

Engraved on the Heart

Tara Johnson

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In Tara Johnson's *Engraved on the Heart*, a young Southern woman's sense of duty to her family bristles against a moral reckoning. Keziah Montgomery shines as an unlikely abolitionist whose star-crossed love kindles a dangerous, inspiring journey.

Inspired by a childhood classmate, Keziah is led to conduct runaways on the Underground Railroad. A timeless and timely theme of helping persecuted people blooms into an unusual Civil War romance that explores Keziah's search for a purpose, the intersection of faith and practice, and how single acts have far-reaching effects.

Keziah moves rapidly from from a quiet, unquestioning life as the daughter of a Savannah slave owner to risking herself for a movement considered traitorous. This transition is handled with broad insights, but, rewardingly, Keziah seldom turns emblematic. She remains a complex figure whose belief in God lends her focus. Helping others find their way to freedom underscores the question of her own freedom, which is hindered by social expectations and her family's shame.

Fascinating scenes capture Keziah's struggle to avoid detection amid personal obstacles. These include epilepsy; her parents' desire that she marry an older suitor, who tilts toward villainous; a cousin who serves as an antiabolitionist foil; and a brother in the Confederate army. Her love interest, Micah Greyson, faces his own challenges that keep him at a distance. The relationship between them builds plentiful tension through lengthy separations and apt dialogue, culminating in a dramatic sequence that forces Keziah to choose her loyalties.

Despite numerous setbacks, Keziah's call to follow God's path remains foremost in her heart. The result is a surprisingly light-filled, adventurous story that avoids the risk of painting Keziah as a benevolent, privileged rescuer; instead, she's a deeply humane reminder of strength found in weakness.

KAREN RIGBY (Religion 2018)

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