

Scholarly Editing: The Annual of the Association for Documentary Editing

Editor-in-Chief: Noelle A. Baker

ISSN: 2167-1257 | DOI: 10.55520/6ZH06EW2

Volume 43, 2026, | DOI: 10.55520/TBA

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. © 2026 Scholarly Editing.

Newman, George A. *A Miserable Revenge: A Story of Life in Virginia*. Edited by Mollie Godfrey, Brooks E. Hefner, Jeslyn Pool, and Evan Sizemore

Reviewed by:

DOI: 10.55520/TBD

John Ernest, *University of Delaware*

Newman, George A. *A Miserable Revenge: A Story of Life in Virginia*. Edited by Mollie Godfrey, Brooks E. Hefner, Jeslyn Pool, and Evan Sizemore. Harrisonburg, VA: James Madison University Libraries, 2025. 415 pp. ISBN 979-8-218-62451-4.

The publication of George A. Newman's previously unpublished novel, *A Miserable Revenge: A Story of Life in Virginia*, written between 1876 and 1877, is both an event worth celebrating and a reminder of all that is yet to be uncovered. The event is the discovery of one of the few texts arising from the life and perspective of an African American in Harrisonburg, Virginia, in the late nineteenth century. The reminder is an echo of Elizabeth McHenry's important call to seek out and consider what is likely to be a significant number of unpublished texts by African American writers. We can trust that such manuscripts exist—many of them buried in archives, some in unexplored records in churches, fraternal organizations, or elsewhere, and many, like that of George A. Newman, in family collections. Newman's novel surfaced through the generosity of his granddaughter, Ruth M. Toliver, when she donated a family collection to the Special Collections department of James Madison University (JMU), a collection that included the 480-page manuscript of her grandfather's novel. What makes the publication of this novel a particularly important event is that those who took responsibility for the manuscript recognized that the editing of this book needed to be a collaborative and community-focused effort, to be true to the spirit of Ruth Toliver's generosity, and to document the full significance of this recovered text.

A Miserable Revenge joins other works that have called attention to underappreciated centers of nineteenth-century African American life. One thinks of Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) in New Hampshire, J. McHenry

Jones's *Hearts of Gold* (1896) in West Virginia, Jane Edna Hunter's *A Nickel and a Prayer* (1940) in Cleveland, Ohio, and many others. Naturally, one thinks, too, of the ways in which the discovery and publication of Hannah Crafts's manuscript *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, probably written between 1853 and 1861, challenged conventional thinking about African American literary tastes, influences, and mindsets in the nineteenth century. Wilson's *Our Nig* would eventually lead to the formation of The Harriet Wilson Project in New Hampshire and the publication of the essay collection *Harriet Wilson's New England: Race, Writing, and Region* (2007), which helped to inspire the tremendous Black heritage work that continues to expand and inspire in that region. Perhaps taking inspiration from the regional work done on Wilson and others, the editorial team guiding the publication of *A Miserable Revenge* recognized that the project should be community focused, both in preparing the novel for publication and in its reach thereafter. The editors note: "Our work to bring Newman's novel into print has been designed to ensure that those closest to Newman's life and legacy are leaders at every stage in the process—contributing to the volume, partnering on our plans for the public symposium, and participating in the creation of a digital research hub for the novel" (xxvii). The editors note as well that "a community-focused project should, by definition, be accessible to the community," which led to the decision to make the novel available in an open-access digital format (xxvii).

