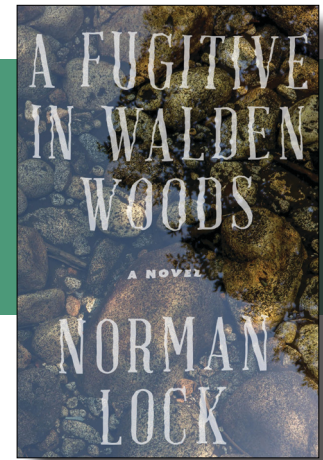




## A Fugitive in Walden Woods

A novel by Norman Lock

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“*A Fugitive in Walden Woods* manages that special magic of making Thoreau’s time in Walden Woods seem fresh and surprising and necessary right now. . . . This is a patient and perceptive novel, a pleasure to read even as it grapples with issues that affect the United States to this day.” —**Victor LaValle**, author of *The Ballad of Black Tom* and *The Changeling*

“Bold and enlightening. . . . An important novel that creates a vivid social context for the masterpieces of such writers as Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne and also offers valuable insights about our current conscious and unconscious racism.” —**Sena Jeter Naslund**, author of *Ahab’s Wife* and *The Fountain of St. James Court; or, Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman*

“Demonstrates Lock’s uncanny ability to inhabit historical figures and meticulously capture the vernacular of the time like a transcendentalist ventriloquist. . . . The text interweaves dialogue known to be spoken or written by Thoreau, Emerson, and Hawthorne with that made up by Lock and attributed to these giants of American literature. Lock’s remarkable achievement is that the reader cannot tell the difference. The real power of the story, however, comes from Samuel, who more than holds his own among these geniuses. His experiences of brutality offer profound insights that sharpen our understanding of American history.” —**Booklist (starred review)**

“Powerful . . . . This novel invokes the past while feeling decidedly relevant to contemporary issues and debates.” —**Kirkus Reviews**

### INTRODUCTION

Samuel Long escapes slavery in Virginia, traveling the Underground Railroad to Walden Woods, where he encounters Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Lloyd Garrison, and other transcendentalists and abolitionists. While Long will experience his coming-of-age at Walden Pond, his hosts will receive a lesson in human dignity, culminating in a climactic act of civil disobedience.

Against this historical backdrop, Norman Lock’s powerful narrative examines issues that continue to divide the United States: racism, privilege, and what it means to be free in America.

### CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. Samuel Long moves from slavery in the south to relative freedom in the north, from a life of physical torment to a community of philosophers primarily concerned with the mind. How does he struggle with these transitions? By the end of the novel, does he find that the transcendentalists’ concern with the mind is more important than the suffering of the body?
2. Thoreau’s willful denial of comforts stands in stark contrast to Samuel’s life of forced labor and complete lack of luxury. Samuel resents Thoreau’s experiment: “His renunciation was no better than that of a man who, having filled his stomach, throws away what is left of his meal in sight of a starveling. And I was the starveling!” he says. In your opinion, does this point of contrast invalidate Thoreau’s ascetic project at Walden Pond? Does Thoreau’s friendship with Samuel affect the transcendentalist’s philosophy as it is expressed in the novel? If so, how?
3. “I write those words now, but I could not possibly have said them then,” Samuel tells the reader. How does mastering language change Samuel’s life? How does the fine prose he acquires later and uses to relate his year in Walden Woods affect how we read his tale?



4. Samuel yearns to speak to another black man in Concord “without inhibition or fear of the lash.” Why, then, are his first encounters with Joseph so strained and awkward?
5. “Were we always to be treated like children?” Samuel asks himself when Emerson confronts him about his rude response to abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. What mistakes do the well-meaning white inhabitants of Concord make in their treatment of Samuel?
6. When Joseph urges Samuel to go with him to Mexico and fight to free the remaining slaves, insisting that they have “a moral duty to take up arms,” Samuel responds, “A sane man does not put his head twice in the lion’s mouth.” Do you agree that the former slaves truly have a moral duty to risk their lives by returning to the South? Do the whites of Thoreau’s day? In the context of the novel, who is responsible for ending slavery, “the first injustice”?
7. Hawthorne tells Samuel that he fears idealism, remarking, “Emerson’s world consists of sublimely radiant ideas far removed from the lives of mill girls in Lowell.” Does the transcendentalists’ idealistic philosophy apply to or have any real effect on Samuel? On Concord? On the modern world?
8. How do Thoreau’s, Emerson’s, and Hawthorne’s attitudes toward nature differ? What do Thoreau and Samuel observe about the Maine wilderness that portends the degradation of our contemporary environment?
9. Do you believe that Samuel’s ultimate act of civil disobedience was justified? Would Emerson have approved of Samuel’s desperate measure? Was that act more genuine than Thoreau’s famous act of civil disobedience?
10. In reference to writing this book and others in the American Novels series, Norman Lock has said, “I had been thinking of the presumptuousness of a white man assuming the voice and consciousness of a black one. I was troubled by what might be viewed as expropriation. I have always been troubled by the presumptuousness of believing I am capable of creating narrators and characters whose experiences are alien to my own, of drawing the vast American landscape when I have traveled only in ‘Concord,’ and of imagining myself within the minds of illustrious men and women. . . . If am to accomplish what I mean to do in these books, I need to take on these other personae. For one, such as I, interested in the Other, there is no escaping the necessity of becoming—in fiction—another person.” What responsibilities should novelists assume when they write in the voice of characters with different experiences than their own? In your opinion, does Lock meet those responsibilities?
11. The epigraph includes this quote from Emerson: “There is no history. There is only biography.” Would you classify this novel as historical fiction or as biographical fiction? In what ways has the author created a biography of America itself?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norman Lock is the author of, most recently, the short story collection *Love Among the Particles* and four books in The American Novels series, a major literary project that exquisitely subverts traditional boundaries between history and imagination, and fiction and nonfiction, to illuminate humanity’s glorious and monstrous legacy. Although each novel stands alone, Lock weaves subtle connections between each book, paying homage to major American literary figures and genres: first with Mark Twain and the coming-of-age adventure story in *The Boy in His Winter*; then with Walt Whitman and the Western in *American Meteor*; Edgar Allan Poe and the gothic psychological thriller in *The Port-Wine Stain*; and Henry David Thoreau and other transcendentalists in a marriage of slave narrative and pastoral drama in *A Fugitive in Walden Woods*. Lock lives in Aberdeen, New Jersey, where he is at work on the next books in The American Novels series. Visit his website at [www.normanlock.com](http://www.normanlock.com).

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