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*Never Caught* Book Review

Erica Dunbar's *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge*, tells a story about our first President unlike those that most Americans are accustomed to hearing about in our historical canon. In a chronological tale using what little we know regarding the life of Ona Judge, this book offers a refreshing perspective and objective critique on America through the life of an enslaved woman who ran away from the President of all people. Although this book is mainly focused on the life of Ona Judge along with George and Martha Washington, it offers a critique about the founding of America that illustrates how the values this country claimed to have fought for and represent do not align with reality and have not since its very inception.

Without the context that Ona Judge was a real runaway slave, the book reads like a historical fiction piece as far as the origin stories used for characters, world-building, and the build-up of climactic moments. The sources Dunbar used involved primary sources ranging from journals written by George Washington, burial records to match the correct timelines, birth records, and various newspapers including the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator* that was responsible for interviewing Ona Judge decades after her escape. The book starts with Judge's birth to her death along while revealing details about George and Martha Washington not known to the general public that provides an example of how invested many of our so-called American

“heroes” were regarding the institution of slavery, all while hypocritically claiming to uphold the freedom and liberty gained post-Revolutionary War. What makes this impressive is that despite the dramatization of Ona Judge’s story, everything aligned with what Erica Dunbar’s research was able to provide despite how much we don’t know about Judge and other runaway slaves. A common critique regarding the storytelling being boring or not informative in certain sections misses the point about the damage that the institution of slavery has caused America, but it also ignores how much white supremacy had an ideological stranglehold in the founding of America. In the author’s note, Dunbar herself even points out right away that, “Enslavement, racism, and sexism often discarded these women from the historical record, and as historians we are frequently left unsatisfied with scant evidence.”<sup>1</sup> The fact that Dunbar managed to craft a fluid chronological book using limited information and full transparency regarding certain speculations should be praised. The lack of information known about Ona Judge and other runaway slaves is, to put it bluntly, blatant historical revisionism and propaganda which the United States loves to acknowledge when other countries are doing it but never at themselves.

A personal and very minor critique I have is that Dunbar is not very explicit about her exact arguments, but it is not something that should be dwelled on simply because the book is written in a truly narrative style. On top of that, the open-ended nature of potential arguments can be made to serve as a good political and historical litmus test for those who read this book. Simply offering the perspective of an enslaved woman is radically different from what most Americans are accustomed too which is the typical narrative of the powerful, strong, rugged individualist white man who triumphed against all odds to achieve “freedom” and “liberty.” Ona

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<sup>1</sup> Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York, New York: 37 Ink, 2020), xi.

Judge's story was a combination of refreshing, realistic, and tragic; and in a roundabout way, her life after running away to the North and gaining her freedom revealed the harsh reality of the lives of black Americans regardless of whether you are free or enslaved. Despite the depravity and limited opportunities that plagued many free black people, freedom was still preferential to slavery, and for very good reason. If the President of the United States' slave felt compelled to run away despite how unique and specific her circumstances were, why would any enslaved person choose to stay enslaved outside of familial ties or old age? Rather than seeing Ona Judge's poverty in her later years and glossing over them as a simple necessity or consequence of freedom (or worse, believing she should have remained a slave), I believe it would be wiser to examine the material conditions that led to such poverty and examine what it means to be "free." The founding fathers supposedly believed in the pursuit of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but that was a reality many white people did not even have post-Revolution let alone an enslaved person. Judge escaped physical enslavement only to live a life of financial despair that many black people deal with still in the 21st century, one could argue that this was the blueprint to handle the question of free slaves while still maintaining and underpaid, overworked and dehumanized labor force. At the end of the day, even those gradual abolitionists were still more concerned with reimbursing and pampering former slaveowners than helping integrate free people into society and allowing them the opportunities to be successful, after all it was "... close to three hundred slaves that fed Virginia's tobacco economy," the relentless pursuit of runaway slaves was not only marked by social embarrassment on behalf of the slaveowner but

was influenced heavily by financial motivations.<sup>2</sup> Despite being a story hundreds of years in the making, Ona Judge's life represents a significant glimpse of the history that American society is not as detached from as it desperately wants to believe even as it is still grappling with police brutality, systemic racism, and the fact that the largest sects of our poor people are black, brown and Indigenous; this is not a coincidence.

Although Dunbar's argument is not as explicit as it could be, the benefit of that is that forces the reader (assuming they are American) to truly examine and potentially redefine what it means to be "American." If this book shocks you as a reader who had no idea how invested the first President was in slavery until his death, it should be a call to action for more examination on your personal beliefs and biases. If it did not shock you as a reader, still read it and pay attention to details that can be connected to the modern-day because there is more relevance than one would expect at first glance. Either way, *Never Caught* is a book that takes the mythological nature surrounding our Founding Fathers along with our country supposed underdog history and exposes it for what it is: a well-constructed white supremacist propaganda campaign. Ona Judge's story is not only a story that defines a truly bottom-up character and perspective in a time where the powerful controlled the narrative with the utmost success, it also is one of the few that genuinely explores the humanity of those who were enslaved and makes no excuses for slavery being the violent institution that it always was no matter how many "benevolent" slave owners there were.

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<sup>2</sup> Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *Never Caught: The Washingtons' Relentless Pursuit of Their Runaway Slave, Ona Judge* (New York, New York: 37 Ink, 2020), 6.