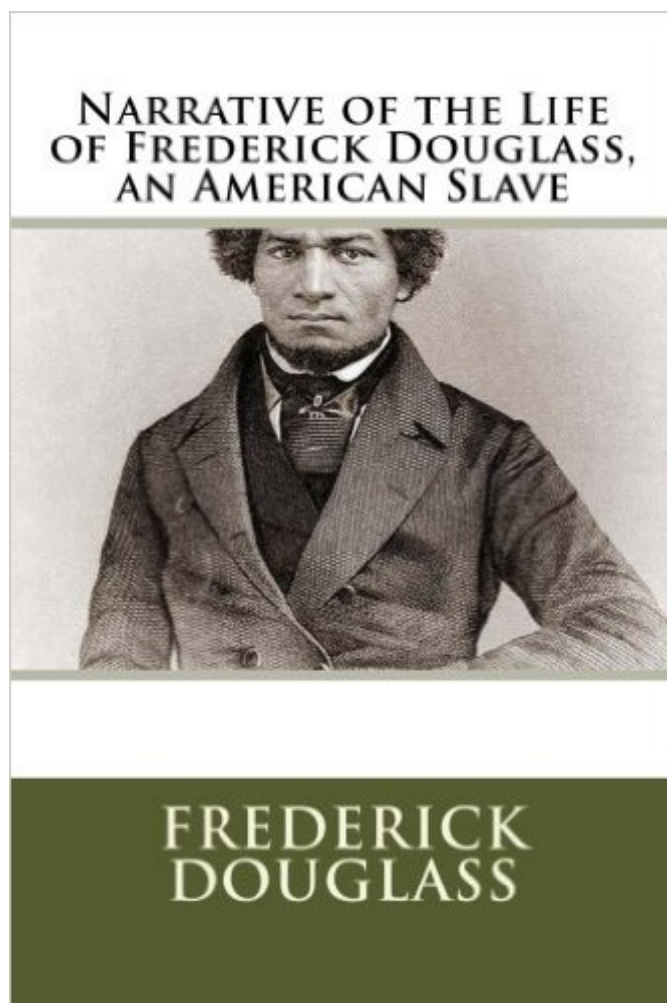


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Narrative Of The Life Of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave



Synopsis

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave By Frederick Douglass

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Harriet Jacobs' (1813-1897) "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" is one of the few accounts of Southern slavery written by a woman. The book was published in 1861 through the efforts of Maria Child, an abolitionist who edited the book and wrote an introduction to it. The book had its origin in a series of letters Jacobs wrote between 1853 and 1861 to her friends in the abolitionist movement, notably a woman named Amy Post. Historically, there was some doubt about the authorship of the book and about the authenticity of the incidents it records. These doubts have largely been put to rest by the discovery of the letters. The book indeed has elements of a disguise and of a novel. Jacobs never uses her real name but calls herself instead "Linda Brent." The other characters in the book are also given pseudonyms. Jacobs tells us in the Preface to the book (signed "Linda Brent") that she changed names in order to protect the privacy of individuals but that the incidents recounted in the narrative are "no fiction". Jacobs was born in slave rural North Carolina. As a young girl, she learned to read and write, which was highly rare among slaves. At about the age of 11 she was sent to live as a slave to a doctor who also owned a plantation, called "Dr. Flint" in the book. Jacobs book describes well the cruelties of the "Peculiar Institution -- in terms of its beatings, floggings, and burnings, overwork, starvation, and dehumanization. It focuses as well upon the selling and wrenching apart of families that resulted from the commodification of people in the slave system.

But Jacobs' book is unique in that it describes first-hand the sexual indignities to which women were subjected in slavery. (Other accounts, such as those of Frederick Douglass, were written by men.) The book is also unusual in that Jacobs does not portray herself entirely as a hero but describes the nature of the steps she took to avoid becoming the sexual slave of Flint. Thus, when Flint subjected her to repeated sexual advances from the time Jacobs reached the age of 16, she tried to avoid him by beginning an affair with a white, single attorney with whom she had two children. When Flint's advances persisted, Jacobs formed the determination to try to secure her freedom. The bulk of the book describes how Jacobs hid precariously in a cramped attic for seven years waiting for the opportunity to secure her freedom. There are also accounts of her prior attempts to leave slavery, including a particularly harrowing account of several days in a place aptly named "Snaky Swamp." Jacobs describes her relationship with her grandmother, a free black woman who was probably the major inspiration of her life. She also describes well her love and concern for her children, conceived through the liaison with the white attorney. This book offers a rare perspective on American slavery as it affected women. It is also a testament, I think, to the value of literacy and knowledge as an instrument for winning and preserving free human life. Although this story is not pretty, it is a testament to human persistence in the face of adversity and to the precious character of human freedom.

