



Stand the Storm

Breena Clarke

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Even though Annie Coats and her son have managed to buy their freedom, their lives are still marked by constant struggle and sacrifice. Washington's Georgetown neighbourhood is supposed to be a 'promised land' for former slaves but is effectively a frontier town, gritty and dangerous, with no laws protecting black people.

Stand the Storm Details

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Author : Breena Clarke

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From Reader Review Stand the Storm for online ebook

Laura Hill says

I didn't really like this book. Some parts were better than others. It reminded me of Lalita Tademy's book. I wonder if this one also is based on a true story? It doesn't flow like a novel does. And the writing patterns were jarring. Like the two sentences that described Gabriel and Mary drowning. The last sentence of the paragraph just said: They Drowned. I almost missed it completely. I guess it was an interesting tale of the Civil War as told from the perspective of this family but again, there were some unsettled things. Like why did Gabriel always distrust Delia so much? Where did that come from? And the preference Annie gave to her son – his being the lord and master of everything. Was this about how men subjugated women even in the midst of discussing the race issues? This is why it kind of felt like an essay about a specific family drawn from historical documents – there was no real narrative flow or closure on the personality quirks. No connection between taking the girls to school and then just drowning on the way back. And the old plantation owner gets the tore back (no severance). I thought it was interesting that Delia ended up kind of saving them all. So although the book was about being black, there was a huge undercurrent about black women and their life, and how they actually supported the superiority of men over them. I liked the ray of hope at the end – everyone going south to help educate all of their people. The way to catch up to the other race.

On Breena Clarke's website the description of the book (probably written by the publisher) talks about the tragic denouement – I didn't find it tragic as much as surprising, and then hopeful in the way that they found a way to turn their situation into a positive one. If it was supposed to be tragic it should have been written better.

Catherine says

Stand the Storm by Breena Clarke is the story of 3 generations of freed slaves who live together and earn their livelihood working in a variety of sewing and knitting trades.

It is hard for me to rate this book. There are several areas of strength for me. I feel the author researched the era very well. I appreciate the details that Ms. Clarke uses in her writing. The picture painted of this period in our country's history was vivid. I also feel the subject matter of freed slaves is one that has not been covered as well in historical fiction. There are many books about the American period of slavery, but not many about the struggles of freed slaves. This book gave me a desire to read more about this era.

There were weaknesses too. As much as I found the topic compelling, I found my mind wandering as I read the book. I had some difficulty with the writing style. Also, I was a bit uncomfortable with the matriarch's obsession with her son. It did not come across as a positive relationship to me. I also did not feel like I was connected to any of the characters. One of the most sympathetic characters for me was the wife of the main character, but she was a relatively minor character.

Overall, an uneven book for me, with both strengths and weaknesses. I will add other books by the author to my to-read list, however.

The Urban Book Source says

Reviewed by Vanessa Dora Murray

Stand the Storm—another exceptional novel from the pen of Breena Clarke, the bestselling author of *River, Cross My Heart*, an October 1999 Oprah Book Club Selection—has arrived. A riveting tale about enslavement, struggle, sacrifice, and the Coats, a family that manages to buy their freedom, true freedom.

Sewing Annie Coats, the lead character, comes to the realization that slaves with special skills are the last to be sold. So, as the most skilled sewer in her neck of the woods, she does not hesitate to teach her own children, Gabriel and Ellen, every thing she knows about sewing, knitting, weaving, and a horde of other skills. The story unfolds when young Gabriel is sent to work for Abraham Pearl, a kind Georgetown tailor, who teaches Gabriel the ropes of tailoring. In time, the Coats, who become so-called ex-slaves, end up operating their own tailor shop and laundry in Georgetown, a place believed to be heaven on earth for former slaves, but as it turns out, their heavenly paradise is actually a frontier town, with no laws defending African Americans. Stand the Storm will have you laughing, clapping, and crying. It is a remarkable piece of work, Clarke's best by far.

A native of Washington, D.C., and the recipient of the 1999 award for fiction by the New Atlantic Independent Booksellers Association and the Alex Award, given by the Young Adult Library Services Association, Clarke has managed to cope with the death of her only child which is probably the reason she is able to effectively write about pain and heartache.

Kudos to Clarke!

What did you like best about this book?

Touching, charming, well written.

What did you dislike about this book?

It is all good. Nothing to dislike.

How can the author improve this book?

She can't. It can't get any better than this.

Lindsay says

I wanted to like Breena Clarke's "Stand the Storm," but it became one of those books I just dreaded picking up. The story starts just before the Civil War, centered around an enslaved family with the unique sewing abilities. These skills drive the young Gabriel Coats to Washington DC, who leads a successful tailoring shop with the help of his mother and sister. I could tell from the first page that this was not a story that was going to end well - perhaps that is what prevented me from connecting with the characters in this story.

