“Like their free counterparts, the family worked hard to scratch out a living with Jack Staines constantly at sea and Ona Staines most likely picking up domestic work while she cared for their small children. Their family was fragile as free blacks across the new nation found themselves only a few steps removed from slavery and poverty. Illness or death of a loved one could completely change the life circumstances of a family teetering on the brink of survival. For women, the situation became even bleaker in the wake of the loss of a husband or son. (p. 179)

With a partial break in the capricious March weather, the Bibliophiles met to review NEVER CAUGHT, by the Rutgers historian Dr. Erica Armstrong Dunbar. Recommended by Rev. Mary Newbern-Williams, this book explores the determined pursuit by George and Martha Washington to recapture a runaway slave from their Virginia Plantation. Sue invited Mary to share the reasons behind her selection and recommendations of this title. Mary reported great interest in the stories of African American slave history, citing titles such as UNDERGROUND RAILROAD, BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME, and JUST MERCY as notable predecessors to the 2017 publication of NEVER CAUGHT.

We were reminded by Harold and Bob H. that the history of slavery goes back to the Romans and Biblical times. However the plight of black populations in early U.S. history was vastly different from parallel circumstances in South America. Slaves sent taken to the southern continent retained some degree of individual identity, whereas American bound slaves were considered by their owners as less than human: sold and traded as property assets. U.S. slavery markets were driven by considerations of liquid assets and credit exchange. In the mid 19th century, the economic value of slaves was greater than the assets of all banks during that era. No support or allowances were made, however, for U.S. slaves’ family relationships, personal affinities or freedom of choice.

Sue made the point that Dunbar’s narrative tone was carefully objective and devoid of personal anger or animus. Terry and David made acute and critical observations that Dunbar’s narrative seemed replete with suppositions and literary license. “How could Dunbar ascribe sensations, feelings and emotions to the lead characters, including George and Martha Washington”, they asked.

This reporter sought to rationalize this notable breach from historical narrative. The book purposely goes beyond the traditional boundaries of documentary history. Rather, it may be viewed as a hybrid of deep factual research coupled with artistic imagination; a modern literary genre sometimes called Creative Nonfiction. It may be argued that Dunbar employed novelistic techniques to enrich the plot and characterization. She sometimes uses the present tense, direct sensory experiences, mundane details, statements of a character “feeling overwhelmed.” These ascriptions, if one accepts them, can offer an immediacy, originality and power to the narrative that enriches the historical record. It’s all a matter of choice.

Our next good read will be LINCOLN IN THE BARDO: A Novel, by George Saunders. This is another title (a novel) where the artistic imagination takes precedence over the formal, historical record. Who knows what Lincoln really thought and felt about the death of his beloved son, Willy?

I have placed an order request for eight paperback copies of this book to be available at the Bookworm. There are several copies on hand at this time. Ask for our book club 20% discount.

I look forward to seeing you at Spezia on Wednesday, May 2nd at 11:30 a.m.

http://bibliophiles.unomaha.edu/

BobR
3/8/18