

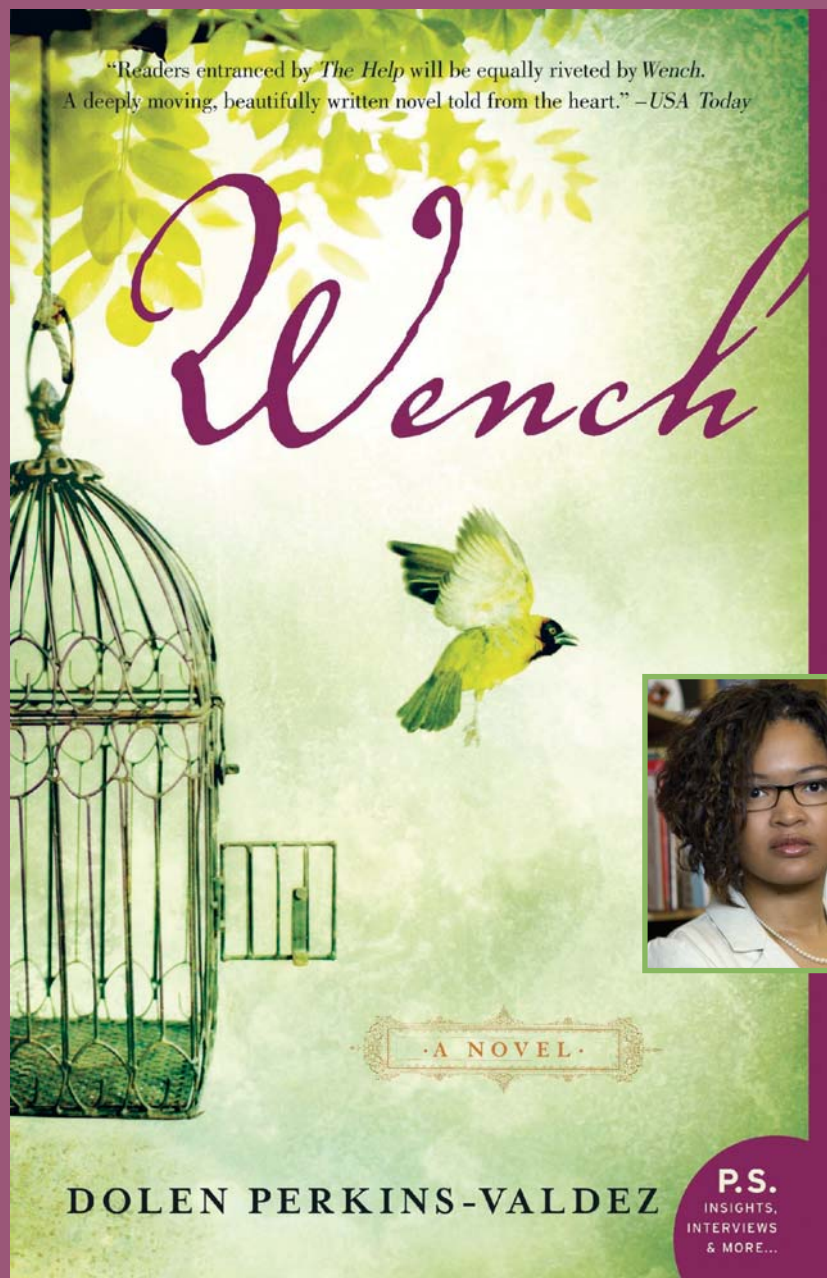
SANTA MONICA

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




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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**

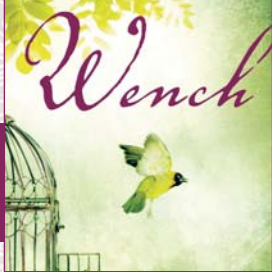
Similar in impact on its subject and setting to Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*, Harriet Jacobs' autobiography, describing her life as an enslaved girl in North Carolina, has long been considered a seminal work of slave narrative. First published in 1861, Jacobs' book was among the first slave accounts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

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