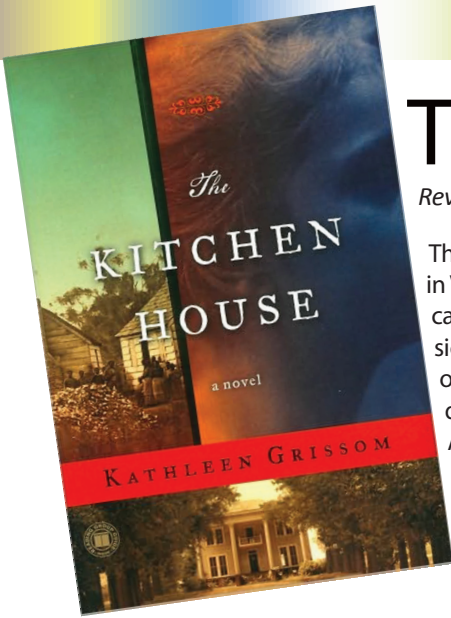


The Kitchen House

Review by Dana Schmidt, Yankton Community Library



This story is set in the late 1800's in Virginia. James Pyke, a ship captain, brings home a pale, sickly, and silent seven-year-old Lavinia after her parents die on his ship on the way to America from Ireland. Lavinia is to become an indentured servant on his plantation. Lavinia is given to Belle, a slave in the Pyke's kitchen house. Belle automatically

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As Lavinia grows stronger, she recalls seeing the bodies of her parents being dumped into the sea. She begins to speak again and eventually begins to feel safe in this strange new world. She makes friends with Fanny and Beattie, the twin daughters of Mama Mae and Papa George. She is accepted and loved by this new patchwork family of house slaves. Belle and Mama Mae become like mothers to her, Fanny and Beattie her sisters, Papa George her daddy. Lavinia's gentle spirit and kind soul also draws Miss Sally, the daughter of the master, to her. This friendship brings Lavinia into the main house more frequently. Soon, even the mistress of the house becomes attached to Lavinia and teaches her how to read and how to behave "properly".

The master of the house is kind-hearted and aims to protect the slaves from unfair treatment but he is often gone on sailing trips leaving the cruel and heartless Rankin in charge of the slaves. The mistress of the house is frequently disabled and detached by her deep depression and an excessive use of laudanum drops that calm her nerves. It is the slaves that watch over and care for the mistress, her two children and each other. And it is the slaves that end up protecting and rescuing the master's son, Marshall, from his tutor who is controlling and molesting the young boy. Unfortunately, the tutor and Rankin had already corrupted Marshall and he ends up directing a lot of his anger toward the very slaves that saved him from this mistreatment.

Though she is loved, Lavinia lives a life of being stuck in between. As a child, she lives the life of a slave, but doesn't look like them. She is surrounded by strong women, caring protective men, and unbreakable innocent friendships. However, when she turns 17, she becomes a free woman, no longer an indentured servant and ends up marrying Marshall. Though in the beginning he shows his affection for Lavinia, Marshall has a terrible temper, a weakness for alcohol, women, and gambling, and a heart full of hatred and jealousy. As a free woman, Lavinia feels more trapped and alone than ever in a loveless, cruel marriage and drowning in her own loneliness. The family she once knew and loved is now forced to withhold all affection and treat her only as the mistress of the house. This book is full of heart-wrenching moments of suffering and misunderstandings, violence and tragedy, jealousy and hatred. But it is also a story of overwhelming love and hope. Though the cruelty and violent treatment of slaves is demonstrated often in this book, love crosses the color lines over and over again.

The story is told from the alternating viewpoints of Belle and Lavinia. Belle's adult perspective gives a better understanding of the fear and struggles that the slaves have and the unfair ways they are treated with little ability to fight back. Lavinia's view is always seen with a bit of innocence and naivety, highlighting how one's misconceptions can lead to hurt and hatred.

The writing and storyline of this book are excellent. The author draws you into the story from the very first page and deeply connects you to her characters. This book would be great for anyone who likes historical fiction or women's literature. It's definitely a five-star book!



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