



My Thomas: A Novel of Martha Jefferson's Life

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When Martha Skelton finds herself falling in love with a shy young burgess named Thomas Jefferson, it feels like an inconvenience. Widowed at twenty-two, Martha has no desire to lose the independence she has gained in the wake of her husband's death. But she cannot deny her feelings indefinitely. Despite her intentions, her friendship with Thomas develops into an intense and all-consuming love. History casts a shadow on Martha's newfound joy. Through her father's slave and mistress, Betty Hemings, she comes to understand the true nature of slavery, an institution she has always taken for granted. As Betty's revelations tear down the walls of her ignorance, Martha begins to work with her husband to end the despicable practice forever. This story is essentially true. Thomas Jefferson was such an obsessive record-keeper that we know what he was doing nearly every day of his adult life, and all the public things he is quoted as saying in My Thomas come from his contemporary writings. Martha's marriage to Thomas spanned the decade from 1772 to 1782, so it put her at the center of the audacious grab at freedom that was the American Revolution. Jefferson's writings suggest that if he had not been widowed, he would have retired from politics following the war and devoted himself to finding a way to end slavery that could have truly and forever healed the separations between the races. It is hard to read Martha's story now and not think about what might have been.

My Thomas: A Novel of Martha Jefferson's Life Details

Date : Published January 15th 2014 by Wheatmark (first published December 11th 1992)

ISBN : 9781627870702

Author : Roberta Grimes

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Romance

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Jim says

Today most anyone knows that slavery is and always was wrong. But what if you were born in a world where it existed? Jefferson and his contemporaries honestly believed that they couldn't just get up one morning and tell the slaves they were free. Could the slaves survive without masters? Could the slave owners survive without the unpaid farm laborers and domestic servants? It was a conundrum. Leave today behind and pay a visit to the 1700's. You'll find that it was cold and muddy and primitive. Infant mortality was so common that it was not unusual to give your next child the same name as the one you just buried. I find that historical fiction is a great way to learn history without the need to just memorize all the names and dates.

Shirley says

This was a long and arduous book to read but in the end I truly did like it and it was a huge insight into the lives of Thomas Jefferson and his wife and the times in which they lived. Anyone who likes to read history brought to life would enjoy this book.

Lola says

A fascinating imagining of Thomas Jefferson's wife Martha's diary. Little is known about her or their relationship (Jefferson guarded her legacy closely and mourned her heavily), but Grimes had given readers an excellent guess at what Martha Jefferson would have been like. She seems like exactly the sort of woman Jefferson would have gone for: spirited, intelligent, beautiful, etc. This depiction of Martha made me able to imagine the extent of Jefferson's grief. Highly enjoyable and thoroughly researched! Recommended for anyone interested in Thomas Jefferson. Even traditionally non-fiction readers might get pleasure out of this.

Graceann says

I quite enjoyed this novel at the time I read it - it is an imagination of the marriage between Thomas and Martha Jefferson. You can only surmise, given that all their letters to one another were destroyed, but this was written in an interesting and plausible way.

Mary Robinson says

I liked this imagining of the life and thoughts of Thomas Jefferson's wife, Martha, whose story is told in the form of a diary. It was especially interesting to see how her thoughts about slavery evolved as she ages from a pampered Southern belle to a mature woman who finally sees the slave she grew up with, and who is really her best friend, as a full human being. It is frustrating not to know how much of this story can be supported by historical documentation. But it is interesting to read if only as a story of personal growth and a love story

between the Jeffersons.

M.M. Strawberry Reviews says

I definitely enjoyed this novel. I'm not sure whether to call this an biography or historical fiction. Given what a private man Thomas was and how little we know of Martha Wayles Skelton Jefferson (we don't even have a single painting of her) this book might be better termed as historical fiction, although it stars an actual historical figure.

Nonetheless, this is a good book and one that I enjoyed a lot. I think that Ms. Grimes did a nice job, giving how scant information about Mrs. Jefferson is, and this story is told mainly in first person perspective. How much the real Martha is reflected in this book, it is impossible to know, but I think it was a great book, with some wonderful conversations between her and Thomas, and Ms. Grimes really captures the feel of the time that she was living in at the time of each journal entry.

Anna Marini says

I highly recommend My Thomas. It is a terrific, well written historic novel; it contains little known historical information about Thomas and Martha Jefferson. Ms. Grimes command of the written word is beautiful and reminiscent of a modern-version Jane Austen style. Thomas and Martha Jefferson's love story is not to be missed. You won't be able to put it down!

