

Discussion Questions for *The Resurrection of Nat Turner, Part 2: The Testimony*



1. What made Nat Turner different from his peers? What made him more likely to embrace rebellion?
2. Nat Turner describes the other captives (slaves) as heroes. Why?
3. What is the difference between the words captive and slave? Captor and master?
4. What relationship or relationships in the book most surprised you? What relationship or relationships most pleased you?
5. Captives were not allowed to speak their native language. Why? Captives were not allowed last names. Why?
6. Who were “the witnesses” who spoke to Nat Turner?
7. According to local lore, Nat Turner and the other slaves met outside the local church. Though they were not welcomed inside, why would they continue meeting there?
8. In his original handwritten diary, Governor Floyd describes the August 1831 “indigo sun.” Why might it have caused excitement? Would it cause excitement today?

9. Modern-day scientists say many Atlantic hurricanes begin over the highlands of Ethiopia. According to NASA, Hurricane Isabel began in Ethiopia, making its way to the Chesapeake Bay. An “Act of God” beginning in Africa may have triggered one of the deadliest hurricanes in American history, the Great Barbados Hurricane of 1831, and Nat Turner’s revolt. Discuss.
10. As he is questioned by Trezvant, Nat Turner laments slavery’s legacy for captives and captors. Describe that legacy.
11. In both parts 1 and 2, Nat Turner refers to a “family debt” that he owes. What do you think he means? How did he pay for that debt?
12. What made it easy for American slave owners to justify their behavior? What makes it easy for modern-day slave owners to justify their behavior?
13. Harriet Beecher Stowe, her brother, and others, such as Benjamin Phipps and William Parker, seemed to feel frustrated and hopeless in the face of slavery. Why?
14. Southampton County, in particular the Jerusalem area, was home to two very famous Civil War generals. General George H. Thomas, nephew to County Clerk James Rochelle, was fifteen at the time of Nat Turner’s revolt. Thomas became a famed Union general known as the “Rock of Chickamauga.” General William Mahone was almost five at the time of the revolt. Son of tavernkeeper Fielding Mahone, he became a famed Confederate general known as the “Hero of the Crater.” Though they were from similar backgrounds, what might have caused the two men to go on such divergent paths?
15. The court records contradicting the original *Confessions of Nat Turner* have existed for 180 years. Why do you believe that evidence has remained hidden?

Author Q & A

A Conversation with Sharon Ewell Foster

1. In *The Resurrection of Nat Turner, Part 2: The Testimony*, we get a unique vantage point into the unrest that ultimately resulted in the Civil War. What was the most difficult part of re-creating these moments on the page?

There were a couple of things that made the process challenging. First was giving myself permission to tell a new story.

We all have stories that we own, stories that we've been told, and those stories are part of who we are. Civil War stories and antebellum stories are part of our American heritage. There are people vested in this history, in the way this story has been told. I'm an African American, but these narratives were taught to me, too. I am an American and the American narrative is my own.

I realized, as I was writing, that most of our Civil War stories tend to be more sympathetic to the South. For example, part of our national story is that we feel sorry for the South because Atlanta was sacked. That's one of the themes of *Gone With the Wind*—that this great way of life was torched, good people were torched. We feel sympathy for Scarlett and Atlanta. So we have this beautiful, poignant literature rising from Atlanta's ashes and bemoaning what happened.

But what isn't part of our national narrative is that instead of Atlanta, Philadelphia might have burned. That's what Gettysburg was about, to keep the South from reaching Philadelphia and destroying what was the North's financial heart.

Part of our national narrative, part of what helps us cope corporally and psychologically with the foulness of slavery, is a story that says everyone believed in slavery. No one thought it was wrong. No one spoke against it, except for a few fanatics. Of course, this narrative negates the efforts of abolitionists like Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass. It also negates the patriotism of people like Benjamin Franklin, Bishop Richard Allen, and everyday people from Philadelphia, Boston, New York, and other towns across America, who risked their lives to speak out against slavery.

Part of our national narrative, because to think otherwise is painful, is that slavery wasn't so bad. Most slave owners were good people and the slaves were content. All slave owners were kindly. I can't think of one account of a slave owner who called himself cruel. No one wants to be that person.

I had to give myself permission to consider and embrace a new story, a new narrative, before I could even recognize the facts in front of me. There were other heroes, there were voices crying in the wilderness, and I gave myself permission to sing their songs and to sing songs about the beauty of cobblestone streets, ships, and immigrants of northern cities. I had to give myself permission to sing the songs of brutalized slaves who had no voices . . . and also one of cruel masters.

As I researched, I had to finally accept that I would never know everything; then, I had to give myself permission to take the creative leap so that I could tell the story. I had to give myself permission to tell the story through my own eyes—a different story of the time before the war.

