

Twelve Years a Slave – Enhanced Edition by Dr. Sue Eakin Based on a Lifetime Project. New Info, Images, Maps

By Solomon Northup, Dr. Sue Eakin

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NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY
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ACADEMY AWARD WINNER FOR BEST PICTURE

GOLDEN GLOBE WINNER

"I wish to thank this amazing
historian, Sue Eakin, who gave her life's work to preserving Solomon's
story"

-- Steve McQueen, 2014 Academy Awards
acceptance speech for Best Picture

In this enhanced/authenticated edition by Dr. Sue Eakin of the riveting true slave narrative that reads like a novel, you are transported to 1840's New York, Washington, D.C., and Louisiana to experience the kidnapping and twelve years of bondage of Solomon Northup, a free man of color. TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE, published in 1853, was an immediate bombshell in the national debate over slavery leading up to the Civil War. It validated Harriett Beecher Stowe's fictional account of Southern slavery in Uncle Tom's Cabin, which significantly changed public opinion in favor of abolition. Now a major motion picture by Director Steve McQueen (produced by Brad Pitt), you can sync this e-book with our Movie Tie-in Audiobook performed by Oscar and Emmy winner Louis Gossett, Jr.

Northup's harrowing true story was authenticated from decades of research by award-winning historian and journalist Dr. Sue Eakin, who rediscovered the

narrative in 1931 as an adolescent and made it her life's work. Dr. Eakin's enhanced e-book includes the original narrative plus over 100 pages of fascinating new background information based on her research and photos. A portion of proceeds from this book supports organizations fighting modern-day slavery in the form of human trafficking. To enhance your book and movie experience see our website listed in the e-book's sample pages, where you'll find instructions for downloading your free PDF Collector's Extra for your library.

SYNOPSIS: Hard working Solomon Northup, an educated free man of color in 1841, enjoys family life with his wife and three children in Saratoga, New York. He delights his community with his fiddle playing and has positive expectations of all he meets. When he is deceived by "circus promoters" to accompany them to a musical gig in the nation's capital, his joyful life takes an unimaginable turn. He awakens in shackles to find he has been drugged, kidnapped and bound for the slave block in D.C. After Solomon is shipped a thousand miles to New Orleans, he is assigned his slave name and quickly learns that the mere utterance of his true origin or rights as a freeman are certain to bring severe punishment or death. While he endures the brutal life of a slave in Louisiana's isolated Bayou Boeuf plantation country, he must learn how to play the system and plot his escape home.


For 12 years, his fine mind captures the reality of slavery in stunning detail, as we learn about the characters that populate plantation society and the intrigues of the bayou - from the collapse of a slave rebellion resulting in mass hangings due to traitorous slave Lew Cheney, to the tragic abuse of his friend Patsey because of Mrs. Epps' jealousy of her husband's sexual exploitation of his pretty young slave.

When Solomon finally finds a sympathizing friend who risks his life to secret a letter to the North, a courageous rescue attempt ensues that could either compound Solomon's suffering, or get him back to the arms of his family.

CONTEMPORARY COMMENTARY:

"I can never read his account of his days in slavery, of his independence of spirit, of his determination to be free... without believing that it would make a difference in today's world if our contemporaries knew of such a man as Solomon Northup" - Dr. John Hope Franklin, past president of the American Historical Association, best-selling author, recipient of Presidential Medal of Freedom (nation's highest civilian honor). Written to Dr. Sue Eakin.

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Editorial Review

Review

NEW YORK TIMES and USA TODAY BESTSELLER
ACADEMY AWARD WINNER FOR BEST PICTURE
GOLDEN GLOBE WINNER FOR BEST DRAMA

"I wish to thank this amazing historian, Sue Eakin, who gave her life's work to preserving Solomon's story" -
- Steve McQueen's Academy Awards acceptance speech for Best Picture

About the Author

The author of *Twelve Years a Slave*, Solomon Northup (b. 1808) was an African American carpenter who was born free but bound into slavery later in life.

Sean Crisden is a multitalented actor and an AudioFile Earphones Award-winning narrator who has recorded audiobooks in almost every genre, from science fiction to romance. He has also voiced characters in numerous video games and appeared in many commercials and films, including *The Last Airbender*.

