



MEDICAL HISTORY UNEARTHED
Reynald Altéma, MD

Say Anarcha: A Young Woman, a Devious Surgeon, and the Harrowing Birth of Modern Women's Health. Written by J.C. Hallman.

Wokeism is alive, and wishful musings about its death are premature. In short order, in what could be considered a realignment of the stars, we learn that the family of the late Henrietta Lacks, whose famous HeLa cells have furthered medical research and science, on August 1, 2023, on her 103rd birthday, received a settlement from [Thermo Fisher Scientific](#).

In our [first publication this year](#), I reviewed a seminal book, *Vagina Obscura*, by Rachel Gross. I alluded to the physical hardships females suffered at the hands of medical professionals and, more specifically, Dr. J. Marion Sims, long heralded as the father of modern Gynecology. Over the last several years, this mythic but checkered reputation has been the subject of serious reappraisal, keeping with the woke spirit where historical figures get a second look under an objective magnifying glass. In this new book by J.C. Hallman, we learn in granular mode about the real story of Dr. Sims's life and his experiments on enslaved women. We also learn in reciprocal tidbits about these women's lives and sufferings at his hands.

Historically, African Americans have been used as guinea pigs in this society over the years, and their contribution to medical advances has received short shrift. Suffice it to remind folks that Henrietta Lacks had her tissues collected at Johns Hopkins University Hospital in 1951 without her consent. That same institution had treated a genius, [Vivien Thomas](#), who shepherded cardiac surgery, miserably for decades before finally giving him a modicum of recognition. Certainly, that list of illustrious achievements is quite impressive, contrary to popular belief, and warrants another essay. However, [Dr. Charles Drew's creation of a blood bank](#) and the little-known creation of the first-ever ambulance service operated by paramedics, [Freedom House Ambulance Service](#), in 1967, are remarkable feats.

Poetic justice can never be better illustrated than by wokeism that carries a color-blind cover. The authors of the lives of [Henrietta Lacks](#) and [Anarcha](#) are Caucasians. This book about the intertwined lives of Dr. Sims and Anarcha is a revelation. It rightfully brings down a couple of pegs of an iconic figure from his pedestal. It sounds a clarion call to elevate a hitherto-unknown historical personality into our lexicon, Anarcha. She was a slave who doubled as a nurse, aka *woman doctor*, and performed duties of a profession that would be later credited decades later to Florence Nightingale as its creator.

This book chronicles the goings-on on plantations. Two groups lived so close yet so far with an obvious interdependence. Unfortunately, racist animus skewed this realm into a cruel one-way paradigm. An omnipotent master lording over expected obsequious slaves. Straying from this format carried, at best, a vicious whipping of a naked torso or any form of imaginary torture and, of course, death in any number of creative manners, sometimes as a spectator show.

Say Anarcha merits the distinction of Dr. Sims's biography and not of a hagiography, for it portrays the man in all his facets and doesn't treat him with a kid's glove. It comes across as a well-researched effort and gives one the full flavor of the persona. It presents him first as an insecure adolescent petrified by the rejection of his beloved to a successful socialite and medical luminary. In so doing, it could have run the risk of weaving a bit of sympathy for the character into our psyche. Fear not; the steady rivulet of villainous acts soaks any remnant of pass one would have been willing to extend. The book's title sets the mood and clearly telegraphs what's ahead. It promotes Anarcha and serves as a smorgasbord of facts from their early lives.

Imagine a mulattress adolescent slave who learned the medicinal properties of roots from an experienced and old slave, Pheriba, who treated another adolescent white male, the young Sims, during his first bout of malaria. Yet that yielded no endearing value in his eyes. That young slave was Anarcha, and he wasn't loath later on to experiment on her without her consent or anesthesia. In fact, she was the guinea pig on whom he experimented the most and caused unforgiving suffering. Her life story, however, leaves the reader full of sympathy for her.

Her body became a baby factory, or to use the epoch's vernacular, *fit for increase*. Her first pregnancy occurred after being deflowered, and raped, by unknown men sent by either the overseer or her master, and subsequently, after a difficult childbirth, she developed a hole between her bladder, rectum, and vagina. It was only one of her five pregnancies, and except for the last one, the baby and mother were separated. Yet, she kept surviving one tragedy after another, including a train accident where it fell into a river because a drawbridge was open. Many passengers perished, but she wasn't one of them.

