

# In 'Truth,' a new narrative of perseverance

**J**ACQUELINE Sheehan and Sojourner Truth were about the same ages when they moved to Northampton, a century and a world apart. And they were the same age, 53, when their narratives were published.

It was 1850 for Truth, the illiterate ex-slave who, using a name she said was given her by God, dictated a memoir to an abolitionist and became one of her era's most famous lecturers and activists.



**LARRY PARNASS**

*Bookmarks*

It is 2003 for Sheehan, a writer and psychologist who moved East from California to start a counseling program at Westfield State College but soon found herself making common cause with a 19th-century American hero.

Sheehan recalls she had been in Northampton less than a year when she read an essay in this newspaper by historian Allison Lockwood that mentioned Truth. "How cool is this?" Sheehan says she asked herself. "I've moved to a town where Sojourner Truth lived."

She read "The Narrative of Sojourner Truth" for the first of more than a dozen times and dug into research for what has become her first published novel, "Truth" (Free Press, \$24). "Before I knew it, I was going over to New York state to see where she was born."

Novelists struggle with many things, perhaps most of all the challenge of capturing and sustaining a voice. In "Truth," Sheehan tells the ex-slave's story from the inside out, in first person, with a soulful simplicity. Miraculously, finding that voice wasn't the hard part, the author said over coffee in Northampton last week, for she knew her story needed easy reach into this woman's mind. "I felt this story had to be told very close to the bone."

The Sojourner Truth who speaks in the novel is of course a fictional one, though Sheehan took pains to reassemble a real world. Her words are as simple as her story is rare — a child of slavery who endured abuse from owners, was sold away from her parents and made her way to freedom and public service.

In Sheehan's telling, Truth speaks in a voice that is unconventionally eloquent, drawing its depth, as you might expect, not from literature but

life. It contains whispers of the profound and is the very sound of perseverance.

I flipped through pages I'd already read in "Truth" looking for the right passage to illustrate that. Every sentence seems able to stand as an example. The voice that contains this story has been sanded down by its tests to a coarse honesty. This is a tale told to friends who need not be impressed. The language is picked clean of boasts. Though "Truth" offers a compelling cascade of incidents, facts and people, Sheehan's real accomplishment is to summon consciousness itself.

This is how Sheehan's subject recalls the moment of her sale, at an auction:

*My dress was pulled over my head and with a swift jerk. I was naked underneath. I heard Mau Mau gasp. I stood with the bothersome bugs trying to get in my eyes, trying to remember if my mother had told me about having to show myself naked to all the people and, if so, what I should do.*

She is sold for \$100 to a sadistic shopkeeper.

Sheehan says she believes Truth was one of her time's extraordinary people, even though for decades, as a slave and servant, her days were filled with ordinary acts. The imagined narrative Sheehan has shaped holds a fascination that's on the quiet side. Even the funny lines are locked in a day's plain run, like knots in pine.

Told by a young white playmate that bees sleep at night, Truth corrects her gently, carefully. "No, they're not sleeping. Bees are like colored people; someone is always awake and working."

Though Truth worked at public causes into her 80s, Sheehan is most interested in revealing the inner life of the young woman — the girl and woman Isabella who was not yet known as Sojourner Truth — for those years tested her most harshly.

"How did she become who she became?" Sheehan asked the other day. "Why didn't she become crushed? Why didn't she become bitter? ... Look what she decided to do. Look how she turned it around."

Such questions come up frequently in counseling — Sheehan's other profession. She believes that her training as a psychologist helped her understand Truth. "I'm not sure I could have written it if I didn't have that kind of background," she said. Sojourner Truth's story, Sheehan



**JACQUELINE SHEEHAN**

notes, is filled with issues of trauma and survival. Their drama fuels writing and therapy alike. "That's why anybody gets into psychology. I can't think of a better background for a writer."

In one instance, Sheehan took liberties with the story to create a confidant for Truth, in the character known as Soan. This person was a friend of Truth's father; the author needed Soan to be — for this time — the young woman's sympathetic audience, in much the way a counselor is.

Early in the novel, Sheehan shows how Truth's mother, known as Mau Mau, "un-names" the hired man who raped her. They had no recourse to the law, but they could erase him from their minds. Later, Truth shows an owner's daughter the scars on her arms, marks of an earlier master's abuse. The child warns her not to speak of the abuse, lest she be branded an evil liar.

