

The Imprisoned Guest

by Elizabeth Gitter

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by
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Massachusetts
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SUMMARY:

In a lyric and poetic style, Elizabeth Gitter tells a multi-layered story of 19th century New England, of one young deafblind woman's education at Perkins School for the Blind, and of the dreams, aspirations, achievements and shortcomings of its first director. Central to the story is Laura Bridgman's relationship with the school's ambitious director, Samuel Gridley Howe, whose "rescue" of seven-year-old Laura from her family's New Hampshire farm produced the world's first educated deafblind person and opened the door to unlimited possibility for future generations of deafblind and visually impaired children. At Perkins, Laura learned to finger spell, to read raised letters, and to write legibly and eloquently. For a time she was one of the most famous women in the world and the topic of psychological and theological analysis among influential writers and reformers of the day, including Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Bridgman was also Howe's ticket to fame, which created a troubling relationship between the girl who idealized him and the man who increasingly resented her as she grew into adulthood. With candor and feeling, in both a dramatic and speculative style, Gitter portrays the intense struggles and victories of Bridgman's extraordinary life and the rich culture and era in which both she and Howe lived. By the time of her death in 1889, Bridgman had been eclipsed by the prettier, more ingratiating Helen Keller. Howe's emotional withdrawal from Bridgman suggests his altruism to be driven more by ego than compassion. Yet Gitter's biography re-establishes Bridgman as a pioneer of great spirit whose contribution to society will not be forgotten.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does the author place the Bridgman/Howe relationship in a historical context? Is there enough or too much background material? How does the era shape the story?
2. Does Gitter analyze or judge Bridgman and Howe by contemporary standards or as products of their era? How easy or difficult is it to relate to Bridgman's or Howe's experiences?

3. Do you agree with Gitter about the reasons why Bridgman fell from grace in Howe's eyes? Could Bridgman have done anything to maintain her esteemed status with Howe?
4. What is Gitter's relationship to Bridgman? To Howe? What is her objective in telling their stories? Does she have a broader agenda?
5. Aside from understanding two important historic figures, what does the book contribute to contemporary society?
6. If you knew of Bridgman or Howe before reading the book, how did it change your perception of them? How has it changed or informed your perception of Helen Keller?
7. Is Bridgman sympathetic? Is Howe an admirable and sympathetic figure? What were his motivations in educating Laura Bridgman? In his work at Perkins? Do you agree with his approach to his student?
8. How did your feelings for Bridgman and Howe change through the course of the book?
9. What are the legacies of Laura Bridgman and Samuel G. Howe individually and together? Did Howe leave the mark on the world that he had hoped? Did Laura accomplish what she wanted to in terms of her world?
10. In your opinion, was Bridgman a heroine or a victim? How would the author answer this question?
11. Hannah Joyner, in a review published in *H-Disability*, wrote that "had Bridgman been educated within the deaf community... [she] would have learned not only a language but a style of communication understood by all of the pupils at the school." Joyner continues that perhaps Bridgman would not have been as isolated at the end of her life. What is your opinion?
12. How significant were the roles of Bridgman's other teachers at Perkins?
13. What insight does the book give to the position of women in 19th century Boston? Of their relationship to education?
14. How does your understanding of the title, *The Imprisoned Guest*, change through the course of the book?
15. What are the greatest strength and the greatest weakness of *The Imprisoned Guest*?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

With a PhD from Yale University, Elizabeth Gitter specializes in the Victorian period and has published essays in “Victorian Literature and Culture,” “Victorian Poetry” and “Studies in English Literature,” among other titles. At John Jay University she founded with others the Thematic Studies Program, an interdisciplinary liberal arts program in which she has taught for most of her career. She researched much of *The Imprisoned Guest: Samuel Howe and Laura Bridgman, the Original Deafblind Girl* at the Hayes Research Library at Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown, Mass.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Reviews:

Association of Blind Citizens, The Advocate Online Newsletter 2002-2003 Fall/Winter, “Book Review” by Cheryl Cummings: www.blindcitizens.org/advocatefw2002.htm

Powells: <http://www.powells.com/s?kw=imprisoned+guest>

H-Net Review, Hannah Joyner:

<http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path+11001009473288>

Legendary Women with Causes: <http://www.montonyapippa.homestead.com>

New York Review of Books:

http://www.nybooks.com/articles/article-preview?article_id=14508

The Braille Monitor, Book Review: <http://www.nfb.org/bm/bm01/bm0110/bm011011.htm>

Further Reading:

Dickens, Charles, *American Notes*, pp. 33-51, (New York; Modern Library, 1966).

Freeberg, Ernest, *The Education of Laura Bridgman: First Deaf and Blind Person to Learn Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Howe, Maud, and Hall, Florence Howe, *Laura Bridgman: Dr. Howe's Famous Pupil and What He Taught Her* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1904).

Simonds, Elsie Hurlbut, “Pencil- Writing: Talk given to the Harvard Class at Perkins Institution May 12, 1951.” Unpublished typescript in collection of Samuel P. Hayes Research Library, Perkins School for the Blind. Perkins School for the Blind:

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