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Young Adult Fiction

The River Jordan: A True Story of the Underground Railroad
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This compelling blend of fact and fiction brings to life one harrowing episode in the complex history of the Underground Railroad: the escape from slavery of Jane and her seven children from a western Virginia tobacco plantation in August of 1843. After a house slave on the Harness plantation alerted Jane that master Solomon Harness planned to take her two oldest sons to auction the following week, she began to seek a means of escape. Her husband and the father of her four oldest children had been sold at auction and sent south sixteen years earlier, and Jane feared the similar loss of her sons.

Also alerted to the family's plight was the leader of the local branch of the Underground Railroad, the most outspoken abolitionist in Marietta, Ohio. He sets the escape plan in motion, and two nights later Jane, her children, and three other slaves escaped across the Ohio River in a shroud of fog, which "surrounded Jane's family in its clammy blindfold." Comparing themselves to the Israelites fleeing ancient Egypt, slaves had come to call the Ohio River the River Jordan, and crossing this river near Marietta in an overcrowded ferryboat was the first step on this family's precarious journey.

So begins an odyssey that takes over two weeks, the fugitives staying in woods, barns, and a grain mill, borne in a hay wagon with a false bottom, pursued by bounty hunters and master Harness himself, and faithfully and tenaciously guarded by sympathizers, both black and white, along the way.

Part of the authors' gripping story is told in the poignant words of Jane's oldest daughter Caroline, writing years later in her journal. Another voice is that of Henry, one of Jane's younger sons, writing letters to his brother Thornton twenty years later from his post during the Civil War. Author Burke is the great-great-grandson of a slave; he conducted extensive research while working up and down the Ohio River, putting together bits and pieces of information

about the inner workings of the Underground Railroad. He skillfully injects his findings into the narrative, filling in the historical gaps with the words of the abolitionists who operate the stations visited by Jane and her family in their quest for freedom. Their journey finally ends in Canada in a small community called Dawn, where former slaves are able to find work and become educated. Even as she realizes that she is finally free, Jane finds her new existence "both exhilarating and unnerving" for where there were no more chains, there was also no longer the corrupt and meager security that life on the Harness plantation had held for her family.

Fueled by a need to unearth the long-buried travails of slaves struggling to make their way to freedom, the authors have produced a riveting account not only of one family's saga, but also of the vast and intricate machinations of the Underground Railroad itself. This book is essential for students, teachers, and anyone searching for a clearer look at slavery, its victims, and those abolitionists who helped to bring about its demise.

Deborah Donovan