*I trusted that Gert knew her mother better than I did, and I never spoke of my scars again. I almost made myself think that all the beating never happened. I didn't forget it, but I put it in a box in my mind that I rarely entered.*

Truth's psychotherapy had to be entirely homegrown.

To connect her tale to real places and events, Sheehan read newspapers of Truth's time, looking between the lines for nuance. She visited a costume expert who lives in Charlemont to better understand how women dressed. "What did they wear

## VALLEY READINGS

The following author appearances, readings and book events are planned for the coming week in the Valley:

**BARNES & NOBLE, HOLYOKE:** Lynn Margulis and Dorlon Sagan discuss the new book, "Acquiring Genomes — A Theory of the Origins of Species," Saturday at 2 p.m. at the store, 7 Holyoke St., Holyoke. 532-3200.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT BOOKS:** Florence author Jacqueline Sheehan reads at 7 p.m. from her new novel "Truth," based on the life of Sojourner Truth, at the bookshop, 106 North Pleasant St., Amherst. 253-5432. The event is co-sponsored by the Everywoman's Center at UMass.

**ODYSSEY BOOKSHOP:** Boston University immunologist Elinor Levy and science writer Mark Fischetti on Aug. 13 at 7 p.m. will discuss their new book, "The New Killer Diseases: How the Alarming Evolution of Mutant Germs Threatens Us All," at the bookshop, located in the Village Commons, South Hadley. 534-7307.

under all that clothing?" she asks.

"Truth" had to be right about 19th-century life, but, as Sheehan understood, couldn't make the mistake of attempting to catalog its features. "You have to gather a huge amount of information and figure out what bit of it to use," she said. "You can't hit the reader over the head with that stuff."

She ached to incorporate something about a New York City theater's staging of the story of the impounded slave ship Amistad, but decided that Truth might not have been able to afford a ticket. And she might have been too involved, at the time, with a religious cult. "I wished I could have worked it in."

To illustrate Truth's illiteracy, Sheehan shows the young woman at work for an owner, delivering fish. She asked customers to note what they'd received, if they could write. For those who couldn't, she devised a way of charting sales. "I kept a picture of each person in my mind along with their fish. If they paid, I pictured the coins sitting over the fish eyes. If they didn't pay, I pictured the fish eyes looking up at me with their dead blank stare."

As Sheehan worked, one voice that didn't belong in the story chased about, nipping at her heels. It was her own doubt about whether a white author should be inhabiting Truth. In a perfect world, she reasoned, this book would be the creation of a black writer. She studied that doubt and found her way through it. Of the two main biographies of Truth that she consulted, one is by a black woman, the historian Nell Irvin Painter. The other is by a white male, Carleton Mabee.

If Mabee could make such an important contribution, in his 1993 "Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend," then why couldn't she? She thought too of another white man,

Thomas Jay Warren, the Denver sculptor selected to create the statue of Truth placed last fall near the corner of Pine and Park streets in Florence.

Sheehan, a member of the committee that commissioned that statue, says she shook off her doubts, resolving that at a time when America needs all of its heroes, racial separations must fall away.

Editors at the Free Press, Sheehan said, did try subtly to determine her race, before they knew. But in the end they had no qualms about marketing a book about Truth by a white author, whose book-jacket portrait makes no secret of her race.

In coming weeks, Sheehan will give more interviews and hold readings, including one Thursday at 7 p.m. at Food for Thought Books, 106 N. Pleasant St. in Amherst. She will meet readers at the Odyssey Bookshop in South Hadley on Aug. 26 and at the Broadside Bookshop in Northampton on Sept. 25.

She is working on a new novel, this one set in the present — and not written in the first person. It concerns a woman who loses her husband to a death she believes she could have prevented.

Sheehan's conversations with Sojourner Truth are mainly behind her. In figuring out how to make this great woman talk once again at the age of 53, Sheehan says she made a promise to her.

"I felt like I had an agreement with her that I would do absolutely the best I could." And that's a vow she can justly believe she upheld.

To suggest topics for Bookmarks — a column about Valley writing and publishing — readers are invited to contact Larry Parnass, the Gazette's arts editor, by phone at 585-5248 or by e-mail at [lparnass@gazettenet.com](mailto:lparnass@gazettenet.com).