A series of juxtapositions of the characters makes the flow of the narrative fluid. Whereas Dr. Sims had no hesitation in using the slaves as objects, Anarcha was tender and empathized with others. For example, the gruesome depiction of having others hold a male slave down while sawing his jaw without proper anesthesia to access a tumor that needed resection leaves one nauseated. Based on Anarcha's training with the old slave, she became an adept caregiver and used all types of concoctions supported by a thorough knowledge of the local plants. It is clearly hinted that she was a quick learner, but it was her unfortunate fate to have lived in an era when women had limited education and slaves learned to read or write at the risk of losing their existence.

Dr. Sims, on the other hand, was persistent. He became part of a competition between the Old World and the New World. Physicians on this side of the Atlantic wanted to best their European counterparts and were vying for the rewards of eponymous instruments, procedures, and diseases. That attracted ambitious minds, a necessary evil. In the case of Dr. Sims, he was besotted with surgical intervention and enamored with creating new instruments for his procedures, he damned the slave that had to go through excruciating pain. Of course, he made sure he respected the pecking order of society. In Alabama, he had a large pool of slaves, and when he opened that hospital for women in NYC, he counted on the large population of poor Irish women. But typical to the norms of society, race dwarfed social class in the ranking. The famous Sims position, of knee chest, as uncomfortable as it was, became the de facto way of accessing the slave's vagina for correction of fistula. Once he arrived in NYC, he had to change to the lateral decubitus position, less taxing on a person's body. Slaves had no say and had to endure torture. White women, even poor, did have a say, and he hewed that distinction.

This book is a historical trove, documenting levity to the sublime. For example, we learn of the amorous liaison between Senator William Rufus King, whom Anarcha treated as an assistant to Dr. Sims, and another one, James Buchanan; King became Vice President, and Buchanan became President later. While Dr. Brown-Séguard, who described and self-named a syndrome, was

sired by an Irish father and a mulattress from Mauritius and studied in France. He was a professor at a medical school in Richmond, Virginia, for six months before tending his resignation and...worked with Anarcha as his assistant. He was doing experiments on animals and Anarcha was taking care of the animals sheltered in a basement. He passed for white until his antislavery stance made some colleagues suspicious of his heritage.

Strangely enough, Dr. Sims initially abhorred women's health. He became entangled in it by happenstance. He received requests to handle three slaves who developed a fistula or a hole in their genitals after childbirth. That hole can develop between the bladder and vagina or anal passage and vagina, or a combination of all three. Such a fate transports the afflicted into a surreal world of hell on earth. On top of the lifelong disdain by the master caste, now the slave had to endure the ignominy of pariah status from her brethren, who saw such victims as cursed and infested with worms, and turtles as part of superstition and ignorance. All the while, the constant expulsion of malodorous waste created all sorts of soft tissue rotting.

Dr. Sims comes across as an ambitious, venal individual bent on vainglory at the expense of the slaves and careless about accuracy in his scientific papers. He hid the fact that the initial success of closing the fistula of Anarcha was short lasting, and Dr. Bozeman, who trained under him, discovered that malfeasance. Dr. Bozeman refined Dr. Sims's clamp suture with the button suture and described his success and the shortcomings of Dr. Sims's technique, while giving all due credit. Dr. Sims became incensed. Nevertheless, the button suture became popular and his creator later became famous. Any raw, cruel means justified the end in Dr. Sims's eyes. Adulation by the upper crust of society and the riches derived from such recognition loomed in the offing. As a comeuppance, Dr. Sims received the boot from the very hospital he created a few years later.

Repairing such complications that up till then have eluded previous practitioners in itself was a noble goal. However, using experimental, crude methods on only African Americans, at the very least, was ethically immoral. It shows without any doubt that the masters considered slaves as beasts of sum, sub-humans, yet were good enough for literally breastfeeding their newborns, nursing their sick, cooking their food, and so on, but not good enough to possess a soul. Dr. Sims settled in Montgomery, Alabama, during its booming time, and behind his office, he created a Negro Hospital where he carried his experiments on Anarcha, Lucy, and Betsey. Across his office, the uppity Montgomery Hall lodged the elite in a luxurious venue, serving as a hospital for the well-heeled.

The word experiment is a misnomer. To get a better perspective, let's let the author describe it from the enslaved person's point of view: "The cursed women who had been whipped said that a painful experiment was like being whipped while giving birth, but there was no whipcrack and no overseer was counting the lashes, and whereas the overseer wanted you to scream from the pain so that all the slaves could hear it, if you flinched at the pain of Dr. Sims's experiments you might be punished too." Such a graphic description of the villainy to which the slaves were the victims says it all. To add insult to injury, the experiments conducted without anesthesia lapsed into a period of dependency on opium and its addictive complications. This book is not for the faint of heart. This portrayal of Dr. Sims with warts and all paints a different picture of the affable, skillful physician who gained worldwide fame after butchering innocent enslaved people.