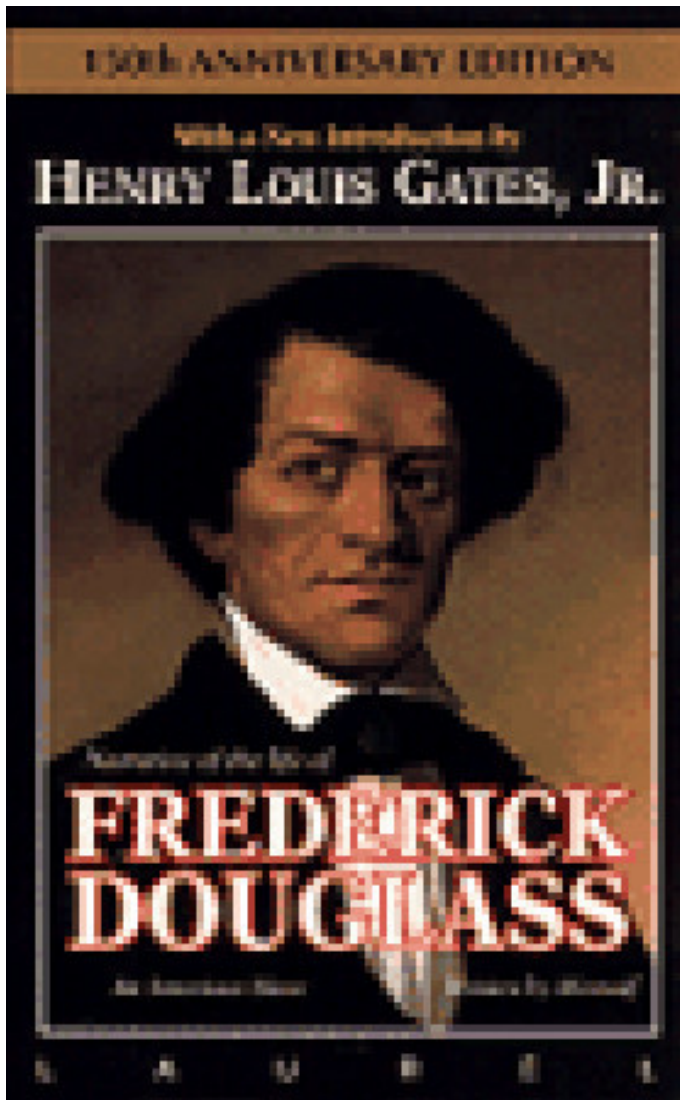

Frederick Douglass

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave (The Autobiographies #1)



Title: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave (The Autobiographies #1)

Author: Frederick Douglass

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Description

Born a slave in Maryland circa 1817, Frederick Douglass went on to become the most influential and distinguished African American of the nineteenth century. As an abolitionist, newspaper publisher, orator and statesman, Douglass dedicated his life to the triumph of freedom over oppression for all black Americans.

Published shortly after his escape from slavery, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* became an immediate bestseller in 1845 and is still the most widely read slave narrative in American history. A piercing denunciation of slavery, the *Narrative* mobilized masses of people for the abolitionist cause. But the *Narrative* is also a deeply personal memoir in which Douglass chronicles his childhood years of deprivation and brutality, his efforts to teach himself to read (teaching a slave to read was illegal in the South), and his dangerous flight to freedom in 1838.

In his insightful introduction, Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. celebrates the 150th anniversary of the book's publication and offers a fresh perspective on what the *Narrative* means today. The comprehensive bibliography lists the body of literature devoted to Douglass's life and writings.

Already a staple for many courses in American literature and history, this edition is enhanced by Professor Gates's introduction and bibliography, and will be a must have for all readers of American literature.

Insightful reviews

Ken Moten: "*Reader! are you with the man-stealers in sympathy and purpose, or on the side of their down-trodden victims? If with the former, then are you the foe of God and man. If with the latter, what are you prepared to do and dare in their behalf? Be faithful, be vigilant, be untiring in your efforts to break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free.*" - from the Preface by [William Lloyd Garrison](#).

This autobiography is easily the most well-known and taught of any slave narrative in the United States. It is preceded by two introductions written by abolitionists [William Lloyd Garrison](#) and [Wendell Phillips](#), respectively and has an epilogue in the form of an appendix containing Douglass' polemic against American Christianity in the South. The narrative itself was written in response to growing skepticism by Whites that a slave could be as articulate and knowledgeable as Frederick Douglass. Douglass (whose birth surname was Bailey) obviously did not want to blow his cover and give away his identity (he was able to avoid suspicion so far because he was biracial--his initial owner was also his biological father) for fear of having to be restored to his "owner," but he relented anyway and wrote this autobiography--though it would not be published until Douglass was safely out of the laws reach in Great Britain where he would remain until British abolitionists had raised enough money to purchase his freedom.