This autobiographical condemnation of the south's Peculiar Institution puts a face on the suffering of the enslaved. American history is full of accounts of slavery which tend to broad overviews of the institution, whereas this book is written by an escaped slave who does not flinch at sharing every detail of her miserable life. Unlike other narratives which distorted the slave's voice through the perspective of the interviewers/authors who were notorious for exaggerating the uneducated slaves' broken English, this book is largely Ms. Jacobs' own words. She was taught to read and write as a child by a kind mistress, so she was able to put her thoughts on paper with clarity that surprised many. Ms. Jacobs had an editor, but this book seems to be her unfiltered view of the world. It is one thing to hear about how slaveholders took liberties with female slaves, it is quite another to read in stark detail about women being commanded to lay down in fields, young girls being seduced and impregnated and their offspring sold to rid the slaveholder of the evidence of his licentiousness. The author talks about jealous white women, enraged by their husbands' behavior, taking it out on the hapless slaves. The white women were seen as ladies, delicate creatures prone to fainting spells and hissy fits whereas the Black women were beasts of burden, objects of lust and contempt simultaneously. Some slave women resisted these lustful swine and were beaten badly because of

it. It was quite a conundrum. To be sure, white women suffered under this disgusting system too, though not to the same degree as the female slaves who had no one to protect them and their virtue. Even the notion of a slave having virtue is mocked. The author rejected the slaveholder's advances and dared to hope that she would be allowed to marry a free black man who loved and respected her. Not only was she not allowed to marry him, she was forbidden to see him or speak to him again. The author shows us the depth of a mother's love as she suffers mightily to see that her children are not also brought under the yoke of slavery. Though she was able to elude her odious master, she does take up with some other white man in hopes that he would be able to buy her freedom. Her "owner" refuses to sell her and tells her that she and her children are the property of his minor daughter. Her lover seems kind enough as he claims his children and offers to give them his name, and he did eventually buy them, though he failed to emancipate them to spare them from a life of forced servitude. Ms. Jacobs noted that slavery taught her not to trust the promises of white men. Having lived in town most of her life, Ms. Jacobs is sent to the plantation of her master's cruel son to broken in after she continues to refuse his sexual advances. She is resigned to this fate until she learns that her children -- who were never treated like slaves -- were to be brought to the plantation also. It is then that she takes flight. After enduring 7-years of confinement in cramped quarters under the roof of her grandmother's house, the author escapes to the North which is not quite the haven she imagined. Still, it is better than the south, and she makes friends who buy her freedom leaving her both relieved and bitter that she is still seen as property to be bought and sold like livestock. In New York Ms. Jacobs is reunited with her children and a beloved brother who'd escaped a few years ago while accompanying his master -- her former lover -- to the free states. There is no fairytale ending to this story because the author endures plenty of abuse and uncertainty even after she makes it to the North. She is hunted down by the relentless slaveowners who were aided by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 and "The bloodhounds of the North." This is a wrenching account of this shameful period of American history, and should be required reading for all.

I often believe it is easy to criticize nineteenth century Americans for not stepping up to the plate regarding the issue of slavery and race in America. Jefferson may well have agonized over the issue he called the "death knell of the nation" and which he labeled a "necessary evil." Certainly he benefitted by the ownership of nearly 300 slaves, but he grew up in a world in which slavery was the norm. It takes a revolutionary and remarkable man to truly stand against the only world he knows and move to create a different world, so I usually defend Jefferson and his political vision which

clearly transcended that world. Reading Frederick Douglass, however, makes me wonder how anyone with firsthand knowledge of the institution could not see the obvious pain and cruelty which existed right in front of his or her eyes. Douglass's narrative, and particularly his descriptions of the slave trade in Baltimore and the obvious place of the whip (whether used or not) as the principal vehicle of social control argues most eloquently that though the slave system may have been a social norm, the blinders had to be unbelievably thick not to see the horrors that the institution wrought. The relationship of slave and master perpetuated a most un-American (at least in terms of our professed values--cf. Douglass's later antislavery orations) tyranny and oppression. Douglass's narrative testifies that our ancestors could have seen much more and done much more and that 600,000 lives and a subsequent 120 years of racial schism and pain was too much a price to bear for the peculiar institution.

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