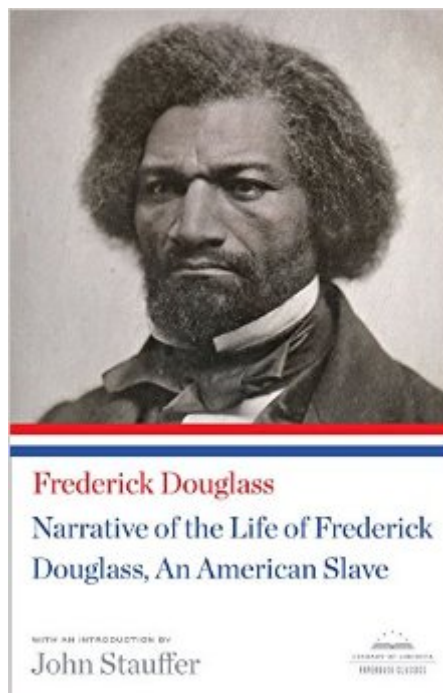


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Narrative Of The Life Of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave: (Library Of America Paperback Classic)



Synopsis

One of the greatest works of American autobiography, in a definitive Library of America text: Published seven years after his escape from slavery, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) is a powerful account of the cruelty and oppression of the Maryland plantation culture into which Frederick Douglass was born. It brought him to the forefront of the antislavery movement and drew thousands, black and white, to the cause. Written in part as a response to skeptics who refused to believe that so articulate an orator could ever have been a slave, the *Narrative* reveals the eloquence and fierce intelligence that made Douglass a brilliantly effective spokesman for abolition and equal rights, as he shapes an inspiring vision of self-realization in the face of unimaginable odds.

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.

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.

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