



# THE WOMAN AT THE LIGHT

by Joanna Brady

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## A Conversation with Joanna Brady

### Where did you get the idea for *The Woman at the Light*?

About ten or so years ago, I read an article in the paper about The U.S. Coast Guard naming a cutter after Barbara Mabrity, the woman who had kept the Key West lighthouse in the nineteenth century. The article aroused my interest, and after digging a little into the history of Key West, I found that she belonged to a very exclusive sisterhood: women who had taken over from their husbands or fathers to tend lighthouses after the men passed away. Barbara's husband had died of yellow fever, a common scourge in Key West.

### So you decided to write about Barbara Mabrity?

Yes, originally as a biography. But when I researched her life, what was known about her was very sketchy. *The Woman at the Light* began as a short story. Fictionalizing her, turning her into Emily Lowry, was very liberating, and opened up a lot of possibilities.

### Did the story come easily?

Yes. The situation I placed Emily in—a woman alone after her husband's disappearance, the arrival of a handsome runaway slave to help her at the light, falling in love with him, having his baby, the Seminole wars—it was all rich territory for a torrent of ideas.

### What was your writing background?

I had once considered journalism, but in the end, opted to major in French and English, with a minor in Spanish. I also lived in Italy for a couple of years and spoke Italian, so my interests gravitated to modern languages and history.

Living in Toronto, Canada, I wrote advertising copy for many years. When we moved to Key West in 1995, my son Terry, then an editor at the Key West Citizen daily newspaper, talked me into writing articles for them. Being a foodie, I eventually gravitated toward writing a weekly food column.



**Was it a problem writing about miscegenation and interracial sex?**

Not really. *The Woman at the Light* is not a book for children, but I don't think the passages in the book dealing with sex are offensive. I prefer racy allusions and suggestive descriptions to blatant sexual descriptions.

Sex between a white woman and a black slave in the antebellum South was a real taboo, and its consequences made for a good story.

**Was the story one that you could personally relate to?**

People sometimes ask me if I've ever had an African American lover. No, I haven't. Did I identify with Emily in other ways? Sometimes. Writing in the first person with a woman's voice, it was easy to slip into her character and blend it with my own.

**Although she was headstrong when she arrived in Key West that first time, frontier life seemed to be quite a reality check. Did Emily regret the move from the get-go?**

Frontier life in Key West was a shock for Emily. Her first night there was a nightmare. Had there been any way to return to her old life, she might have gone back. But she was trapped there. In any case, I think she was too proud to tell her family she'd made a mistake.

**Did you see a parallel between slavery and marriage at that time?**

Yes. As a Negro slave, Andrew would only have been considered three-fifths of a person for census purposes in any slave state. While women were technically free, they were still subject to their husbands. They owned nothing, couldn't vote, had no way to control their fertility, and had huge families.

**You said yellow fever was a common scourge at that time?**

Disease was a terrible fear for early Key Westers. Emily wanted to stay at Wreckers' Cay because she thought yellow fever was an airborne disease. We know now that it was spread by mosquitoes, like malaria. There would have been less stagnant water on a small sandy island like

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Wreckers', so her family might have been safer than people in Key. But Emily wouldn't have known this.

**Key West seems to have had a very colorful history. Did you get caught up in it?**

Oh yes, very much so. Most of the early settlers were Bahamians who earned their living in one way or the other from the sea, and many people born in Key West (nicknamed "Conchs") still have ties to the Bahamas. The fishermen and wreckers (also known as "salvagers") of the time were a colorful, hard-drinking bunch. Some of them were New England sea captains, Cubans, and people from Southern states. What they had in common was that they were all attracted by the lure of money in wrecking and later by the cigar factories.

**Would Barbara Mabritty have liked your book?**

No, definitely not. Miss Barbara was Confederate, as was the rest of Florida. She would never have approved of Emily's love affair with a slave.

**What role did the lighthouse itself play in the story?**

For me, lighthouses have a haunting, magical quality about them, and I love to visit those venerable sentries from the past. The beautiful lighthouse in Key West was my model.

Wreckers' Key, a deserted island with a lighthouse, was the perfect place for an illicit—and illegal—romance with Andrew.

**You seem to be very much at home in Key West.**

Absolutely. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. In some ways, it's very Caribbean. Yet, it can be quite sophisticated. We love its literary traditions, its art, theater, and musical scenes. In the summer, we spend a few months in a stone cottage in the Dordogne Valley in southwest France from June to September. But I'm always happy to get home.



## Learning to Love History

While I liked history in school, I can't say I was ever so interested in it that I would actually pick up a nonfiction history book to read. But that has certainly changed over the years. College, traveling, and living in Europe has given me a deep appreciation for history. I now have a better understanding of Faulkner's quote: "The past is never dead. It's not even past." Or Alphonse Karr's quip: "*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*" The more things change, the more they do remain the same.

