

Britain, Slavery and Gothic Fiction

Coram Boy, Extract 2: Mr Gaddarn's Business Deal

Toby knew he had been carried inside his mother's belly across the ocean called the Atlantic, passing the coast of Spain and on round to the shores of England. At some point on that voyage, he had been born. Old Benjamin had described the Atlantic as the 'Great Ocean of Darkness' because of the way their people had been kidnapped in their thousands, snatched from their homes and villages and dragged screaming on to the ships. They were crammed deep down in the skylless, airless, dark-as-hell holds, row on row. They were so tightly packed that for the weeks and weeks it took for the ships to arrive at their destination, people could hardly move a muscle or breathe. Many died, so many – of disease or cruel treatment or just from a broken heart. Their bones littered the ocean bed, their souls howled soundlessly in that heaving, lonely waste, too far out for even the gulls to reach. And those who hadn't died wished they had, preferring to be dead rather than enslaved.

A great window overlooked the river, but Toby was too tired to do more than glance at the beachcombers' fires burning on the shore, and the spangle of lights hanging from so many yardarms all along the banks, and the frenzy of activity on the docks as ships were made ready for the next high tide. He curled up on the cushions which lined the windowseat and within a minute fell into a feverish sleep.

'Well, gentlemen, I think I can do business with you.'

The voice of his master broke into his dream. Toby groaned inwardly to think he was trapped for possibly an hour or two while they discussed shipping property and other speculations. But then he heard the word 'Coram'.

'I can take possession of four boys and three girls by the end of the month,' Mr Gaddarn said.

'Just three girls? Can you not procure a few more? Six, at least, would make it much more worth my while, and yours too'

'What is the present going rate for white girls?' asked a third voice.

'One hundred pounds a piece if they be virgins,' came the reply.

'I want three hundred, minimum,' announced Mr Gaddarn.

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'Well, gentlemen, here's till we meet again. I have a ship returning from India within the month. It is going to stop on the Guinea coast to pick up a further cargo of slaves – I am hoping for at least three hundred destined for Honduras.'

There was a clink of glasses, further formal exchanges and pleasantries, then the door to the map room was opened and all four men left, taking the light with them. In darkness once more, Toby continued to lie utterly still. Part of his wanted to escape, to have nothing to do with it and to have no knowledge of it, but another voice in his brain said, No. See for yourself.