The story of his life is one that was not too much out of the ordinary for a typical slave except for the whole learning to read and write part, as well as, Douglass' unusually bold exertion of his

humanity which would cost him dearly again and again. The names for most of the people in this book are censored (which was the rule in slave narratives in order to not easily identify himself) and the details of his escape are also partially concealed to protect the people who helped him.

Now I mentioned that this narrative features a section called "Appendix." which contains an epilogue and a poem in the form of a parody. Both are essentially strong critiques of American Christianity, especially in the South. Now I have read polemics by the best of them, Baldwin in [The Fire Next Time](#), Nietzsche, Hume, Marx, and etc., but nobody has made such a vicious and precise attack on the institution as Douglass in my opinion. Now he was, himself, an ordained minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, but that did not stop him from remembering the suffering he went through and witnessed, especially at the hands of slave-owning clergy men. He notes with particular disdain that the most unhinged and immoral slave owners were always ministers or deacons. It is something that the American South for all its feeble progress, has never truly reconciled. Here is a sample of the Appendix/epilogue:

"I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of "stealing the livery of the court of heaven to serve the devil in." I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a class-leader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me. He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families, -- sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers, -- leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate. We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer against adultery."

You see, unlike your Dawkins and Hitchens, Nietzsche and Sartre, Douglass had a lifetime's worth of experience in which to criticize the unholy alliance of slavery and religion. One finds that the most militant critics of slavery at that time were Black preachers (with the exception of John Brown, a White militant anti-slavery minister--even more than Douglass).

All in all, I believe that if you want to learn about the experience of American slavery (assuming you know nothing)...read [Twelve Years a Slave](#) first and then immediately afterwards read this book. The former gives you an outsiders introduction and the latter gives you an insiders view.

Personally, though this maybe the most well written slave narrative, my personal favorite remains [Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl](#). Though the experiences of Slavery were many, no two people suffered the same way and the variety of people who wrote their stories in different centuries and different tongues bring us an original perspective on persevering through human suffering.

"Sincerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something toward throwing light on the American slave system, and hastening the glad day of deliverance to the millions of my brethren in bonds -- faithfully relying upon the power of truth, love, and justice, for success in my humble efforts -- and solemnly pledging my self anew to the sacred cause, -- I subscribe myself,

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

LYNN, Mass., April 28, 1845."

I read this as a part of [The Classic Slave Narratives](#).

Jesse: I know that most Goodreads members probably have their minds made up about slavery by now, but I had forgotten until recently what a remarkable piece of literature this is:

"On the one hand, there stood slavery, a stern reality, glaring frightfully upon us,- its robes already crimsoned with the blood of millions, and even now feasting itself greedily upon our own flesh. On the other hand, away back in the dim distance, under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-covered mountain, stood a doubtful freedom - half frozen - beckoning us to come and share its hospitality." (123)

It's worth a second look and you haven't read it before, you really ought to. There's a lot more here than "slavery is bad".

Douglass' interpretation of religious identification among slave-holders will be of special interest to students of Southern literature.

Julia: Frederick Douglass was born into slavery. With a slave owning father - who was presumably his first master - and a slave mother, all Douglass ever knew was slavery. However, even though he was a slave, he knew he was being denied his basic human rights without anyone telling him: *"The white children could tell their ages. I could not tell why I ought to be deprived of the same privilege."*

Douglass also offers an interesting insight into the emotions of slaves:

"Slave sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. To those

songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery."

This is before Douglass has learned how to read or write. There is something innate in people that tells them when they are being wronged and Douglass knew that his condition as a slave - and the entire enterprise of slavery - was wrong. But it wasn't just wrong for himself. When describing his owner's wife, he describes her as angelic, as one of the first people who ever looked upon him with kindness and sincerely smiled at him. However, *"The cheerful eye, under the influence of slavery, soon became red with rage; that voice, made all of sweet accord, changed to one of harsh and horrid discord; and that angelic face **gave place to that of a demon**"* (Emphasis is mine.) He goes on to explain that when it came to Sophia Auld, the aforementioned woman, *"Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me."* Douglass explains that she wasn't a born slave owner and that in the power of owning another being she became as corrupted as the worst of them. **The slaving system is detrimental not only to the slaves, but also to their masters.**

Douglass also sheds a light on the hypocritical nature of the slave holder. How the most pious of Christians turn out to be the worst of slave breakers, using the example of Mr. Covey: *"Added to the natural good qualities of Mr. Covey, he was a professor of religion - a pious soul - a member and a class-leader in the Methodist church. All of this added weight to his reputation as a "nigger-breaker."** He then goes on to compare Mr. Covey to God, in what I can only imagine was meant to be a sardonic and ironic comparison by saying *"His comings were like a thief in the night"* when he went to go check on the slaves and make sure they were doing their work.