Diana says

Martha Wayles Skelton is a 22 year old widow when Thomas Jefferson comes in to her life. She had no intention of remarrying but fell deeply in love with her Thomas.

I was fascinated with many aspects of this story. The research was extraordinary. I particularly enjoyed the details of the clothing worn during this time period.

Thomas Jefferson was portrayed not only as a brilliant mind who loved his books, almost as much as his wife, but also as a kind man with a heart who cared and fought for the equality of all.

Although, I thought that I grasped the horror of slavery, this book gave me more insight about that tragic time in our history.

F. says

I received this book from the goodreads-first-reads free giveaway. The format of the book was interesting but as I continued reading, it became a bit dull and boring. I think it would have been better to have some historical content or documentation surrounding the entries or to split into chapters. It is written in a 'diary' fashion and you get an idea of Martha attempting to describe Thomas in a positive light and also describe her emotions towards him but it becomes monotone.

Beth says

Surprisingly uncheesy. If this book is to be believed, Martha was quite the spitfire and a bit of a sexpot. I should like to have been her friend.

Serena Gullede says

The story of Thomas and Martha Jefferson, while not as popular- or as controversial- as his relationship with Sally Hemings, gets its due with this book as told through Martha's point of view. She views Jefferson as only a wife can, so I found his portrayal in this book as a tad over-romanticized. I still enjoyed the book, and I'd recommend it to history fans.

Peggy says

My Thomas is author Grimes' own love letter to Thomas Jefferson, a man of strong convictions, principles and contradictions. Using the device of his wife Martha's private Journal, rescued by one of the Jefferson's slaves, Ms. Grimes puts a more human face on this eminent statesman in this *First Reads* giveaway I won.

Little is known about the actual Martha Jefferson because of her husband's penchant for destroying personal papers to preserve his privacy, but I'm not convinced that the Martha imagined here could have been capable of the profound influence she apparently had on him. Their personal views, values and educations just seem to be at such polar opposites. Her character does grow and develop throughout the book, so that she eventually holds an even more seemingly radical point of view than her husband's, but her willfulness has such a strong element of selfishness that I found it difficult to envision this couple's "perfect communion of minds", or even to like her.

The details of the every day life of colonial Virginia's gentry are meticulously researched here, and provide an interesting window into the cares of managing a plantation from the woman's domestic sphere, and the attitudes toward slavery and human rights which shaped both of the Jefferson's opinions.

Caroline Johnson says

Won this book from Goodreads. Fans of Historical Novels will love this. Very detailed writings from Martha Jefferson's diaries.

Luthien says

Some of the founding fathers' wives—sometimes called the “founding mothers”—were inspirational, even heroic. (See: Abigail Adams, Dolley Madison.) Some were pitiable and even tragic. (See: Patrick Henry's first wife, Sarah.)

Martha Jefferson would probably fall into the latter category. Unfortunately, she left very little impression on the historical record. That's just the way the cookie crumbles, particularly when your husband is Thomas Jefferson.

That's not to say her life didn't matter, or that Jefferson didn't adore her (he did, by all accounts). It just means that we see her through rose-colored glasses. Fuzzy rose-colored glasses, at that, because Jefferson—infamously an intensely private man—burned all their letters after she died.

Therefore, there's not much to go on when it comes to, you know, writing a novel.

I'm sure it seemed like a good idea at the time, and it's an admirable effort on Roberta Grimes'. She clearly did a good deal of research, and it isn't her fault that there's so little of Martha *to* research. Perhaps she looked forward to using artistic license to fill in the gaps in the historical record. Who knows.

I do know that Jefferson probably burned their letters to keep his married life as private as possible—and here it is in all its fictionalized glory. If memory serves, Ms. Grimes alleges that he burned them to protect Martha's memory because she wrote, I don't know, racy things to him or something...? It was weird.

Also, it's pretty clear that she thinks Martha died because—forgive me—her husband couldn't keep it in his pants and kept getting her pregnant. Her many pregnancies probably didn't help her ill health, but as they say, it takes two to tango.

Overall, this was a decent effort, but if you're going to write about a Jefferson woman, maybe Martha Jefferson Randolph—his daughter—would be a better choice. She not only lived through the Revolution, but accompanied her father to Paris and served as his First Lady (when Dolley Madison wasn't filling in).

And if you just want to write about a founding mother, Abigail Adams was fabulous. Now talk about a life worthy of a novel. (I just really love her. Sorry.)

Cook Memorial Public Library says

Powerful love story as well as fascinating portrait of famous men of the era. Diary format from Martha, Thomas Jefferson's young wife.

Recommended by staffer Connie.

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