

## IN PRINT

## A Long Way From Home

Harper Collins; 1999

By CONNIE BRISCOE

A LONG WAY FROM HOME tells the emotionally charged story of three generations of household slaves on President James Madison's Montpelier plantation. There is Susie, the matriarch whose strict ways and cool head can only keep her family safe for so long. There is her daughter, Clara, strong-willed and smart-mouthed, whose painful secret shapes her family's destiny. And there are Clara's daughters, Susan and Ellen. Beautiful, brave, and extremely light-skinned, Susan and Ellen share a desire to know their father's identity and to spend their lives together; but a cruel twist of fate rips the family apart, sending one sister running for freedom and the other far from the home she has known and loved.

This hauntingly beautiful novel opens in the peaceful Piedmont area of Virginia. Trained as a house slave since childhood, Susie enjoys the privileges that her position as maid to Miss Dolley provides her and Clara. For Susie, life holds no mystery, no promise beyond the boundaries of the plantation itself—a lesson she tries to impart to the dreamy Clara, who longs to control her own destiny despite her mother's frightening admonition: "You don't know a

thing about freedom, 'cause I don't know anything about it. It takes money and know-how to live free. You don't just up and do it."

Life will change for both mother and daughter, though, with the death of James Madison and the departure of his wife for her town house, events that leave the estate in the hands of Dolly's profligate son, Todd. As a result of his neglectful stewardship, the plantation soon falls to a series of owners, each posing a new threat to Susie and Clara, and other longtime Madison slaves with whom the two have shared their entire lives.

Amidst these devastating changes, Clara grows into womanhood and becomes a mother herself, giving birth to two light-skinned daughters, Ellen and Susan. Yet the threat of separation that has shaped her life is soon a reality when her younger daughter, Susan, is sold to a wealthy businessman in Richmond. Susan must create a new life for herself in this bustling city, a life that will be filled with both terror and hope, for it is in Civil War-torn Richmond that she will find love and realize the long-held dream of her ancestors: freedom.

Told against the breathtaking backdrop of American history that includes

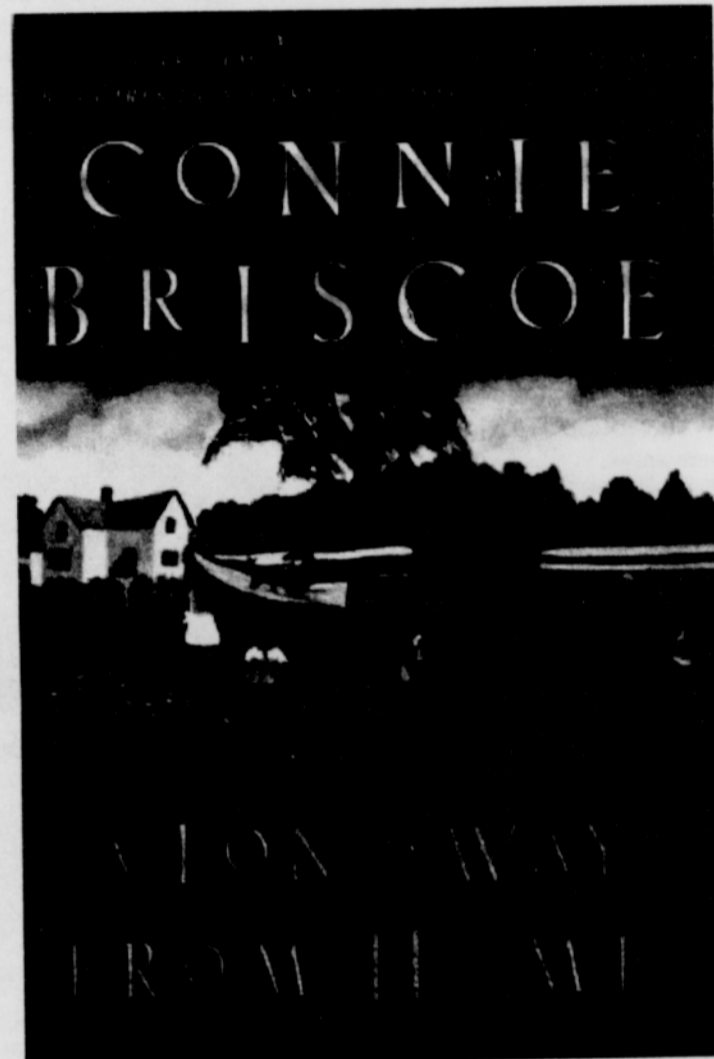
a fresh look at one of our founding fathers, A LONG WAY FROM HOME offers unique insight into the day-to-day lives of these women—their heartbreaks and triumphs, tears and survival—and the hopes and dreams that keep them together even as they are torn apart, and that push them toward the promise of freedom. It is a moving, ambitious story of one family's indestructible spirit in the face of slavery, told proudly by one of their descendants and one of today's most lyrical, accomplished authors.