2. What prompted you to intersect the stories of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Nat Turner, two of the most famous figures in the American abolitionist movement? How do you think their very distinct personalities inform our current view of African American history? I wonder if you know what a leap you have made with the question you've posed. The narrative surrounding Nat Turner has been that

he was a monster, not an abolitionist or a freedom fighter. Your understanding is significant.

But, to answer you, I had a few unresolved questions while researching that I think were answered in a letter that Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote to an English duchess.

Long ago, I was a pre-broadcast screener at PBS—I screened programs before they were aired nationally. One of my favorites was called *Connections*—the host would find unexpected connections between seemingly unrelated historical events. The linking of Stowe and Turner was a *Connections* kind of thing.

In preparation for writing the book, I read everything I could get my hands on that mentioned Nat Turner, including other novels. Stowe wrote a book called *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, a novel which she said was inspired by Nat Turner. Though she is most well known for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, whose protagonist is a long-suffering, passive slave hero, the hero of *Dred* is a fiery, revolutionary refugee slave ready to take up arms against his oppressors. There is a chasm between Tom's and Dred's responses to slavery. I wanted to know what inspired Stowe to make the leap.

As part of my research, I also visited Southampton County, Virginia, and talked to local historians. One of them told me the story of Will, one of the slaves involved in the rebellion. Will was counted as dead, but his body was never found. The mystery of it piqued my interest. "Aha! Will got away," I thought.

Some months later, I visited the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center in Connecticut looking for some hint as to what might have inspired her point of view in *Dred*. I wanted to know what might have inspired her to write about Nat Turner, who, by then, was already much vilified. There I came across reference to a letter in which Stowe mentions writing *Dred*. Upon obtaining a copy of the letter, I learned that in the same letter she mentions being inspired by a runaway slave named William. My eyebrow lifted higher when I read a novel, published around the time Stowe was writing *Dred*, by African American author William Wells Brown. Out of

nowhere in his novel, Brown begins to write about Nat Turner and Will. Brown describes Will just as the local historian described him—very dark with a prominent scar on his face. That is part of how Stowe describes Dred in her novel. Hmmmm. Also, online, there is a letter from Stowe requesting that Douglass help her meet a refugee slave who might tell her more about slavery.

The connection was made for me and I wrote Stowe into the novel. But her role as the “tour guide” who helps readers through the story and history was inspired by the first editor who worked on the manuscript, Dave Lambert. Harriet was a section in *The Witnesses* at the time of his review and he suggested that I place her story more prominently among the other witnesses. His feedback was so insightful: He questioned whether the story, as it was, had enough arc. Lambert’s comments reflected a doubt I had. As I mulled his notes, I soon realized that Harriet’s journey to write *Dred* could be the bridge that tied things together in my own story. His comments helped make this a better book.

In response to your second question, I don’t think of this as only an African American history story. What I see in Harriet Beecher Stowe is a person willing to learn from others and adjust her views. I see her as a symbol of hope for people who struggle with racism or any other kind of response to others that is based on ignorance. Her life and understanding says that change is possible. To me, she says that we should encourage positive change and acknowledge growth when we see it.

Generally speaking, I don’t think that Nat Turner is part of our national view of African American history. While many know of Stowe and her contribution, far fewer have ever heard of Nat Turner.

Stowe is a much more acceptable hero. She was courageous. She fought with the weapons available to her—her pen, her words, and her faith. She had the benefit of formal education. Turner did not. There were no publishing doors open to him. He used the weapons available to him. His war against slavery was much more violent. People—men, women, and children—died.

Of course, as a nation we sing songs about the violent overthrow of oppressors. It is our patriotic duty to take up arms against tyrants. The fourth stanza of our national anthem says:

*Then conquer we must, when our cause is just,
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust"
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!*

Nat Turner's story challenges us. The questions are troubling. Does a person held against his will have a patriotic duty to take up arms? What defines a hero? What if that person is of another hue? Were we once a nation who wrote tyranny into our national laws? Were our national heroes also villains?

I think it's because the questions are so difficult that we have not really had a national debriefing on slavery. We have not had the discussion. We don't ask these questions of ourselves or of our children.

But I think we're ready, we're mature enough as a nation. I see Harriet and Nat as two people, courageous people, who can help us have a discussion of our past and our present—a discussion that involves and unites people who are as different as Stowe and Turner.

3. Nancie finds it imperative to drill her line of Ethiopian ancestry (all the way back to King Solomon) into Nat's head. How do you think the American sense of heritage has evolved in the past few centuries? And why?

