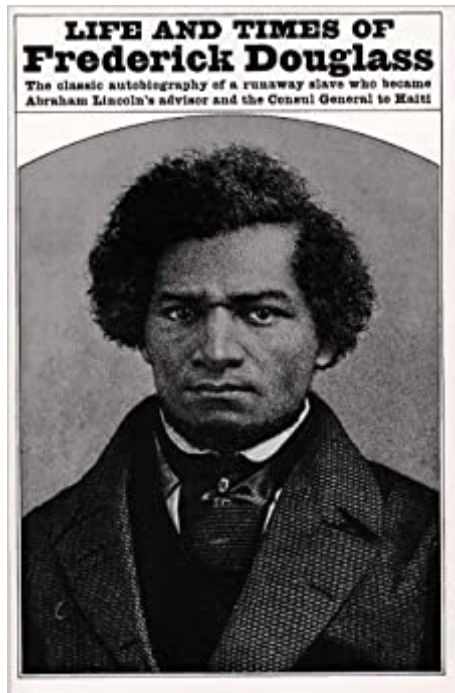


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Life And Times Of Frederick Douglass



Synopsis

LIFE AS A SLAVE. CHAPTER I. AUTHOR'S BIRTH. Author's place of birth-Description of country-Its inhabitantsGenealogical trees-Method of counting time in slave district- Date of author's birth-Names of grandparents-Their cabinHome with them-Slave practice of separating mothers from their children- Author's recollections of his mother-Who was his father? In Talbot County, Eastern Shore, State of Maryland, near Easton, the county town, there is a small district of country, thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing that I know of more than for the worn-out, sandy, desertlike appearance of its soil, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever. It was in this dull, flat, and unthrifty district or neighborhood, bordered by the Choptank river, among the laziest and muddiest of streams, surrounded by a white population of the lowest order, indolent and drunk.

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Customer Reviews

Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey (Frederick Douglass) was born a slave in Talbot County, Maryland. He took the name Douglass after escaping from the South in 1838. As a leader in the abolitionist movement, Douglass was famed for his eloquent yet incisive political writing. And, like his near-contemporary, Booker T. Washington, understood the central importance of education in improving the lives of African Americans, and was therefore an early proponent of desegregation. A firm believer in equal rights for all, Douglass attended a meeting of the National Council of Women in Washington, D.C., in the hours before his death in February 1895. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Frederick Douglass's autobiography is compelling. He was born into slavery, liberated himself, became a powerful abolitionist speaker, and counseled American presidents. He was a most remarkable man. As a slave, Frederick Douglass was prohibited from obtaining a formal education, but his autobiography demonstrates the power a motivated individual can have in learning outside of the classroom, a lesson we should never forget. Frederick Douglass had direct, personal experience with historical events and personalities. His unique insights into slavery, the Civil War era, and Abraham Lincoln are fascinating as is his commentary concerning human nature in general. He provides a perspective of the era that I have not found in other books, particularly his views of Abraham Lincoln (pages 250-260 & 353-358). There is much to learn from this book, which is well worth reading. The following are some illustrative passages from the book:

"Very well," I thought. "Knowledge makes a child unfit to be a slave." I instinctively assented to the proposition, and from that moment I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom. (page 50)

There, too, was my dear old father [Douglass' spiritual leader, not biological his father], the pious Lawson, who was in all the Christian graces the very counterpart of "Uncle Tom" the resemblance so perfect that he might have been the original of Mrs. Stowe's Christian hero. (page 66)

The slaveholders there, like slaveholders elsewhere, preferred to see the slaves engaged in degrading sports, rather than acting like moral and accountable beings. (page 103)

