

Fremont Public Library Great Books Book Club

“Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave” and “My Bondage and My Freedom” by Frederick Douglass

June 22, 2024

The focus for this month's discussion will be on “Narrative,” but we look at the autobiography the author expanded and published 10 years later.

“Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave” 1845

1. Douglass opens his story by telling us that he is troubled by not knowing when he was born. Why is this fact so important to him? Why do you think it was important for slave owners to keep slaves ignorant about their birthdays and parentage?
2. Douglass mentions that slaves and slaveholders view slave songs very differently. What is Douglass' interpretation and what significance does he give the songs in his own development?
3. The book includes several turning points in Douglass' life. What do you think are the turning points? To what extent did his "take-charge" attitude create these turning points?
4. What is the purpose of the first half of the narrative: to inform, persuade, enlighten, share a personal experience, or entertain? Is the narrative subjective or objective? Who does Douglass see as his audience?
5. How does Douglass depict religion from the slaves' point of view versus the slaveholders' point of view? How does Douglass maintain his religious faith when his owners use religion to justify their treatment of slaves?
6. Douglass asserts that “Slavery proved as injurious to [his master's wife] as it did to [him]” (p. 81). What does Douglass mean by this statement?
7. Douglass presents much of his early life's narrative in a factual tone and avoids personal opinions, yet the story is full of emotion. How is this possible? Where do you find evidence of emotion?
8. Douglass's development of literacy is critical throughout the book. What is significant about his education in reading as it relates to freedom?
9. Does Douglass' life embody the American spirit, ideology, and heroic tradition of the underdog rising to become a success?
10. How are women (i.e. Douglass') relatives (mother, grandmother, cousins, etc.), other slaves, and slaveholders' wives) depicted as the narrative progresses?
11. What is the purpose of the Appendix?

“My Bondage and My Freedom” 1855

12. How would you compare the tone and style of this second autobiography to Douglass' first, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave?”
13. Did you notice that certain elements of Douglass' life are more fully fleshed out or different from “Narrative?” Why do you think Douglass changed the stories; to better represent what actually happened, to protect people who might have been further injured when the initial work was published, to make a stronger point that abolition was necessary, or something else? Which of the two narratives do you find more persuasive?

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General Questions

14. For both books, do you think the introductions by other authors added to or subtracted from Douglass' story?

Sources:

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