Because my father was an amateur historian, I grew up in a home that was filled with historical novels and history books. Now, I think most of the books I read are historical fiction, and increasingly nonfiction history. What I find fascinating about them is how revisionist they are. The line between the truth and stories about the truth often becomes blurred, until you realize that we'll never know what really happened.

This is one of the reasons it took me so long to write *The Woman at the Light*. Not many books had been written about early Key West, and writing my book took quite a lot of research. For an author to write about England or France, or Russia, say, where the story of the past has been pretty well documented and the role of the historian has been mostly to interpret what went on before, it is easier to work with. But the history of an obscure little place like Key West produces only sketchy details.

Along the way, I learned a lot about the laws governing slaves, about the status of women, miscegenation, and the disparity between the states on the subject of slavery. I was fascinated to learn about what it was like to tend a lighthouse, to deal with the unpredictability of weather, and about the wrecking and salvaging industry in the Keys. Life could be harsh in a frontier island town at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Tormented by mosquitoes and no-see-ums, with no electricity or running water, no respite from the tropical sun, and no means of communicating with the rest of the world, living in Key West would have been misery. An area of virtually unexplored territory like that can

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be very exciting for a writer.

In Key West, much of the history was reinvented, and I was sometimes faced with having to choose which version of a story I wanted to believe. For example, nobody knows for sure how many children Barbara Mabrity actually had. Some books said five, some said six. Some say all her children were drowned when the lighthouse was blown over during the hurricane of 1846. Other versions say that would have been impossible as she would have been in her sixties then and her children were probably grown-up and had possibly moved away.

Faced with discrepancies like these, an author looking for enhancement to a plot will pick the version that makes for the best story! And this I confess I did in *The Woman at the Light*.



## Recommended Reading

I read many books about Key West and the Florida Keys while writing *The Woman at the Light*, but one of my best references was *Key West, The Old and the New*, written in 1912, by Jefferson Beale Browne. It is about as definitive a history of early Key West as one could find.

In 1940, a young woman named Thelma Strabel wrote a serialized story about Key West called “Reap the Wild Wind” for the *Saturday Evening Post*, about wrecking in Key West in the mid–nineteenth century. The story captured the imagination of Cecil B. DeMille, who turned it into a blockbuster movie a couple years later. She then turned it into a novel, which I found fascinating and helpful.

More recently, retired U.S. naval officer and former submarine commander, John Viele, wrote a fascinating trilogy called *The Florida Keys*. It’s an excellent source of information about the Keys.

I also read several books about lighthouses, which gave me an idea of what was involved in tending one. *Women Who Kept the Lights: an Illustrated History of Female Lighthouse Keepers* by J. Candace Clifford and Mary Louise Clifford was a big help in understanding what some of these women went through, courageously tending lights all over the country, in all kinds of weather.

I couldn’t have written this book without the inspiration of all of these excellent writers.

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## *Reading Group Questions*

1. Early on we see Emily in her own milieu of upper class New Orleans. Had she not met Martin, she would have married within that class and remained there. Knowing what we do about her headstrong character, would she have been happy there?
2. From the beginning, Emily hates Key West. At what point does her hate turn to acceptance and then to love? If she'd had no children, would she still have continued to hate it?
3. Martin is in many ways an enigma. He has many positive qualities, but do you feel these are outweighed by his faults? Is he someone you would find hard to live with? Talk about how his character evolves when he vanishes and only his spiritual presence remains. Do you think Emily is turning him into the husband she always wanted?
4. Did you guess early on what happened to Martin on Wreckers' Cay? What did it tell you about the competition of wreckers to make money?
5. Pedro claims to adore Emily. Yet, he sleeps with prostitutes after their marriage. Does this seem incongruous to you, even knowing what we do of his appetites? When you think of Pedro, which Hollywood actor springs to mind?
6. Dorothy becomes a key character as the story moves along. She can be fun, but as we realize later—she has a dark side. Do you find you like her? Do you find her behavior forgivable? In Emily's place, would you have found it in your heart to pardon her?
7. If Emily had married Captain Lee, what kind of life might she have had? What about Captain Peartree? Would she have been happier if she'd stayed in New York?





8. Pedro's enthusiasm for sex—we'd call him oversexed or addicted to sex today—got to be really tiresome. Once she became wealthy in her own right, why do you suppose Emily stayed with him?
9. How did you feel about the ending of the book, and the way the author managed to find Ebony and integrate her into a life of her own in Key West? Did you find the resolution satisfying?

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