Jean Fagan Yellin

Jean Fagan Yellin
Distinguished Professor Emerita of English, Pace University

Distinguished Professor Emerita of English Jean Fagan Yellin, PhD, is one of the United States' most distinguished scholars of the literature of slavery.

With a bachelor's degree from Roosevelt University and a master's and doctorate from the University of Illinois, Jean Yellin began teaching at Pace in 1968, quickly emerging as a popular, dynamic professor with a social conscience and a restless curiosity. She wrote and edited dozens of books, articles, and presentations about literature, race and women in 19th century America and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for *Women and Sisters: The Anti-Slavery Feminists in American Culture* (1990).

In the course of her reading, she encountered a gripping book that purportedly was written by an escaped slave from North Carolina but that most scholars dismissed as having been ghostwritten by a white abolitionist. In archives, Yellin discovered other writings that the supposed author clearly had written herself and began to think the book had come from the same hand. Through years of research, Yellin verified the author's literary skills and the facts the book described, concluding that Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* indeed had been "written by herself," as the subtitle proclaimed. Yellin's definitive edition of the work, published in 1987, was quickly accepted by scholars, making Incidents a classic part of the American literary canon that now has been translated into German, Portugeuse, and French and become basic reading for educated people as well as for students of gender studies, literature, and history.

In 2004, Yellin published *Harriet Jacobs: A Life*, a biography that went beyond Incidents to reveal Jacobs' inspiring roles in the movements for women's suffrage and the education of former slaves. The book won enthusiastic reviews in the *New York Times* Book Review and elsewhere, earning its author an award from the Modern Language Association and the $25,000 Frederick Douglass Prize from the Gilman Lehrman Center at Yale for the best historical research of the year on slavery.

Meanwhile, having discovered that Jacobs is the only African-American woman held in slavery whose papers are known to exist, Yellin was raising grants to produce a definitive annotated edition of Harriet Jacobs' papers. It is due to be published next year. She also served as a consultant to the lengthy segment on Harriet Jacobs in the four-part PBS series *Slavery and the Making of America*. In the fall of 2006, Pace faculty members organized a national symposium on the legacies of slavery and sisterhood as one of the signature events of the Pace University Centennial.

Yellin has held research grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Association of University Women, the Smithsonian Institution, the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for Afro-American Research at Harvard University, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library, and the National Humanities Institute. She and husband divide their time between Florida and Goldens Bridge, in Westchester County.

Source URL: http://www.pace.edu/commencement/commencement-2007/honorary-degree-recipients-0/jean-fagan-yellin