Throughout the narrative, Douglass is trying to establish his identity. He is forming himself from nothing. He has nothing to remember except a mother who used to sneak in to his plantation even though it was miles from his own to visit him, a grandmother who was left to rot by her slave owners and a father who may or may not have been his actual master. When it comes time for him to find a name, he changes his surname a few times, from Bailey to Johnson and then eventually to the last name Douglass, which was actually given to him. But when Mr. Johnson, the man who named him, gave him his name, Douglass told him that *"he must not take from me the name of 'Frederick.' I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity."* At this point Douglass is a free man in the North, and his identity is that of an ex-slave, now married, and living a life where he can be his own master. But there is power in that first name, as I believe it reminds him of where he came from and how hard it took for him to get to where he is. There is power in names.

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is a narrative that is well worth the read, and I understand why it is required reading in high schools and colleges. This review is a brief overview of the amount of subjects offered up, the themes involved and more. To properly explain this book it would require multiple dissertations, but I hope it gave you interest in wanting to read it. This narrative offers an in-depth and personal look into slavery from an ex-slave's point of view while also being incredibly accessible and readable. Highly recommended.

* I'm sorry to have had to use the "n" word in a review. Please understand it was in the quotation and does not reflect my own speech.

Can also be found on [The Book of Jules](#)

Cathleen: i have learn this ebook numerous times, and i am yes i'm going to proceed to reread it each few years or so. i am in awe of the sheer beauty of Douglass's mind and genius with language; his observations on human nature, power, injustice, dignity and self-determination are profound.

Jenny Zarate: I learn this booklet for the 1st time in 1998 in a school room setting. Having remembered that I cherished it then, I re-read it in the course of my early pregnancy, again while I had loads of time and will maintain either eyes in a single spot for a longer interval of time. i do not recognize if it used to be the hormones, or simply the truth that I wasn't feeling the strain of being the one white woman within the African American Literature class, however it used to be even larger than I had formerly remembered it. Quick quote from a colleague of mine in that class: "This nigga talks like a white guy. Shit." I bear in mind the teacher, a stunning black lady with an awesome mind and talent to relay details to all --even to those that didn't do the analyzing -- shuddered at that comment, let loose an incredible sigh, after which wear her top smile to provide an explanation for the horror of what he had simply said.

Elizabeth: This ebook calls for to be read. "If you provide a nigger an inch, he'll take an ell. A nigger should still be aware of not anything yet to obey his master... studying might destroy the simplest nigger within the world... He may instantly turn into unmanageable, and of no worth to his master. As to himself, it might do him no good... It may make him discontented and unhappy." (Chapter VI, Mr. Auld). In a fashion Douglass's new grasp was once right. via instructing Douglass simply the alphabet on my own and listening to Mr. Auld's objections, Fredrick Douglass has began to turn into "unmanageable". while Mr. Auld spoke those phrases whatever sparked in Douglass; he learned he had a present now not many different black humans had, freed or enslaved. He then went out of his strategy to the right way to read. He lied, carried books while he wasn't intended to, and bargained with white boys of the neighborhood. He then went extra and tricked boys into educating him tips on how to write with out their figuring out and copied from his younger master's institution books. He "took the ell". Also, Mr. Auld was once correct simply because studying did damage the slaves within the experience of what the slaveholders wanted. The need a slave that does all their paintings without grievance or disobedience. as soon as a slave earnings wisdom and observe that they're people with souls, and rights and did not deserve the lifestyles they have been leading. They then rebelled, making them extra unmanageable and at last they'd haven't any price simply because they'd run away. Mr. Auld then proved himself correct back with an analogous quote. while Douglass was once examining "The Columbian Orator" the burden of being a slave began to undergo down on him. He learned that he'd consistently be a slave and that there has been no break out from his grotesque life. At twelve years outdated he has replaced from a boy jam-packed with desire to a boy of despair.

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