

WINIFRED CONKLING

on writing

PASSENGER *on the* PEARL

A two-story red-brick building stands at the corner of Duke Street and Reinekers Lane in Alexandria, Virginia. The charming colonial now serves as a private office space, but 150 years ago it held the Bruin Slave Jail. Hundreds of slaves passed through that building in the twenty years it functioned as a slave pen, including one young domestic slave named Emily Edmonson.

What first struck me when I learned about Emily Edmonson was her age. She was just thirteen-years-old when she and her siblings became stowaways on the *Pearl*. In my world, most thirteen-years-olds attend middle school, where they worry about memorizing locker combinations, attending school dances, and making friends. Today, children still experience heart-breaking challenges at school and at home, but few of them face the kind of life-altering choices that Emily Edmonson had to make. Emily was forced to work as a domestic slave and then she had to somehow muster the courage to leave her family and the life she knew so that she could escape to a free but uncertain future.

When thinking about and writing about a person like Emily, I can't help but wonder what choices I might have made if I had faced similar challenges. My hope is that the people who read *Passenger on the Pearl* also think about how they would have felt living under the conditions Emily and those around her endured. What would you have done? Would you have run away on the *Pearl*? How would you have felt?



WINIFRED CONKLING is the author of the middle-grade novel *Sylvia and Aki*, winner of the Jane Addams Children's Literature Award and the Tomás Rivera Award. She studied journalism at Northwestern University and received an MFA in writing for children and young adults from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. She has written many nonfiction books and articles for adult readers. *Passenger on the Pearl: The True Story of Emily Edmonson's Flight from Slavery* is her first work of nonfiction for young readers.

“Today, children still experience heart-breaking challenges at school and at home, but few of them face the kind of life-altering choices that Emily Edmonson had to make.”

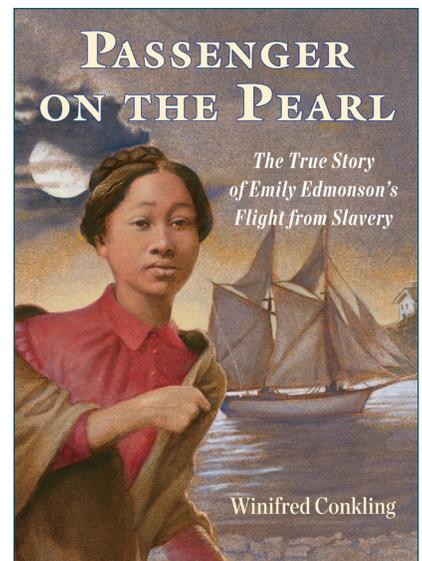


So often history focuses on events involving older people. I was intrigued to find in Emily's story a way of introducing the struggles of young people who were held in bondage as slaves. Time after time, Emily escaped the worst of what those around her experienced. She was taken to New Orleans to be a "fancy girl," but she was returned before being sold. She was exposed to life-threatening yellow fever, but she avoided contracting the illness. She was scheduled to return to the South in a slave coffle, but her father raised the necessary ransom just in time. Through Emily's story, readers can imagine the repeated threats faced by young African Americans of the time. Emily's story survives, in part, because she was much luckier than most other enslaved people in the mid-nineteenth century.

I am grateful to have been able to tell Emily's story. Every event in the book is true and supported by evidence and source material cited in the book's notes. Rarely does an author have access to such excellent primary source material, but in this case, I was able to draw on Captain Daniel Drayton's excellent memoir to describe the conditions on the night of the escape, as well as author Harriet Beecher Stowe's interviews with Emily, Mary, and Amelia Edmonson. Stowe's detailed account in *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* recounts dialogue as well as description in what amounts to an oral history of the family. For an author writing creative nonfiction, this material is pure gold.

While Emily's story can be told because it has been so well documented, her story was far from typical. Most of the other runaways onboard the *Pearl* that night did not fare as well as Emily and the other Edmonson siblings, and their stories have been lost. Most of the other fugitives on the *Pearl* were torn away from their families and sold to plantation owners in the South. I don't know what happened to them, but it is reasonable to assume that many died from yellow fever and other illnesses, after suffering harsh and inhumane conditions as field slaves. While the stories of these undocumented lives are not included in the book, I hope that readers also think of them when reading *Passenger on the Pearl*.

“Emily's story survives, in part, because she was much luckier than most other enslaved people in the mid-nineteenth century.”



YOUNG ADULT NONFICTION

On sale January 13, 2015
 Ages 12 and up, Grades 7 and up
 \$17.95 Hardcover
 176 pages, 6³/₄" x 9"
 ISBN: 978-1-61620-196-8
 E-Book ISBN: 978-1-61620-436-5