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A Fugitive in Walden Woods: The American Novels

Norman Lock
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Lock draws from ex-slave narratives for this evocative novel set within American history.

Norman Lock's American Novels series engages creatively with nineteenth-century literary classics. In the fourth novel in the series, *A Fugitive in Walden Woods*, a runaway slave encounters Henry David Thoreau and his transcendentalist circle and ponders the meaning of physical and ideological freedom.

Samuel Long has been a fugitive for one year when his Underground Railroad journey ends in Concord, Massachusetts. Abolitionists eventually buy his freedom; in the meantime, Long builds a shack in Walden woods, where he becomes acquainted with Thoreau. From Long's escape from slavery to his Maine woods pilgrimage with Thoreau, the narrative is a testament to self-reliance and compassion.

Lock skillfully weaves in Concord's transcendentalist milieu through the philosophical debates that Long observes or participates in. Along with Emerson, a number of historical figures make appearances: Bronson Alcott is the Underground Railroad station master at Long's final stop; Long initially relays his slave narrative to William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*; and Nathaniel Hawthorne is a frequent guest at Emerson's drawing room discussions or on fishing trips with Long and Thoreau.

The novel evokes New England's seasons through vivid scenes of harvesting ice on Walden Pond, picnicking riverside, and camping en route to Maine. Long's folksy metaphors feel just right: he recalls sitting "in the dark like a maggot in a tin of meat"; Thoreau's cabin is "well made, like his sentences"; and Hawthorne "could mint sentences bright as new pennies."

In imagining Long's escape from slavery—after leaving his Virginia plantation he hides on an island, lives off oysters, and cures his fever with sweet-flag tea—the author was inspired by accounts from the likes of Frederick Douglass, Solomon Northup, and Henry Bibb. Even in the world of the novel, Long's slave narrative does not arise out of a vacuum, but in the context of these earlier autobiographies: Hawthorne specifically references them, encouraging Long to dig deeper than "Negro" stereotypes when telling his own story.

Having an ex-slave as narrator opens an unusual window into what seems like familiar history. At the same time, Lock's is a fitting homage to Thoreau.

REBECCA FOSTER (May/June 2017)

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