An excerpt: "Drunken fool wasn't worth a fart in a whirlwind. He shouldn't even be here. He didn't own this place anymore. Because of his shoddy management of Montpelier, their lives were ruined. For the first time in years, she had on a halfway decent dress, no thanks to him. She backed farther away and, in the folds of her skirt, made a fist with her hand. He couldn't see it, but if he dared to get down off that horse and come anywhere near her, he would damn sure feel it.

He made a move to do just that—get down from his horse—but was so drunk and fat, he had trouble lifting his rump. She turned to flee and bumped smack into Squire May, the driver who had replaced Daddy on the Bell plantation, as he rounded the corner of the laundry house. He was whistling, but the tune fell quickly from his lips. Judging from the look on

his chocolate-colored face, Clara imagined he probably had a pretty good idea that something fishy was going on here. He glanced down at the basket and laundry strewn over the yard and rubbed his dark beard. For a fleeting moment, Clara worried about what

he might do. Everybody in these parts knew that Mass' Todd had attacked her. They also knew that her daddy had to run after going up against the white folks in trying to defend his daughter. She hoped Squire wasn't about to do anything foolish."



## Meet the Author

INTERVIEW BY JOY RAMOS

Q: When did the thought of writing this novel emerge?

Connie Briscoe: I used to visit my grandmother when I was little, and on one of the visits I noticed a picture sitting on her dresser of what looked like two white women. Being black I found that to be very strange. So I asked her who were the two white women and why did she have a picture of them, and she told me that they were not white that they were black women of my family who were slaves on the plantation of President James Madison. One was my great-great-grandmother Susan and the other was her sister Ellen. As I had gotten older I did more research and started to learn more about my ancestors and the plantation of James Madison. I went four generations back to my great-great-great-grandmother, Susie. She had a daughter named Clara who was also a slave. Susan's father was a white man who owned a plantation.

Q: What was the earliest story that you were told about them?

Connie Briscoe: The earliest story that I was told was that Susan's father would come into their room every night and give her and her sister a penny. Also that Susan was sold at

a very young age, she was about 14 years old. The known history of the family was that the family had been slaves on the Madison plantation for several generations. But that wasn't enough information. So I researched the lives of the slaves and what it was like to be a slave on the James Madison plantation at the time my great-grandmother Susan and her sister Clara were alive. This took place during the peak of the 1800's, approximately around the 1820's - 1830. James Madison had become deeply in debt because his crops were going bad and his stepson was an alcoholic with a bad gambling problem. James Madison had to spend tens of thousands of dollars trying to get him out of debt. By the 1830's, he was severely in debt. President Madison didn't believe in selling slaves, but he had no choice but to sell 16 of his slaves to save his land.

Q: What advice would you give to African Americans who want to research their ancestral history?

Connie Briscoe: To anyone who may be pondering on his or her ancestral history, I would say to start with an old family member, the older the better because they will know more about it than anyone else and because life isn't forever and you don't know how much time is left. They will give you the richest anecdotes that you will not find between the pages of any book. There are dozens of genealogy books to direct you and there are a lot of African-American genealogy books as well.

There are Internet sites that will help you too. Two in particular are the Christine Genealogy website page, created by an individual who has gathered information over the years.


And another is the Afro Genius website, which is a mailing list of people who are searching for their roots.

Q: How did you create the main characters and whom do you relate to the most?

Connie Briscoe: All of the major characters are based on real people. Like the slave named Sarah in the book, she was a real slave who lived on the Madison plantation. The formal research took three years. By this time, I had grown a passion to write the novel. The writing of the novel took at least a year and a half. I identify most with Susan because she lived the closest to my time and she was the one who was freed after the Civil War. She died in 1870 at a very young age of the disease yellow fever. Her husband Oliver died in 1820 and he was the one who passed on the story to his daughter Minnie, who was my great-grandmother. I can remember Minnie and a cousin of hers sitting around talking about Susan and her sister Ellen. The fact that Susan entered my life through the conversations that we had about her made her more real to me.



Connie Briscoe



## DIXON'S


5804 N Interstate Ave.  
Portland, OR 97217  
(503) 289-6062

# RIB PIT

## LDP GRAPHIC DESIGN

GRAPHIC DESIGN FOR TODAY'S GROWING BUSINESS.

- \* LOGO DESIGN
- \* AD LAYOUTS
- \* FLYERS
- \* BUSINESS SETS
- \* CAMERA READY ART
- AND MUCH MORE



59¢  
COLOR COPIES  
NO MINIMUM

6¢  
BLACK/WHITE

Member - Oregon Association of Minority Entrepreneurs  
CALL FOR YOUR FREE ESTIMATE. 1999 CATALOG AVAILABLE SOON.  
10% DISCOUNT TO ALL NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Ms. Lauri Chambers  
Graphic Designer, Owner

Phone: 503-493-3391  
Email: ldpvc@teleport.com