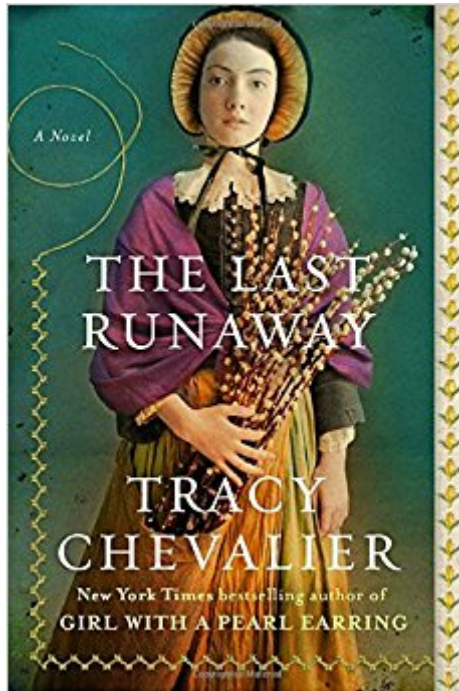




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The Last Runaway: A Novel



Synopsis

New York TimesÂ best-selling author ofÂ *Girl With a Pearl Earring* and *At the Edge of the Orchard*Â Tracy Chevalier makes her first fictional foray into the American past inÂ *The Last Runaway*, bringing to life the Underground Railroad and illuminating the principles, passions and realities that fueled this extraordinary freedom movement.Â Honor Bright, a modest English Quaker, moves to Ohio in 1850--only to find herself alienated and alone in a strange land. Sick from the moment she leaves England, and fleeing personal disappointment, she is forced by family tragedy to rely on strangers in a harsh, unfamiliar landscape.Â Nineteenth-century America is practical, precarious, and unsentimental, and scarred by the continuing injustice of slavery. In her new home Honor discovers that principles count for little, even within a religious community meant to be committed to human equality.Â However, Honor is drawn into the clandestine activities of the Underground Railroad, a network helping runaway slaves escape to freedom, where she befriends two surprising women who embody the remarkable power of defiance. Eventually she must decide if she too can act on what she believes in, whatever the personal costs.

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Customer Reviews

Honor Bright sailed from England to America in 1850 with her sister, Grace, who is betrothed to a fellow Quaker in Ohio. After Grace's death, Honor is left in the awkward position of an outsider, searching for her place in an unsettled land of restless change where even the Quakers are different from those she had known at home. She finds solace in writing letters to friends and family in England and in the exquisite quilting skills that tie her to her old life and offer some hope of ties to a

new one. Honorâ€™s only true American friend is Belle, the unorthodox milliner who clandestinely aids runaway slaves, even as her rough and charismatic brother, Donovan, hunts them down. Horrified by the realities of slavery, Honor faces the new complexities of the Fugitive Slave Law and the challenges it poses for the Quakers and for her personally. Chevalier (*Girl with a Pearl Earring*, 2000) offers a cast of strong characters wrestling with thorny personalities, the harsh realities of the frontier, and the legal and moral complexities of American slavery. --Vanessa Bush --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

âœA rich, well-researched novelâ€™s the story of one young woman becoming an American.âœ NPR, *All Things Considered* âœWell-told and engrossing . . . With compelling characters and swift pacing, *The Last Runaway* adds a worthy new chapter to a story that has consumed generations.âœ USA Today âœIrresistible.âœ O, The Oprah Magazine âœChevalier admirably weaves historical figures and actual events into a compelling narrative.âœ San Francisco Chronicle (on *Remarkable Creatures*) "Evokes entire landscapes...a master of voices."âœ New York Times Book Review (on *Falling Angels*) "Chevalier's signature talent lies in bringing alive the ordinary day-to-dayness of the past...lovingly evoked."âœ Elle (on *Burning Bright*) "Absorbing...[Chevalier] creates a world reminiscent of a Vermeer interior: suspended in a particular moment, it transcends its time and place."âœ The New Yorker (on *Girl With a Pearl Earring*) "Chevalier's ringing prose is as radiantly efficient as well-tended silver."âœ Entertainment Weekly (on *Falling Angels*).

This story kept my interest, and was very good (just not great). The storyline is a strong, consistent one. The story itself is very good however I found myself wanting a little more depth to the story. Given slavery is one of the main factors in the book it could have addressed the Underground Railroad which went right through Ohio, where the story is primarily told, however this is absent from the book. Odd because I Chevalier does considerable research. She did here with this book in regard to immigration and the effects it had on the developing countryside of the USA and Europeans arrived. She goes into detail about the type of stitching done in the US vs. England, the Quaker life in general and comparatively in England vs. the US, and the only business a woman can have in 1850 is being a seamstress and dress/bonnet maker. Bonnets often speaking volumes about a women's social status regarding financial means, religion, age and work. Quilts were also very relevant and it was detailed how and why this is the case, and went into detail about the difference in types of stitch and design. I listened to the unabridged version of the audiobook. The