Many of those who came to America came poor; came in chains, stolen or sold away; came from prisons; came wearing cloaks of rejection and disgrace, banished from their homelands. Some were forbidden to remember their past, their names, their languages. Others, I can imagine, simply reinvented themselves.

We are now, I think, the children of our national heroes. We are the children of Washington and Jefferson. Some of us are the children of Abraham Lincoln and others the children of Jefferson Davis.

This is problematic for many of us because many of the national heroes were slave owners, oppressors. The heroes made patriotic speeches, but their cruel words of oppression taint them. African Americans were the slaves and rejected children of these heroes. For so long race has influenced that connection; African Americans were the lesser children, America's bastards.

That's why *Roots* was so important—Alex Haley's book gave us a pre-American, an African forefather. Haley's work made Kunte Kinte a national hero, but still he was hero to African Americans. He is viewed like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, not as an American hero, but as an African American hero.

We are the children of national heroes. I think it's time that our connection to national heroes transcends race.

That's why the Martin Luther King statue is so significant—he is a hero for all the people. His words resound:

And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

Beautiful, right? An American hero who welcomes us all.

4. Class and race often seem inextricable in the novel. And yet both Harriet and Nat are able to remember a time when the lines of class and slavery did not take race into consideration. Why do you think Harriet finds this knowledge both comforting and horrifying?

You can't see me, but I'm laughing uncomfortably and cringing because I find the notion comforting and horrifying, myself.

It is comforting because it proves that we are able to find ways to connect that transcend race. It is terrifying for me, as it was for Harriet,

because it illustrates how easily we can be swept up into divisions. So much so that we are willing to turn away from our core beliefs and our faith—to chase after the gods of greed, superiority, and dishonesty—in our allegiance to misguided associations of class and race.

5. For which character did you find the voice hardest to write? Which came most naturally? Why do you think that is?

Nathaniel Francis was the most difficult to write. To write a character, you must surrender to him. His thoughts must be your thoughts. He invades you. You must believe as he believes. You must love him.

I didn't want to love Francis. I did not want to experience his viewpoint of the world, a viewpoint that would find me inferior and inhuman. I did not want to be a person who, I believe, conspired to have others murdered simply for money. I do not want to think that I am capable of that behavior.

I kept fighting him. He turned my hair grayer.

I did not want to be sympathetic to him, but in order to tell the story I had to give in to him. I surrendered to him because he was the only one who could tell me what happened in the courtroom. I had to be him in order to learn the truth.

I also resisted Easter because I had personal issues with the thought of slave women who loved the master's children, as in *The Help*, who would take an oppressor's child to her breast when she could not nurse or keep her own. But Nat Turner's character whispered to me, like a melody to a composer, that they were all heroes. All the slaves were heroes, like prisoners of war, even Easter.

Easter taught me about the power and complexity of love, love that even transcends chains.

The easiest characters for me to write were Harriet and Nat Turner's mother. They were both mothers of sons, as I am.

Many of Harriet's struggles to understand in the book are my own. As I wrote, I felt her. In the same way, I felt Nat's mother calling to me to find the truth, to clear her son's name.

6. Nat and Thomas clearly have an intimate, yet complex, relationship. Both care for the other, yet can't seem to keep their lines of communication open. How do you think this informs the debates that were raging between the North and the South at the time?

These are such deep questions. You've got me working here. I am grateful for your analysis.

I think that their relationship was like many present-day relationships: We make compromises so that we can remain friends. We are afraid to test the strength of our relationships. So it was with the North and South. There was a bond forged by common struggle and ideals, but as a new nation they were afraid to test the strength of their union.

Slavery was the issue. Right made a deal with wrong—many of those who knew that slavery was morally and legally wrong compromised because they doubted that there was another way to hold the Union together. Those who knew better excused their friends' wrongdoing. They sacrificed millions of lives—because the North and the South were afraid to test the union, or to trust that they could survive disunion.

Those compromises—which were inscribed into our laws, words that remain to testify against us—were made out of fear, not faith or love. We made compromises with evil because we were afraid to test the depth of our relationship or trust God to resolve what seemed impossible. We are still living with the legacy of those compromises.

7. Nat can almost taste Ethiopia as he stands in the Chesapeake Bay, and yet the shrieks of the beaten woman resound loud enough around him to make him stay. What do you think Nat gave up when he decided to return? What did he gain?

He gave up what might have been. He gave up personal gain, his family, and peace, temporary peace, for a more lasting peace.

8. Harriet finds the murder of the Waller family the hardest to stomach, and the sentiment cannot help but echo in the reader.

Yet you still manage to keep Nat a sympathetic character. What was the hardest part about writing this scene?