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PENGUIN BOOKS

TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE

SOLOMON NORTHUP was a free man kidnapped into slavery in Washington, D.C., in 1841. Shortly after his escape, he published his memoirs to great acclaim and brought legal action against his abductors, though they were never prosecuted. The details of his life thereafter are unknown, but he is believed to have died in Glen Falls, New York, around 1863.

IRA BERLIN is Distinguished University Professor of History at the University of Maryland. He has written broadly on the history of the larger Atlantic world, especially on African and African American slavery and freedom. His many books include *The Making of African America*, *Slaves Without Masters*, *Generations of Captivity*, and *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*, winner of the Bancroft Prize and the Frederick Douglass Book Prize and a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR. is Alphonse Fletcher University Professor and director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research at Harvard University. He is editor in chief of the Oxford African American Studies Center and TheRoot.com, and host of *Faces of America* (PBS). He is general editor for a Penguin Classics series of African American works, including *The Portable Charles W. Chesnutt*, edited with an introduction by William L. Andrews; *God's Trombones* by James Weldon Johnson, with a foreword by Maya Angelou; *Iola Leroy* by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, with an introduction by Hollis Robbins; and *The Life of John Thompson, a Fugitive Slave* by John Thompson, edited with an introduction by William L. Andrews.

SOLOMON NORTHUP

Twelve Years a Slave

Introduction by
IRA BERLIN

General Editor
HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

Foreword by
STEVE MCQUEEN

PENGUIN BOOKS

Foreword:

A BOOK OF COURAGE

Three and a half years before finishing the production of *Twelve Years a Slave* I was lost. I knew I wanted to tell a story about slavery, but where to start?

Finally, I had the idea of a free man kidnapped into bondage, but that's all I had. I was attracted to a story that had a main character any viewer could identify with, a free man who is captured and held against his will. For months I was trying to build a story around this beginning but not having great success until my partner Bianca Stigter, a historian, suggested that I take a look at true accounts of slavery. Within days of beginning our research Bianca had unearthed *Twelve Years a Slave*.

"I think I got it," she said. If ever there was an understatement. The book blew both our minds: the epic range, the details, the adventure, the horror, and the humanity. The book read like a film script, ready to be shot. I could not believe that I had never heard of this book. It felt as important as Anne Frank's diary, only published nearly a hundred years before.

I was not alone in being unfamiliar with the book. Of all the people I spoke to not one person knew about *Twelve Years a Slave* or about Solomon Northup. This was astonishing! An important tale told with so much heart and beauty needed to be more widely recognized.

I hope my film can play a part in drawing attention to this important book of courage.

Solomon's bravery and life deserve nothing less.

What Is an
African American Classic?

I have long nurtured a deep and abiding affection for the Penguin Classics, at least since I was an undergraduate at Yale. I used to imagine that my attraction for these books—grouped together, as a set, in some independent bookstores when I was a student, and perhaps even in some today—stemmed from the fact that my first-grade classmates, for some reason that I can't recall, were required to dress as penguins in our annual all-school pageant, and perform a collective side-to-side motion that our misguided teacher thought she could choreograph into something meant to pass for a "dance." Piedmont, West Virginia, in 1956, was a very long way from Penguin Nation, wherever that was supposed to be! But penguins we were determined to be, and we did our level best to avoid wounding each other with our orange-colored cardboard beaks while

stomping out of rhythm in our matching orange, veined webbed feet. The whole scene was madness, one never to be repeated at the Davis Free School. But I never stopped loving penguins. And I have never stopped loving the very audacity of the idea of the Penguin Classics, an affordable, accessible library of the most important and compelling texts in the history of civilization, their black-and-white spines and covers and uniform type giving each text a comfortable, familiar feel, as if we have encountered it, or its cousins, before. I think of the Penguin Classics as the very best and most compelling in human thought, an Alexandrian library in paperback, enclosed in black and white.

