



2009

The Letter Writer

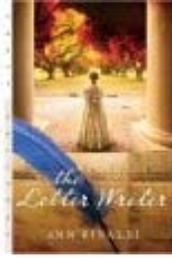
Alison Canar

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Rinaldi, Ann. *The Letter Writer*. Harcourt, 2008. ISBN 9780152064020. \$17.00. 217 p.

Reviewer: Alison Canar

Reading Level: Young adult

Rating: Dependable

Genre: Historical fiction;

Subject: Southampton Insurrection, 1831--Juvenile fiction; Turner, Nat, 1800?-1831--Juvenile fiction; Slavery--Juvenile fiction; Books--Reviews;

For an illegitimate child in the antebellum south, Harriet enjoys a comfortable lifestyle. She lives with her father's widow, who treats Harriet with compassion despite her origins. Mother Whitehead runs the plantation with grace while allowing her oldest son, Richard, to deal with the unsavory elements. A stern young minister, Richard believes in a vengeful, punishing god. Meanwhile, Harriet becomes fascinated with another young preacher in the area, a slave named Nat Turner. Harriet befriends Nat and he asks her to lend him a map. Harriet feels uneasy, but complies after Nat assures her that he only wants to use it for preaching. Unfortunately, Nat's version of preaching to the slave owners turns out to be a bloody massacre which takes the lives of her entire family and many others. Harriet prepares to take over as the mistress of the plantation on her own, until the uncle she has been writing to returns and reveals himself as her father.

While the basic plot of this novel is compelling, the story suffers from convoluted subplots and a long, drawn-out conclusion. In addition, the motives of Nat Turner's rebellion are overlooked. Although the story is written from the perspective of a young white girl whose family and friends are needlessly slain, the just elements of Turner's cause-fighting for freedom could still have been addressed. Instead, Rinaldi chooses to focus the remainder of the novel on replaying the narrator's vision of the violent events and untangling complicated issues with her father.

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