As for the writing, there were some beautiful images and passages here. However, the story was just so overwhelming in its messages of loss, despair, and devastation. The Coats family repeated finds success, frees themselves from bondage, only to find themselves somehow re-enslaved again. Any glimmers of happiness are quickly overshadowed. Perhaps this is an absolutely true representation - I am not a good judge here - but as a reader, I found this book difficult and painful. I could not truly recommend it.

Charlene says

Breena Clarke did her research, apparently. This story of a freed slave and his family set in Washington D.C. feels authentic. It's one of those books I looked forward to reading each day.

Sarah Weathersby says

The story dragged along way too much to the point where Gabriel and his mother could no longer see themselves as free. The midpoint of the story has an inundation of RATS!! And it becomes clear to Gabriel that he would lose the negotiation with their former master, and might find himself slave again.

Mocha Girl says

Breena Clarke's *Stand the Storm* centers on the story of "Sewing Annie" Coats and her son, Gabriel, expert tailors who manage to purchase their freedom at the cost of entering a less than lucrative business arrangement with their former owner. Nonetheless, hard work and thriftiness allow them to purchase Ellen (Annie's equally talented daughter) and her daughter, Delia. Prosperity reigns but the clan is happy for only a short while. The threat of re-enslavement looms at every corner as the reality of the times are made clear with the risk of being illegally captured by "pinchers" and sold South never to be seen again. There was also the ever-changing laws and complicated slave/freeman policies that deceitful slave owners misuse to extort and exploit freemen, not to mention the nerve-wrecking uncertainty of their status living in a district surrounded by slaveholding states as the country enters the Civil War.

The history lessons are supplemented with interludes of courtship and conflict featuring some colorful, charismatic and lovable, yet sympathetic characters who serve as love interests and arch nemeses for Annie and Gabriel. Luck and courage are also factors in their adventures propelling the "freedom train." Their industrious and ingenious survival skills are demonstrated during their humiliating encounters with whites and other undesirables. Unsurprisingly, for a story rooted in this era, the ugliness of racism and sexism are a given and Clarke does not skirt the realities of the degrading, violent sexual abuse that women and children of color endured at the hands of slavers, owners, or any white male in a position of authority. However, through Delia, the author broaches the sensitivities of colorism and the complications that it brings to the Coats's household.

Told largely from the freedmen's perspective in Washington's Georgetown district, this literary novel will appeal to Historical Fiction buffs in that it evokes the cadence and archaic vocabulary of the antebellum era and elicits the bittersweet nostalgia that comes with it. The author conjures poignant images to transport the reader back to the bustling rat-infested waterfronts, the narrow, muddy thoroughfares lined with trendy businesses and salacious bordellos, and the horrors of blood-soaked, body-littered battlefields. It is these circumstances that prompts a forlorn Annie (depressed when her beloved Gabriel joins the Union Army) to reminisce about her early years enslaved on the plantation and yearns to return to perceived safety, quiet, and comfort of it. The author continues down this conflicted path as she delves into the complicated familial interrelationships of the Coats clan, the ramifications and hardships of a (slave) mother's love, and its ultimate affects on the ties that bind. This title is well researched and recommended for literary, historical fiction fans or those interested in the challenges of African Americans in the antebellum period.

Reviewed by Phyllis
APOOO BookClub
July 25, 2008

Amy says

This novel follows a family before, through and after the Civil War. Very interesting novel. I learned a lot about the time period -the author did an excellent job of weaving history into the narrative. It was very difficult to read (emotionally) at times but well worth it.

The rhythm of the language in the book was challenging for me to become accustomed to initially, but did not keep me from enjoying the book. Once I got the rhythm, I was amazed at the language and how it boosts the enjoyment of the reading. Wonderfully well written, gut-wrenching, intense book. There were times when I felt I was standing there watching it all because Clarke did such a fantastic job of describing the scene and putting it into perspective for the reader.

I've read a lot of books about slavery and this time in history but I really enjoyed the perspective of this one and there were moments when I felt as if I'd been punched in the gut by the pure cruelty of some of the experiences described in the book but, overall, it is the story of a family. An interesting family with interesting dynamics that I enjoyed reading about. Really good book that I definitely recommend!

Suzanne says

"The boy's proficiency with needlework was clear from the first, and Pearl was surprised. Would Ridley have hired him out so reasonably if he'd known how skilled the boy was? He'd had practice taking instructions and following steps to the letter and he was agile and accomplished at simple sewing. Pearl realized right away that this little Gabriel was a competent hand for tailoring."

The story begins when little Gabriel, a slave boy, is hired out to a Jewish tailor in Georgetown. It is a handful of years just prior to the civil war, and the nation's capital is on the border between north and south. In *Stand the Storm*, Breena Clarke weaves a well-researched tale of a slave who strives to better himself and earn freedom for him and his family.