I still gravitate to the Penguin Classics when killing time in an airport bookstore, deferring the slow torture of the security lines. Sometimes I even purchase two or three, fantasizing that I can speed-read one of the shorter titles, then make a dent in the longer one, vainly attempting to fill the holes in the liberal arts education that our degress suggest we have, over the course of a plane ride! Mark Twain once quipped that a classic is “something that everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read,” and perhaps that applies to my airport purchasing habits. For my generation, these titles in the Penguin Classics form the canon—the canon of the texts that a truly well-educated person should have read, and read carefully and closely, at least once. For years I rued the absence of texts by black authors in this series, and longed to be able to make even a small contribution to the diversification of this astonishingly universal list. I watched with great pleasure as titles by African American and African authors began to appear, some two dozen over the past several years. So when Elda Rotor approached me about editing a series of African American classics and collections for Penguin’s Portable Series, I eagerly accepted.

Thinking about the titles appropriate for inclusion in these series led me, inevitably, to think about what, for me, constitutes a “classic.” And thinking about this led me, in turn, to the wealth of reflections on what defines a work of literature or philosophy somehow speaking to the human condition beyond time and place, a work somehow endlessly compelling, generation upon generation, a work whose author we don’t have to look like to identify with, to feel at one with, as we find ourselves transported through the magic of a textual time machine; a work that refracts the image of ourselves that we project onto it, regardless of our ethnicity, our gender, our time, our place. This is what centuries of scholars and writers have meant when they use the word “classic,” and—despite all that we know about the complex intersubjectivity of the production of meaning in the wondrous exchange between a reader and a text—it remains true that classic texts, even in the most conventional, conservative sense of the word “classic,” do exist, and these books will continue to be read long after the generation the text reflects and defines, the generation of readers contemporary with the text’s author, is dead and gone. Classic texts speak from their authors’ graves, in their names, in their voices. As Italo Calvino once remarked, “A classic is a book that has never finished saying what it has to say.”

Faulkner put this idea in an interesting way: “The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means, and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.” That, I am certain, must be the desire of every writer. But what about the reader? What makes a book a classic to a reader? Here, perhaps, Hemingway said it best: “All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you, and afterwards it belongs to you, the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was.”

I have been reading black literature since I was fifteen, yanked into the dark discursive universe by an Episcopal priest at a church camp near my home in West Virginia in August of 1965, during the terrifying days of the Watts Riots in Los Angeles. Eventually, by fits and starts, studying the literature written by black authors became my avocation; ultimately, it has become my vocation. And, in my own way, I have tried to be an evangelist for it, to a readership larger than my own people, people who, as it were, look like these texts. Here, I am reminded of something W. S. Merwin said about the books he most loved: “Perhaps a classic is a work that one imagines should be common knowledge, but more and more often isn’t.” I would

say, of African and African American literature, that perhaps classic works by black writers are works that one imagines should be common knowledge among the broadest possible readership but that less and less are, as the teaching of reading to understand how words can create the worlds into which books can transport us yields to classroom instruction geared toward passing a state-authorized, standardized exam. All literary texts suffer from this wrongheaded approach to teaching, mind you; but it especially affects texts by people of color, and texts by women—texts still struggling, despite enormous gains over the last twenty years, to gain a solid foothold in anthologies and syllabi. For every anthology, every syllabus, every publishing series such as the Penguin Classics constitutes a distinct “canon,” an implicit definition of all that is essential for a truly educated person to read.

James Baldwin, who has pride of place in my personal canon of African American authors since it was one of his books that that Episcopal priest gave me to read in that dreadful summer of 1965, argued that “the responsibility of a writer is to excavate the experience of the people who produced him.” But surely Baldwin would have agreed with E. M. Forster that the books that we remember, the books that have truly influenced us, are those that “have gone a little further down our particular path than we have yet ourselves.” Excavating the known is a worthy goal of the writer as cultural archaeologist; yet, at the same time, so is unveiling the unknown, the unarticulated yet shared experience of the colorless things that make us human: “something we have always known (or thought we knew),” as Calvino puts it, “but without knowing that this author said it first.” We might think of the difference between Forster and Baldwin, on the one hand, and Calvino, on the other, as the difference between an author representing what has happened (Forster, Baldwin) in the history of a people whose stories, whose very history itself, has long been suppressed, and what could have happened (Calvino) in the atemporal realm of art. This is an important distinction when thinking about the nature of an African American classic—rather, when thinking about the nature of the texts that comprise the African American literary tradition or, for that matter, the texts in any underread tradition.

