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We first meet Sarny as a twelve-year-old slave girl on a tyrannically run Louisiana plantation. She becomes fascinated by Nightjohn when he is brought shackled, scarred and defiant to work alongside her comrades. When he reveals a secret mission to spread the forbidden skills of literacy amongst the slaves, Sarny is immediately pulled into a web of enticing possibilities. Then the discovery of Nightjohn's crusade leads to a harrowing confrontation with the plantation owner. In the sequel we meet Sarny as a ninety-four-year-old, recalling her life as a young widow whose husband has been worked to death. She takes us back to the closing stages of the Civil War, when one of the plantation owner's last acts before Nemesis arrives in the form of a yankee bayonet thrust is to sell Sarny's two children. Much of the rest of the memoir concerns Sarny's remorseless search for her lost children, a grim trudge through burning plantations and along roads strewn with the dead and dying.

In both of these stories, compellingly told in Sarny's dialect, the atrocities inflicted by slavery and warfare are depicted with uncompromising clarity. But the books are also full of tenderness, a yearning for freedom, and a life where fulfilment is possible for everybody. The historical context of Sarny's life is vividly realised, and **Nightjohn** includes a postscript reminding the reader of the role of slavery in the building of America.

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