I’ll tell you something I’ve never really understood: the difference between “art” and “craft.” Yes, I get the sociological difference (“art” is made in New York and Paris; “craft” is made in Omaha and Wichita), but what about the substantive difference? One common way to differentiate the two is to say “art” is not functional and “craft” is functional. You can’t sit on a painting but you can sit on a chair. If that’s the difference, then the “Museum of Modern Art” in New York should be called the “Museum of Modern Art and Craft,” because it’s full of (not very comfortable) furniture. I also cannot really comprehend the difference between “insider art” and “outsider art.” Again, I get the sociological distinction (see above), but who gets to say who’s inside and who’s outside? And if there’s “insider art” and “outsider art,” is there “insider craft” and “outsider craft”?

All I know is this: there was a freed slave named Harriet Powers who made really beautiful, highly literate, and deeply religious quilts. In the world of quilting (which is much bigger than you think), Powers is a bit like Vermeer: not many pieces, but all highly valued. And like Vermeer, she’s interesting because we don’t know a lot about her. In This I Accomplish: Harriet Powers’ Bible Quilt and Other Pieces (2010), Kyra Hicks does her best to fill in the many blanks. The book is a combination detective story, journey of discovery, and guide to further research. Hicks, a master quilter herself, doggedly pursues every lead she can find regarding the mysterious Powers, and they take her to some very unexpected places (for example, Keokuk, Iowa). The picture of Powers that emerges from This I Accomplish is that of a skilled, religiously-inspired artist, confident and proud of her work, moving through a long-forgotten world of African American quilters.

If you know any quilters (and I know you do), this book would make an excellent gift. If you’d like to see Powers’ quilts for yourself, they are held by the National Museum of American History (part of the Smithsonian) in Washington and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.