In this Christian country men and women

were obligated to hide in barns and woods and trees from professing Christians, in order to learn to read the Holy Bible. (page 104) To make a contented slave, you must make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible to annihilate his power of reason. (page 130) Regarding Abraham Lincoln - I at once felt myself in the presence of an honest man. I felt that I could love, honor, and trust without reserve or doubt. (page 251) In a word, in all that he did, or attempted, he made it manifest that the one great and all-commanding object with him was the peace and preservation of the Union, and that this was the motive and mainspring of all his measures. (page 257) Our faith in him was often taxed and strained to the uttermost, but it never failed. We came to the conclusion that the hour and the man of our redemption had somehow met in the person of Abraham Lincoln. (page 355) I know of no class of my fellow men, however just, enlightened, and humane, which can be wisely and safely trusted absolutely with the liberties of any other class. (page 274) I esteem myself a good, persistent hater of injustice and oppression, but my resentment ceases when they cease, and I have no heart to visit upon children the sins of their fathers. (page 288) I have aimed to assure them [black Americans] that knowledge can be obtained under difficulties that poverty may give place to competency that obscurity is not an absolute bar to distinction, and that a way is open to welfare and happiness to all who will resolutely and wisely pursue that way that neither slavery, stripes, imprisonment, nor proscription need extinguish self-respect, crush manly ambition, or paralyze effort that no power outside of himself can prevent a man from sustaining an honorable character. (page 350) The laws which determine the destinies of individuals and nations are impartial and eternal. We shall reap as we sow. There is no escape. The conditions of success are universal and unchangeable. The nation or people which shall comply with them will rise, and those which violate them will fall, and will perhaps disappear altogether. No power beneath the sky can make an ignorant, wasteful, and idle people prosperous or a licentious people happy. (page 371)

Everyone should read this.* Especially if you are white, or especially if your education either omitted or glossed over some aspects of slavery and its history in this country. Douglass is a good writer, and his story is worth a read on the basis of being a gripping story. Douglass was also important and influential, and this, his own version of his biography, is also worth reading just for understanding his life story. And of course it is full of first-person authentic historical detail about those times, and the texture of life as a slave in antebellum Maryland. But the most important thing I

got out of this book was understanding, as the core injustice of slavery, that it is a condition in which a class of people live without the protection of law. Without even the theoretical protection of law. With no legal or theoretical, let alone practical, recourse against violence and abuse, against privation, theft, torture, forcible separation from family, or any other of the harms and crimes that citizens normally take for granted, that the state ultimately has a duty to protect them from.

Douglass wrote this as a polemic at a time when slavery was not universally understood to be a moral atrocity and a per se crime against humanity. He makes a case for that understanding that is still relevant today, as our legal system even now too often fails to provide in practice the equal protection that it does (since the fourteenth amendment) in theory. *Except young children. Graphic violence and sexual situations are probably not appropriate for, e.g. fifth graders when they cover slavery and civil war in the typical 5th grade curriculum. But when the topic comes back in high school, I would think few kids would be too sheltered to read this.

The best way to describe this book is to quote from an article in a Rochester newspaper written to honor Mr. Douglass' life. In the book you will agree with its sentiments. Frederick Douglass can hardly be said to have risen to greatness on account of the opportunities which the republic offers to self-made men, and concerning which we are apt to talk with an abundance of self gratulation, It sought to fetter his mind equally with his body. For him it builded no school-house, and for him it erected no church. So far as he was concerned freedom was a mockery, and law was the instrument of tyranny. In spite of law and gospel, despite of statutes which thrall'd him and opportunities which jeered at him, he made himself by trampling on the law and breaking through the thick darkness that encompassed him. There is no sadder commentary upon American slavery than the life of Frederick Douglass. He put it under his feet and stood erect in the majesty of his intellect; but how many intellects as brilliant and as powerful as his it stamped upon and crushed, no mortal can tell until the secrets of its terrible despotism are fully revealed. Thanks to the conquering might of American freemen, such sad beginnings of such illustrious lives as that of Frederick Douglass are no longer possible; and that they are no longer possible, is largely due to him who, when his lips were unlocked, became a deliverer of his people. Not alone did his voice proclaim emancipation. Eloquent as was that voice, his life in its pathos and in its grandeur, was more eloquent still; and where shall be found, in the annals of humanity, a sweeter rendering of poetic justice than that he, who has passed through such vicissitudes of degradation and exaltation, has been permitted to behold the redemption of his race?

Frederick Douglass was born into slavery and escaped its bonds to become an eloquent force for the ending of that 'peculiar institution'. His view was optimistic, as it needed to be. Sadly many of the same battles are still being fought today. I think he would be dismayed and disheartened by the state of today's USA, and particularly by the current administration in Washington. An important historical document.

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