This book was a pleasure to read on so many levels. The story was captivating from the first pages. There is a tremendous sense of time and place in this novel. Clarke manages to capture the essence and struggles of a black family in this American city. There is so much wonderful history presented here. Despite having read quite a bit on the issues of slavery and the civil war, there was so much I learned reading this book. That's quite a coup! Also, despite the travails, I didn't find it a depressing book. In fact, I found myself cheering for every small success and grabbed on to the same hope that Gabriel did.

Nicholewebbmail.com Webb says

I was really struck with the beauty of the writers words and how she was able to talk about such a very gruesome time in our country with such elegance and grace. The images were so haunting. I am white and attend a multiracial church with about 80% of the members being african american the first

Sunday at church while reading the book I just sat back listening to my pastor and looked around to see all the beautiful people I was surrounded by and to see what they have overcome. It's also saddening to see why the culture struggles even today with so many single african american women raising children in poverty and as my Pastor stated just last sunday the majority of prisoners in our country today is black men. It gives me a heavy heart.

The book took a turn for me once the civil war started. There was a disconnect for me in that section of the book and I was startled when Gabriel and Mary died on the way home. It was very abrupt. But then, so is life I suppose and the idea that they went through so much tribulation only to die in a time of peace is still mulling around in my head.

I'm confused why the Author decided to throw in the rape scenes and details about the master abusing and even killing one of his slaves during a rape at one point right at the end there? And without letting us see him get what was coming to him.

Overall it was a good read.

Sandy Vaughan says

This is the story of Sewing Annie who is put under the tutelage of Knitting Annie to learn her skills on the Ridley Plantation. When Knitting Annie dies, Sewing Annie takes up the the black smith by whom she has a boy, Gabriel, and a girl, Ellen. By teaching them her skills, she hopes to save her children from the fields. At 10, Gabriel is sent to Washington DC to apprentice to a tailor. The tailor moves on after selling the shop to the Master. The Master's nephew is put in charge of the store with Gabriel, Sewing Annie, and Ellen running the business.

This is the story of the strength and love of family from before and through the Civil War and after. It is heartwarming and gut wrenching and well worth the read.

The rhythm of the language threw me for a bit from time to time but did not stop me wanting to find out what would happen to this family.

I could feel most of the characters and understand their motivations and enjoyed their growth. The novel is portal into time period well known but from a different vantage. It is so well worth the read.

Summer Van Wagoner says

Amazing details pull you back centuries and make your surroundings seem almost unreal as you read. But, like so many amazing stories, full of disgusting details- this one about rape. At any books end, I ask myself what this book brought to my life. I already knew the historical facts. I've read moving stories about slavery and the lives of those subjected to it. I think the disgusting images it put in my mind outweigh any of the images of exemplary attributes of her main characters. And to top it off, it doesn't end right. I HATE that. Killing people off doesn't make you Shakespeare.

There are more uplifting books out there, just as beautifully written, that won't leave you feeling a little raped yourself.

Shelby says

This book is about a black family who lived in DC before and during the civil war. I wanted to like this book and parts of it I liked, however, on the whole it wasn't very good. The writing is difficult at times and the characters were hard for me to connect with and really like. Then at the end it got boring and I almost didn't finish it. In about 7 pages the author has about 10 major things happen and the book ends. Weird. Plus, there was too many rape scenes and I can do without rape scenes.

Susan says

Sewing Annie , really knitting Annie, was a Maryland slave who sat and knitted day in and day out. She trained her son, Gabriel, who became an excellent sewer at a very young age. Their master bounded Gabriel to a tailor shop in Washington, DC. Master Ridley still owned Gabriel, but received payment from the tailor. Sewing Annie soon joined the, as did his sister Ellen. Any side jobs allowed them to keep money. So even though they purchased their freedom, they were still bound to Ridley and the tailor shop. It was interesting to follow from a slave's point of view. As much as I like the novel, I also felt there were different story points that were glossed over or not really fleshed out. I would really give it a 3.5 rating.

OOSA says

Freedom

STAND THE STORM by Breena Clarke tells the story of slaves Annie, aka Sewing Annie, and her son Gabriel Coats. Gabriel was groomed by his mother to help sew, weave, knit and dye cloth. Gabriel exhibited a genuine aptitude for needlework. Master Ridley, of the Ridley Plantation, decided to hire ten-year-old Gabriel out to the local tailor. Eventually Master Ridley devises a business plan to open up his own business in tailoring. Any extra business that Gabriel would get on his own would be for his own profit. Profits he intended on buying his and his family's freedom.

Gabriel does earn their freedom, making uniforms for soldiers. Gabriel falls in love with a runaway slave, Mary. They eventually get married and have children of their own. Unbeknownst to Gabriel and Mary, just because they are free does not necessarily mean that their children will be.

STAND THE STORM is the story about the individual struggles of the "free" slaves during the time of the Civil War. I found this story to be difficult to read because it moved so slowly. Briefly, early on, the story seemed to pick up...only to slack right back off again. It was hard to get attached to the characters. I usually enjoy historical fiction but this story was just adequate.

Reviewed by: LeonaR
2.5 stars
