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## Book Review - Cecelia and Fanny: The Remarkable Friendship between an Escaped Slave and Her Former Mistress

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## Off the SHELF

**Cecelia and Fanny: The Remarkable Friendship Between an Escaped Slave and Her Former Mistress** by Brad Asher (University Press of Kentucky, 2011: ISBN 978-0-8131-3414-7, \$30.00)

Brad Asher, an independent scholar who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and who is an author of three works of history, captures the interesting and true story of an escaped slave and her former mistress in *Cecelia and Fanny*. Asher begins the account by captivating the reader's attention with the story of Cecelia's break to freedom. Cecelia, a fifteen year old slave from Kentucky, who belongs to her twenty year old mistress, Fanny Thruston, has travelled with the Thruston family to Niagara Falls in the spring of 1846. At the time, the falls marked the boundaries "between slavery and freedom," for beyond the falls lay Canada and the promise of a new, free life for fugitive slaves. The young Cecelia must certainly have been plagued by doubts as she chose to leave behind her mother and brother, still enslaved, as well as the life she had known since birth, to seek freedom in Canada. Despite her circumstances and any hesitation, she still chose to traverse the "geography of freedom," crossing the boundary away from being someone's personal property and into a new territory of liberty and selfhood.

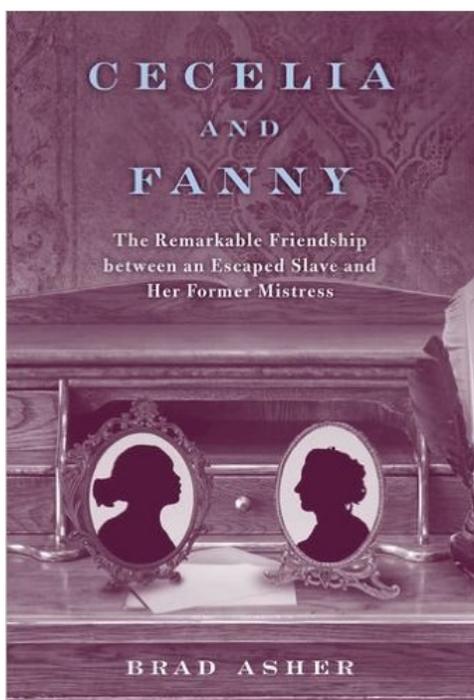
Asher presents his research and conjectures in a fascinating juxtaposition of chapters, alternately

looking at Cecelia's and Fanny's developing lives and the historical context surrounding them, leading the reader from the antebellum pre-Civil War era to the years following the war and Reconstruction. In the chapters, Asher presents the stark contrast of the lives of both women. Cecelia's life is traced from a babe in arms, sold into slavery with her mother to the Thruston family, her trip as a teenager to Niagara Falls and her break to freedom, her establishment of a new life and identity in Canada, her family life

and marriages, and her real and brutal struggle to maintain an independent life as a wage-earning free black woman. Fanny, in contrast, was brought up in a relatively privileged Kentucky lifestyle and led a life that "followed the common nineteenth-century trajectory for women," first as a daughter, then as a wife and mother (including her role as a mistress of a successful household). Despite the contrast, the women's lives intersect again after Cecelia flees slavery when she reaches out to Fanny by letter. This commences a correspondence between the

two, which lasted an unknown period of years. In the correspondence, the reader can see a glimpse of a complex connection that transcends the bond of that between a slave and her former owner.

Throughout his work, Asher makes it clear that he did not have voluminous amounts of information and archival documents on which to base his research. He had a few letters from Fanny to Cecelia and documentation written by



Fanny's son as well as public administration records. Despite this paucity, Asher presents a fascinating and convincing portrayal of the women's lives, based on the evidence available and on well-researched conjectures, confirmed with an impressive amount of end notes. Asher himself addresses the question of why someone should want to add another book addressing slavery to their collection. First, *Cecelia and Fanny* provides a look at slavery in an urban, rather than a rural context, as both women lived their entire lives in cities. Secondly, Kentucky was also unique in that it was a border state, interestingly situated between the plantation South and the mostly abolitionist North. Finally, this work does a wonderful job of not only presenting portraits

of these two women but also documenting many historical facts about the contexts in which they lived, such as information about the lives of free blacks in Canada, courtship practices of the time, family lives of slaves, and how the Civil War affected many states and cities.

This book is recommended for any library with African American or Southern history collections, and it will be an informative and wonderful read for anyone interested in Southern history.

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