I believe they have met this goal responsibly and well, both in the background they provide, in their website (<https://sites.lib.jmu.edu/newmanmiserablerevenge/>), and in their selection of materials for the print-copy edition. In addition to a foreword by Ruth Toliver and a very useful chronology, this edition includes an informative Editors' Introduction by Mollie Godfrey and Brooks E. Hefner and a section on "Companion Resources," with contributions by Tiffany Cole, Jeslyn Pool, and Evan Sizemore. Included as well is a section on "Additional Writings by Newman," featuring two speeches and two poems, one of which seems likely to be written to go with an established tune, a popular parodic form for nineteenth-century Black poets. Finally, the edition includes a section devoted to criticism, with essays by Mark Metzler Sawin, Veronica T. Watson, and Leonard L. Richards Jr. This edition, then, involves a collaboration among JMU faculty, faculty from Eastern Mennonite University and Old Dominion University, a doctoral candidate from the University of New Mexico, an alumnus of JMU's MA program, and the author's own granddaughter, herself an educator and local historian. The website echoes and builds on these materials considerably, including suggested lesson plans and a "Choose Your Own Ending" page, which accounts for the fact that the last page of Newman's manuscript is torn, preventing readers from knowing how Newman brought the story to its close. Like the print version, the web version is engaging and educational, and both versions encourage readers to explore the significance of this novel in its regional and historical context. It is a pleasure to encounter this community of readers and scholars in the pages of this edition and on the website, and there is great reason to admire the work they've done in preparing this edition to reach other readers, scholars, and communities in the years ahead.

One of the many benefits of this novel's publication is that we have a chance to learn about and reflect upon the life and work of its author, George A. Newman, born in 1855 in Winchester, Virginia. Like Charles W. Chesnutt and J. McHenry Jones a decade or so later, Newman was an educator with an interest in writing. In 1875 Newman moved to Harrisonburg, where for the next thirty-three years he was a teacher and administrator in the city school system, in addition to holding teaching positions in Warren County, Augusta County, and West Virginia. He worked as well as an agent of the Internal Revenue Service and as a deputy US marshal. Importantly, he was also a minister, a musician, and a member of the Mt. Zion Lodge of Masons. He was, in short, connected with and

influential in many of the primary forums for African American communities and Black social, political, and economic networks. In the novel, Newman clearly draws not only from what one assumes is capacious reading but also from his experience as a free Black child indentured to a white landowner in Winchester before the Civil War. Newman, then, is an important representative—indeed, an embodiment—of nineteenth-century Black community organizing efforts. He was well respected, at least regionally influential, determined, and profoundly aware of both the challenges and the opportunities facing Black communities of his time, and he was deeply involved in those organizations—educational, religious, fraternal, and social—devoted to guiding community members and future generations to new possibilities, even as they addressed ongoing efforts to restrict or redirect that progress.

As a recently discovered manuscript, this would be an important publication in any event, but *A Miserable Revenge* has real claims to special distinction among nineteenth-century African American literary productions. One distinctive feature of this novel is that it is simply a wild ride of a story. There are, of course, other nineteenth-century African American texts that take the reader on an almost unchartable course. William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853) and Martin R. Delany's *Blake* (published serially from 1859 to 1862) come to mind. But I agree with the editors that this story is especially worthy of notice. "*A Miserable Revenge's* wild storyline," they observe, "its murderous plots, bewildering secret identities, disguised detective, and gruesome grave-robbing 'revenge' plot—suggest its interesting affinity with mid- to late-nineteenth century popular fiction, especially periodical fiction and dime novels, which ... makes Newman's work unique for his time" (xxv). In his excellent essay on the context for the novel, Mark Metzler Sawin echoes this point. "The book mirrors," Sawin notes, "the sensational stories of the times—the dime novel thrillers full of scheming villains, truehearted lovers, and cunning heroes, all pulled together in dark mysteries, wrenching drama, and outrageous plot twists" (331). Later Sawin adds that there is ample evidence that Newman was "an active consumer of Frank Leslie's publications" (336). While it is not surprising that Newman might have read the popular genre fiction of the time, Sawin's, Godfrey's, and Hefner's observations should lead us to spend more time thinking about the habits of African American readers—including an immersion in popular novels and magazines that might provide some foreground for Kinohi Nishikawa's important scholarship on Black writers' engagement in pulp fiction in the twentieth century.