One of James Baldwin’s most memorable essays, a subtle meditation on sexual preference, race, and gender, is entitled “Here Be Dragons.” So much of traditional African American literature, even fiction and poetry—ostensibly at least once removed from direct statement—was meant to deal a fatal blow to the dragon of racism. For black writers since the eighteenth-century beginnings of the tradition, literature has been one more weapon—a very important weapon, mind you, but still one weapon among many—in the arsenal black people have drawn upon to fight against antiblack racism and for their equal rights before the law. Ted Joans, the black surrealist poet, called this sort of literature from the sixties’ Black Arts movement “hand grenade poems.” Of what possible use are the niceties of figuration when one must slay a dragon? I can hear you say give me the blunt weapon anytime! Problem is, it is more difficult than some writers seem to think to slay a dragon with a poem or a novel. Social problems persist; literature too tied to addressing those social problems tends to enter the historical archives, leaving the realm of the literary. Let me state bluntly what should be obvious: writers are read for how they write, not what they write about.

Frederick Douglass—for this generation of readers one of the most widely read writers—reflected on this matter even in the midst of one of his most fiery speeches addressing the ironies of the sons and daughters of slaves celebrating the Fourth of July while slavery continued unabated. In his now-classic essay “What Is to the Slave the Fourth of July” (1852), Douglass argued that an immediate, almost transparent form of discourse was demanded of black writers by the heated temper of the times, a discourse with an immediate end in mind: “At a time like this, scorching irony, not convincing argument, is needed. . . . a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke. For it is not light that is needed, but fire; it is not the gentle shower, but thunder. We need the storm, the whirlwind, and the earthquake.” Above all else, Douglass concludes, the rhetoric of the literature created by African Americans must, of necessity, be a purposeful rhetoric, its ends targeted at attacking the evils that afflict black people: “The feeling of the nation must be quickened; the conscience of the nation must be roused; the propriety of the nation must be startled; the hypocrisy of the nation must be exposed; and its crimes against God and man must be

proclaimed and denounced.” And perhaps this was so; nevertheless, we read Douglass’s writings today in literature classes not so much for their content but to understand, and marvel at, his sublime mastery of words, words—to paraphrase Calvino—that never finish saying what it is they have to say, not because of their “message,” but because of the language in which that message is inextricably enfolded.

There are as many ways to define a classic in the African American tradition as there are in any other tradition, and these ways are legion. So many essays have been published entitled “What Is a Classic?” that they could fill several large anthologies. And while no one can say explicitly why generations of readers return to read certain texts, just about everyone can agree that making a best-seller list in one’s lifetime is most certainly not an index of fame or influence over time; the longevity of one’s readership—of books about which one says, “I am rereading,” as Calvino puts it—on the other hand, most certainly is. So, the size of one’s readership (through library use, Internet access, and sales) cumulatively is an interesting factor to consider; and because of series such as the Penguin Classics, we can gain a sense, for our purposes, of those texts written by authors in previous generations that have sustained sales—mostly for classroom use—long after their authors were dead.

There can be little doubt that *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), by W. E. B. Du Bois, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), by Zora Neale Hurston, are the three most classic of the black classics—again, as measured by consumption—while Langston Hughes’s poetry, though not purchased as books in these large numbers, is accessed through the Internet as frequently as that of any other American poet, and indeed profoundly more so than most. Within Penguin’s Portable Series list, the most popular individual titles, excluding Douglass’s first slave narrative and Du Bois’s *Souls*, are:

Up from Slavery (1903), Booker T. Washington

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man (1912), James Weldon Johnson

God’s Trombones (1926), James Weldon Johnson

Passing (1929), Nella Larsen

The Marrow of Tradition (1898), Charles W. Chesnutt

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861), Harriet Jacobs

The Interesting Narrative (1789), Olaudah Equiano

The House Behind the Cedars (1900), Charles W. Chesnutt

My Bondage and My Freedom (1855), Frederick Douglass

Quicksand (1928), Nella Larsen

These titles form a canon of classics of African American literature, judged by classroom readership. If we add Jean Toomer’s novel *Cane* (1922), arguably the first work of African American modernism, along with Douglass’s first narrative, Du Bois’s *The Souls*, and Hurston’s *Their Eyes*, we would most certainly have included many of the touchstones of black literature published before 1940, when Richard Wright published *Native Son*.

