

SHADRICH MINKINS: FROM FUGITIVE SLAVE TO CITIZEN
BOOK REVIEW

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Slavery in the Antebellum South consumed the lives of many, if not all people living there. One slave, Shadrich Minkins, lived in Norfolk, Virginia, was an object like other slaves, but Shadrich decided that he wanted a future. It was hard to assign an age to slaves, “like Frederick Douglass, Minkins probably did not know either the day or even the year of his birth” (13). It was difficult for the author, Gary Collison, to give the audience correct information about age. Gary Collison, in this novel, writes about the lives of slaves and their need for a future once they escaped to Canada. Shadrich’s story starts in Norfolk Virginia, a major hub for slaves who escaped to the North. He uses this port to escape from his new slave master; his destination was Boston. As slaves escaped to the north, “...the captain and crew were [paid by the fugitive], the fugitive could appear on deck, dine in the open, breathe in the sea air, and rest, having to hide in port and when other vessels were in sight” (54). Shadrich used this method to reach Boston where he found fellow fugitives and thus started a new life. While living in Boston, the Fugitive Slave Law was passed through the Compromise of 1850.

The new law brought fear into the lives of all fugitives living in the North. It was not safe for slaves to communicate to loved ones, as slaveowners were traveling to the North to capture fugitives. Shadrich becomes one of the slaves captured by a constable from Norfolk, employed by Shadrich’s owner. His arrest was a non-violent arrest and within hours supporters gathered in Shadrich’s defense. Fugitives were granted a hearing, not a trial; they were not allowed to testify, could not appeal; they had no rights at all. As in most hearings, slaves were sent back to slavery within hours, but this was not the case with Shadrich. “Getting a three-day postponement was a small victory for Minkin’s side...” this gave time for attorney’s to figure out a plan of action (117). Shadrich was found guilty and to be sent back into slavery, but he did not make it back to the South. He was rescued by a group of blacks from the courthouse in which he was sentenced. He then started his journey to the North, following the North Star. He goes through cities of Cambridge, Concord, Leominster, and then finally to his final destination, Canada. Once in Canada, “for the first time in nearly a year, he was safe. For the first time in his life, he was completely, unequivocally free” (165). As he entered Canada, he

took residence in Montreal. Toronto offered more assistance for fugitives, but Montreal offered fugitives a warm welcome.

In Montreal, he found work in a traveling theatre group, in which he was almost captured again. It was a hard adjustment for Shadrich in Canada, not knowing who to trust or where to go. "Time are very hard in Canada...Every thing are so high and wages so low They cannot make a living," described by a fugitive (185). Once he left the theatre Shadrich started a new life of waiting tables. From waiting tables, he gained the opportunity of opening two restaurants. He found a life partner in his early years living in Montreal, and they brought three children into the world; two children died at young ages. His restaurants did not survive, so he opened a barbershop in the heart of Montreal; and thus lived in one of the four black communities of Montreal. Shadrich lived in Canada during the Civil War, at the end of the war, many decided to leave Montreal and return home. This was not the case for Shadrich; he stayed with his wife until his death.

Gary Collison, associate professor at Pennsylvania State University, has published one book; *Shadrich Minkins*. In this book, he uses foreshadowing within the first half of the book: "For Shadrach Minkins and Boston's other blacks, the lesson of the history of fugitive cases was the Southerners had come to Boston before and would undoubtedly come again, to recover slaves" (88). The author uses this element early, and through out the remainder of the book he explains the capturing of slaves. Throughout the book, he is historically accurate when talking about the Fugitive Slave Law, Daniel Webster, the United States Senate, the Civil War, etc. In the beginning of this book, it resembled a piece of fiction, but as the book progresses, he incorporates facts and tidbits that brings the book into the non-fiction category. The research that he conducts is not fluid as records about slaves/fugitives are hard to find to form a chronological history of their life. He does a great job in this book to narrate the life of Shadrich Minkins. There are few first hand accounts from Shadrich found in the book, but numerous second hand accounts of Shadrich's life are present. The author had to rely on these second-hand accounts to track Shadrich's journey into Canada, and then embeds a letter from Shadrich on page 174, stating that the final destination for Shadrich was Montreal Canada. This book is a great way for historians, students, and educators to learn about the life of fugitives and the journey North through the life of one fugitive, Shadrich Minkins.

The sources that Gary Collison uses are mostly primary sources. He uses manuscripts, journal entries, newspaper articles, and government documents to write this book. It seems that years of research are conducted to formulate such an account of one slave's life. Reviews of the book are for the most part positive; they share errors of the author. Gold was discovered in 1848, not 1849 at Sutter's Mill (p. 51), the Boston Massacre did not occur in 1775, but did occur in 1770 (p. 73). How did DeBree, Shadrach's owner, know that he was in Boston? Though these errors are few and far between, and the critics state it is hard to write a biography over a slave that is unknown in history. The author makes his book into a biography through intensive research. He worked hard to piece together the past of a fugitive slave and his journey to freedom. Many antebellum authors share frustration when writing about lives of former slaves, but Gary Collison does a great job in his book. He takes the research and forms a narrative about slave briefly mentioned in history and creates a 200+ page book about the life of an ordinary, illiterate slave.