



The *Bondwoman's Narrative* is a best-selling novel by Hannah Crafts, a self-proclaimed slave who escaped from North Carolina. She likely wrote the novel in the mid-19th century. The manuscript was authenticated and published in 2002. Scholars believe that the novel, possibly the first written by an African-American woman, was created between 1853 and 1861. It is the only known novel by a fugitive slave woman, and it may precede the novel *Our Nig* by Harriet Wilson, published in 1859.[1]

Crafts explores the experiences of Hannah, a house slave in North Carolina. In the preface, Crafts writes that she hopes "to show how slavery blights the lives of whites as well as the black race."

The novel opens by telling that Hannah grew up on a plantation in Virginia owned by the Cosgroves, where she was taught as a child to read and write by Aunt Hetty, a kind old white woman, who was subsequently discovered and reprimanded, as the education of slaves was supposed to be limited. This establishes her literacy, important in grounding her right and ability to tell her story. She describes herself as of a "complexion almost white." Later she is sold to the Henrys and the Wheelers, ending up in North Carolina with the last family.

As a young woman, Hannah serves as a lady's maid at Lindendale plantation. Her master and mistress host a large

wedding. During the party, Hannah notices an unattractive old man following her new mistress. Hannah concludes that “each one was conscious of some great and important secret on the part of the other.” In the coming weeks, after observing her new mistress lock herself away most of the day, Hannah comes to learn that the old man is Mr. Trappe, a crooked lawyer who has discovered that the mistress is a fair-skinned mulatto who is passing for white.

Hannah and the mistress flee the plantation in the middle of the night, become lost, and stay the night in a gloomy shack in the forest. The shack was recently the scene of a murder, and is strewn with bloodstained weapons and clothes. Under these conditions, Hannah's mistress starts to go insane.

Months later, the women are found by a group of hunters who escort them to prison. One of them, Horace, informs Hannah that her master slit his throat after their escape. The women are taken to prison, where they meet Mrs. Wright, a senile woman imprisoned for trying to help a slave girl escape. The mistress' insanity worsens. After several months, the women are moved to a house, where conditions are much better, but they are unable to leave or know the identity of their captor. After a lengthy imprisonment, it is revealed that their captor is Mr. Trappe. The mistress, upon learning this, suffers a brain aneurysm and dies.

Hannah is sold to a slave trader. As she is being transported, the cart horse bolts and runs the cart off a ledge. The slave trader is killed instantly. Hannah wakes up in the home of her new mistress, Mrs. Henry, a kindly woman who treats her well. As Hannah recuperates, Mrs. Henry is told that Hannah's previous owner wishes to claim her.

Despite Hannah's pleas, the young woman is returned to the status of house slave, but she is sold to the Wheelers. She

describes Mrs. Wheeler as a vain, self-centered woman. At one time, her husband serves as the United States Minister to Nicaragua. (This was one of the details that led to tracing Crafts as a slave held by John Hill Wheeler.)

One day, when sent to town for facial powder, Hannah hears news of Mr. Trappe's death. After Mrs. Wheeler uses the new facial powder, she discovers that it reacts with her perfume or smelling salts, causing a blackening effect on her skin.[3][4] Mrs. Wheeler realizes she had blackface in an encounter with a prominent woman, causing her much emotional discomfort.[3] After the family moves to North Carolina and she replaces Hannah as her maid with another house slave, Mrs. Wheeler suspects Hannah of telling others about the blackface incident. As punishment, she orders Hannah to the fields for labor, and plans for her to be raped. Hannah escapes and flees to the North.[3]

Along the way, Hannah comes under the care again of Mrs. Hetty, the kind white woman who originally taught her to read and write. Mrs. Hetty facilitates Hannah's escape to the North, where the young woman rejoins her mother. There she marries a Methodist minister and lives in New Jersey.