Every teacher’s syllabus constitutes a canon of sorts, and I teach these texts and a few others as the classics of the black canon. Why these particular texts? I can think of two reasons: First, these texts signify or riff

upon each other, repeating, borrowing, and extending metaphors book to book, generation to generation. To take just a few examples, Equiano’s eighteenth-century use of the trope of the talking book (an image found, remarkably, in five slave narratives published between 1770 and 1811) becomes, with Frederick Douglass, the representation of the quest for freedom as, necessarily, the quest for literacy, for a freedom larger than physical manumission; we might think of this as the representation of metaphysical manumission, of freedom and literacy—the literacy of great literature—inextricably intertwined. Douglass transformed the metaphor of the talking book into the trope of chiasmus, a repetition with a stinging reversal: “You have seen how a man becomes a slave, you will see how a slave becomes a man.” Du Bois, with Douglass very much on his mind, transmuted chiasmus a half century later into the metaphor of duality or double consciousness, a necessary condition of living one’s life, as he memorably put it, behind a “veil.”

Du Bois’s metaphor has a powerful legacy in twentieth-century black fiction: James Weldon Johnson, in *Ex-Coloured Man*, literalizes the trope of double consciousness by depicting as his protagonist a man who, at will, can occupy two distinct racial spaces, one black, one white, and who moves seamlessly, if ruefully, between them; Toomer’s *Cane* takes Du Bois’s metaphor of duality for the inevitably split consciousness that every Negro must feel living in a country in which her or his status as a citizen is liminal at best, or has been erased at worst, and makes of this the metaphor for the human condition itself under modernity, a tellingly bold rhetorical gesture—one designed to make the Negro the metaphor of the human condition. And Hurston, in *Their Eyes*, extends Toomer’s revision even further, depicting a character who can only gain her voice once she can name this condition of duality or double consciousness and then glide gracefully and lyrically between her two selves, an “inside” self and an “outside” one.

More recently, Alice Walker, in *The Color Purple*, signifies upon two aspects of the narrative strategy of *Their Eyes*: first, she revisits the theme of a young black woman finding her voice, depicting a protagonist who writes herself into being through letters addressed to God and to her sister, Nettie—letters that grow ever more sophisticated in their syntax and grammar and imagery as she comes to consciousness before our very eyes, letter to letter; and second, Walker riffs on Hurston’s use of a vernacular-inflected free indirect discourse to show that black English has the capacity to serve as the medium for narrating a novel through the black dialect that forms a most pliable and expansive language in Celie’s letters. Ralph Ellison makes Du Bois’s metaphor of the veil a trope of blindness and life underground for his protagonist in *Invisible Man*, a protagonist who, as he types the story of his life from a hole underground, writes himself into being in the first person (in contradistinction to Richard Wright’s protagonist, Bigger Thomas, whose reactive tale of fear and flight is told in the third person). Walker’s novel also riffs on Ellison’s claim for the revolutionary possibilities of writing the self into being, whereas Hurston’s protagonist, Janie, speaks herself into being. Ellison himself signified multiply upon Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, from the title to the use of the first-person bildungsroman to chart the coming to consciousness of a sensitive protagonist moving from blindness and an inability to do little more than react to his environment, to the insight gained by wresting control of his identity from social forces and strong individuals that would circumscribe and confine his life choices. Toni Morrison, master supernaturalist and perhaps the greatest black novelist of all, trumps Ellison’s trope of blindness by returning over and over to the possibilities and limits of insight within worlds confined or circumscribed not by supraforces (à la Wright) but by the confines of the imagination and the ironies of individual and family history, signifying upon Faulkner, Woolf, and Márquez in the process. And Ishmael Reed, the father of black postmodernism and what we might think of as the hip-hop novel, the tradition’s master paro-dist, signifies upon everybody and everything in the black literary tradition, from the slave narratives to the Harlem Renaissance to black nationalism and feminism.

