawu, Sweet and Reenie? What does it mean to you?
10. How would you characterize the ending of the story?
11. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the novel?