The most difficult part, as the writer, was being Nat Turner. When I write, I sit in the characters. I felt everything. I experienced everything. I'm serious when I tell you my hair is grayer. (I think I'm going to invest in some dye.) I felt his agony. I smelled the blood.

It has made me very grateful to those who paid the price for my liberty. Most of my working career I have spent among military people, so I thought I was grateful before. But now I realize that we don't fully appreciate what we do to them and what they sacrifice having to make life or death decisions in order to secure and protect our freedom.

9. On page 188, there is an apple tree that has been overtaken by a beautiful, flowering vine. Nat “would prefer to allow both to live—the apples were sweet, fragrant, and might fill his stomach; the wisteria flowers were beautiful to behold.” Do you think Nat would consider the vine in the same way as he carries out his mission in Cross Keys?

Exactly. You got it!

He loved both the captives and the captors. God loves both the oppressed and the oppressor. But there was no choice: Unchecked, the wisteria choked everything in its path.

10. Nat's relationship to God becomes most pronounced in his ongoing conversation with Trezvant in the jailhouse. How do you think religion both divided and united the white and black population of the early nineteenth century?

The conversation actually takes place in Peter Edwards's home before Nat Turner is taken into custody. Nat Turner was a preacher and I think the conversation about race and slavery would also have been about religion.

I think Christianity, in particular, was dealt body blows by slavery and race. Ruthless people, liars, used religion to justify superior-

ity, slavery, greed, etc. They painted God as the white God of white people. There were many who professed religion even as they did ungodly things.

It's hard to trust people who say they are God's people when there has been a history of religion being used to manipulate, control, and oppress others. Mistrust was planted then and I believe it remains today.

That lie still causes many to turn away from Christianity. The lie still causes some to feel superior and others inferior. There are some who still preach, teach, and believe this foolishness—they're also slavery's victims.

Yet, at the same time, throughout history and even today, we find diverse people who are bonded together by faith. The abolitionist movement was undergirded by faith. For example, many of the leading abolitionists were courageous people of faith, both white and black—like Henry Ward Beecher, his sister Harriet, Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Bishop Richard Allen of Philadelphia—who worked together. In a previous novel, *Abraham's Well*, I wrote about Native American, African American, and white preachers who risked their lives to preach together to the Cherokee and the people of African descent who walked the Trail of Tears.

There are people today who find the courage to reach across color lines—despite all the barriers that would prevent it. If we are willing to do the difficult work of looking at ourselves, faith can help us. It can help us begin to judge people and choose friends and leaders not by skin color or by who they say they are but by the content of their character.

I guess if race and slavery dealt Christianity body blows, then I guess you could say that faith won't surrender. Faith, hope, and love keep fighting back.

11. Thomas Gray's decision to write a false confession for Nat is one of the strongest betrayals. Where does testimony figure in the novel? How does it inform your role as an author?

This second book really is Nat Turner's testimony. I never intended to write from Turner's perspective. I tried to avoid it.

But he whispered to me, insisting that he must speak. He told me that they, all the slaves, were heroes: When we teach school-children about slaves we should tell the children that they were American heroes.

He talked to me about the Great Dismal Swamp, about his love for his wife, Cherry, and his son. He told me about the heart-break and frustration, and about the witnesses. I suppose you could say he gave me his testimony, and it was my job, as author, to deliver it.

12. At the end of the novel, Nancie declares herself free when she can finally reassume her Ethiopian name, Nikahywot. Do you find a similar power in names?

Names open and shut doors. Names confer privilege and take away power. When you take someone's name, when you take their heroes, their God, whatever makes up their identity, you diminish them. You begin to destroy them and re-create them in your own image.

My mother was a schoolteacher. The first year of my life was spent on a Navajo Indian reservation in Arizona.

As a child, I remember my mother talking about our time there. She spoke with wonder. But then her voice would become a whisper and I thought I heard fear in the voice of a woman who showed no fear. "They take the children away from their families," she said. "They cut their hair." She shook her head with sorrow. "The children cry and the families cry, but they don't care."

I could imagine the faceless, nameless "they" who did these things. It was a reservation and these things were done by federal mandate.

My mother showed pictures of the Navajo children clinging to her as though she was their mother. "They won't let them speak their language," she said of the children. "They make them change their names."

I knew what she was telling me. It was a violation so great that it could not be spoken out loud. But Nancie reclaimed her name.

I needed to free my readers. I needed to give them hope; it is who I am. It is what I believe.

I needed to lift the lamp, to tell the tired, discouraged, and poor not to give up. We should not be deceived: No matter the circumstances we can wrestle back our power.

Nikahywot's name was like a light, a beacon to all of us, and she reclaimed it. Thirty years later, centuries later, it is never too late. It was restoration and, I suppose, I also did it for the Navajo children and for my mother.



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