narrator was good, but there were deficits in that she really couldn't do an English accent very well, and at times it almost seemed she was trying to sound like someone who couldn't do an accent, if that makes sense. Only bc there was barely a lilt of accent most times. This could have provided a more rich dimension to the story. Belle is a strong female character who Honor Bright, the main character, comes across and is very influenced by. I wished more than a few times that the story had more Belle and less Honor in it. Belle seemed a strong personality and knew who she was and what she wanted. In fact, I thought I would def get a book that was about Belle many times while listening. However Belle's brother, Donovan, a side character who presents male chauvinism, extreme racism, and bounty hunting for slaves is the complete opposite of Belle, which is why it seems such a weak point in the book that Honor essentially has a crush on Donovan despite getting married to another man etc. I feel like it's presented in a Danielle Steele manner where the woman cannot help the intense feelings/longings she has inside for this handsome, mean man. Perhaps it was meant to express his bad-boy nature is what drew her in, but it wasn't stated this way. It was interesting to learn more about the mail system and how it took 2 months or so to get mail. I would have liked to learn a little more about the mail system in the US and from the US to England at this time given she mentions it often in the book, and often letters are read. We know many people communicate this way, and it takes a long time to send or receive. That's it, so opening that aspect a small bit would have been good. I reiterate that I liked the story, I will listen to it again but there were some small shortcomings with character development, narrator reading the book, and with the reality of runaway slaves. There were up to 10,000 slaves running away monthly in many years, often via the Runaway Underground, which as stated, was absent from the book. Chevalier went into the first person experience/narrative of Honor and Belle, and could have done so with a runaway slave to create a character we could identify with and learn about the experience of being a runaway. She does touch upon this, but only grazes the topic.

After Honor Bright, a young English Quaker, is jilted by her fiance, she emigrated to Ohio in the early 1850s. She finds America much more open and raw, both environmentally and socially, than the England she grew up in. She finds it difficult to adapt to this new environment, never quite feeling that she belongs. Her one solace is the sewing of quilts, something at which she is extraordinarily talented. Her English style of sewing and quilting is much finer than that of the local women. Almost by chance Honor gets involved in helping runaway slaves traveling through Ohio trying to reach Canada. She marries Jack Haymaker, a local Quaker, but his family opposes aiding runaways for fear of fines, jail, or even losing their property. Honor is caught up in these conflicting

attitudes, but can never quite reconcile with refusing to help the fugitive slaves. Because of their differences she leaves her husband and his family for a while. Eventually she and her husband reconcile their differences and set out to create their own independent life.

My American Eden

Before writing a review of this book, I asked myself this question: What should great historical fiction do? Given the fact that I am drawn to the challenge as a writer, the question is apt. It has always been my intention to bring an event, an era, and a moment in time, back to life. In order to accomplish this feat, the reader must feel as if they are in the setting, in the era, in the place, indeed, in the kitchen, or the parlor with their protagonist. Do the events of the past have any significance to the present? Was there a struggle? Did our heroine fight her way through it, delivering us to the comfortable present? If the answer is yes, then chances are, a great story is underway.

In "The Last Runaway," Tracy Chevalier who many readers may know from "Girl with a Pearl Earring," can take a bow as an author who can transport us back to a particular time and place. It is the story of Honor Bright, a dignified Quaker woman who leaves England to accompany her sister to America. When yellow fever takes her sister's life she is stranded, alone and traveling to a small community in Ohio. The first and most obvious question as to why she did not return home has simple explanation. Plagued with ghastly seasickness, she simply could not stomach the idea of another voyage. Her challenge is to find her place. As in all great stories involving a journey, memorable characters help her along the way. A milliner, a slave catcher and her sister's intended are her first ports of call. However the path is not smooth. Even though she is with fellow Quakers, she finds they are different, due to being American and caught in the crossfire of the last days of slavery. From the beginning the founder of the movement, George Fox, set down the tenant that all people carry the same light of God within, and therefore, are not to be enslaved, owned or sold. For Honor, this belief was a given, but in England they were not living with slaves in their midst. In Ohio, recent passage of the Fugitive Slave Law meant those who sought to aid escapees, faced steep penalties. Honor marries. Her new husband, his mother and sister, lost their farm in North Carolina for aiding and abetting runaways. Moving north to start anew in Ohio, they forbid her to use their new farm as a link in the chain. She is caught in the grips of a moral dilemma. Her friendship with the milliner, put her in that territory from the moment she arrived in Ohio. Her beliefs and her conscience are tested. How far are we willing to go to right a wrong of which we are entirely certain? This is a central question to many great novels.

Chevalier uses her considerable skill to put us in the time and place. England, she points out, is a place ordered by hedgerows, settled for over one thousand years, where houses built of stone and great husbandry give it a

delicious and pleasing air. In Ohio, Honor balks at the size and scope of the new territory; it looms large and terrifying in her mind. The diet she finds less varied, the eternal corn mush, tasteless, the climate, too cold and then too hot, the people more outspoken, and the needlework, less skilled. Yet she presses on with the inherent gentle persistence that makes up her sensibility. Her new family are decidedly not friendly, and when she takes matters into her own hands, she is chastised. A baby is born, and in their frustration, they let her know that they will take the child from her and send her on her way, with the Faithwell Meeting, disowning her. Conform or be shunned and abandoned with no maternal rights; that is where she finds herself. The same skill that brought us right into a Vermeer as in "Girl with a Pearl Earring," leads us to the harsh farms and small minded communities of nineteenth century America. A character who lives in our mind who almost walks and breathes, is what makes Tracy Chevalier a remarkable author. Honor Bright is not a one dimensional heroine, just as the slave catcher Donovan is not an entirely evil antagonist. Characters in this novel have painterly shades, as does the landscape and the culture. Certainly, the paradox of slavery and its long aftermath, is a worthy subject for an American tale. In the capable hands of Tracy Chevalier, it is pieced together as remarkable quilt: rich, textured, varied, and composed of great design.

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