Beyond the warp and bend of *A Miserable Revenge's* plot, though, is perhaps its most distinctive feature—that it tells the story of white people. Newman's narrator refers to the novel's Black characters as "our minor characters—our kitchen characters"—characters, as Veronica Watson observes, who are "largely relegated to the periphery of the narrative" (144, 369). The story told here is about white people, making this "the earliest 'white life' novel known to date" (369). To be sure, as Godfrey and Hefner observe, "the novel's plot speaks to issues that were of central concern to Black communities in the Reconstruction era," but it also turns to stereotypes and genre conventions in representing Black and Indigenous Americans (xxi–xxii). Watson's excellent essay on "the moral economies of whiteness" in Newman's novel places Newman's focus on white life in the context of other African American texts that give significant or nearly exclusive attention to white characters, including work by Charles Chesnutt, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ann Petry. But Newman's dime-novel approach makes his novel a particularly distinctive example of this body of writing. As Watson explains, "the very absence of interrogation into white social structures in general, and white, masculine, aristocratic privilege in particular, offers an entry into a deeper consideration of the functioning of whiteness in his narrative" (374). I agree, and while I can offer no conclusions as to what all Newman is trying to achieve by this story, I join others in noting that at the end

of the novel all its characters are determined to relocate from Virginia to Boston, which offers the possibility of a better life. It is worth noting, too, that the novel's title aside, Newman is clearly less interested in revenge than in cooperation, in working toward a solution to the nation's racial tensions. The optimism comes at the cost of stretching an already stretched plot, but while he brings a critical eye to the world he imagines in the pages of this novel, Newman does not come to "white life" writing to condemn.

The stable center of this wild ride, and arguably the most intriguing and important character in the novel, is the narrator, who is not exactly a character but is certainly a commanding presence. In a particularly perceptive review of *A Miserable Revenge*, Mary Ann Zehr accounts for the narrator's compelling presence. "The narrator's metacognitive observations," she states, "drew me into the novel."¹ As Zehr observes, and as any reader will see, the narrator is rather hard to pin down. Even when telling a straight story, he makes us aware that we are witnessing events through him, and he is clear at times about postponing or withholding information, just as he seems to have a kind of quiet humor in his management of the story—introducing characters, orchestrating the plot, and occasionally commenting on some relevant aspect of the novel's historical and cultural context, as when he comments on slavery. This is a "white life" story as viewed through a perspective shaped by Black life in Virginia in the late nineteenth century. There are no significant racial dynamics here to witness beyond the quiet (and sometimes not so quiet) authority of the narrator's presence, which makes this homage to the popular fiction of the time particularly compelling.

Scholars reading this novel will likely find themselves anxious to find ways to explore the almost inexplicable existence of this story, written by a prominent Black leader during one of the most difficult periods in American history for African Americans. There are many research trails to follow here—and the editors of both the print copy and the website have charted those trails admirably well. Other readers will find an intriguing read. If they come looking for an example of African American literature, they will be productively confused by what they find. This is a novel that calls upon us to think carefully about how we understand literary history, and how we understand the literary culture into which many African American readers no doubt immersed themselves. It's a quiet revelation of a discovery, and a great, loud read for those who enjoy murderous plots, grave-robbing scenes, mysterious identities, and sometimes clueless detectives. It is also a model of community-focused editing, expertly handled with great respect for presenting the text as faithfully as possible, and with as much useful context as is appropriate. *A Miserable Revenge* is a great addition to what we know, and what we don't know, about nineteenth-century African American literature, and this is an edition—and an approach to collaborative editorial work—that will, I hope, guide others when similar discoveries are made in the future.

-
1. Mary Ann Zehr, "Book Review: An Unpublished (Until Now) 19th-Century Novel," *The Citizen*, September 6, 2025, <https://hburgcitizen.com/2025/09/06/book-review-an-unpublished-until-now-19th-century-novel/>. ↩