This sort of literary signifying is what makes a literary tradition, well, a “tradition,” rather than a simple list of books whose authors happen to have been born in the same country, share the same gender, or would be identified by their peers as belonging to this ethnic group or that. What makes these books special—“classic”—however, is something else. Each text has the uncanny capacity to take the seemingly

mundane details of the day-to-day African American experience of its time and transmute those details and the characters' actions into something that transcends its ostensible subject's time and place, its specificity. These texts reveal the human universal through the African American particular: all true art, all classics, do this; this is what "art" is, a revelation of that which makes each of us sublimely human, rendered in the minute details of the actions and thoughts and feelings of a compelling character embedded in a time and place. But as soon as we find ourselves turning to a text for its anthropological or socio-logical data, we have left the realm of art; we have reduced the complexity of fiction or poetry to an essay, and this is not what imaginative literature is for. Richard Wright, at his best, did this, as did his signifying disciple Ralph Ellison; Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday achieved this effect in music; Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden achieved it in the visual arts. And this is what Wole Soyinka does in his tragedies, what Toni Morrison does in her novels, what Derek Walcott does in his poetry. And while it is risky to name one's contemporaries in a list such as this, I think that Rita Dove and Jamaica Kincaid achieve this effect as well, as do Colson Whitehead and Edwidge Danticat, in a younger generation. (There are other writers whom I would include in this group had I the space.) By delving ever so deeply into the particularity of the African and African American experience, these authors manage, somehow, to come out the other side, making the race or the gender of their characters almost translucent, less important than the fact that they stand as aspects of ourselves beyond race or gender or time or place, precisely in the same magical way that Hamlet never remains for long stuck as a prince in a court in Denmark.

Each classic black text reveals to us, uncannily, subtly, how the Black Experience is inscribed, inextricably and indelibly, in the human experience, and how the human experience takes one of its myriad forms in blackface, as it were. Together, such texts also demonstrate, implicitly, that African American culture is one of the world's truly great and eternal cultures, as noble and as resplendent as any. And it is to publish such texts, written by African and African American authors, that Penguin has created this new series, which I have the pleasure of editing.

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

Introduction

SOLOMON NORTHUP:
A LIFE AND A MESSAGE

For sheer drama, few accounts of slavery match Solomon Northup's tale of abduction from freedom and forcible enslavement.¹ Lured to Washington in 1841 from his home in upstate New York with the promise of easy employment, fast money, and great adventure, Northup was drugged and beaten and sold into slavery within sight of the nation's capitol. He then joined the mass of black humanity—some one million in number—that was forcibly transported south to reconstruct the plantation economy on new ground, as the center of American slavery shifted from the production of tobacco and rice in the seaboard states to that of cotton and sugar in the interior. In Louisiana, Northup labored as a slave for twelve years until, in 1853, a dramatic rescue returned him to freedom and his family in the North.

Frederick Douglass, no stranger to the brutal realities of slavery, confirmed the power of Northup's narrative. "Think of it," Douglass wrote. "For thirty years a man with all a man's hopes, fears, and aspirations—with a wife and children to call him by endearing names of husband and father—with a home, humble it may be, but still a home...then for twelve years a thing, a chattel personal, classed with mules and horses...It chills the blood."²

Blood is everywhere in *Twelve Years a Slave*. Northup makes clear that the slave owner's authority could be maintained only by terrorizing black people with relentless physical and psychological violence. Whips,

paddles, shackles, and stocks make repeat appearances, especially during the process of reducing the newly kidnapped free man to a slave. Stripped of his clothing, nailed to the floor, Northup endures blow after blow to his naked body, with his enslavers pausing only to ask if their prisoner accepts his new status. When Northup demurs, the beatings are “renewed, faster and more energetically, if possible, than before.”³ When at last the paddle breaks, his enslaver picks up a rope and continues the assault, until Northup is reduced to silence by the threat that if he ever suggests he has been kidnapped from freedom, he will be a dead man.

Northup is given a new name, Platt, and remade into a slave. The whip that introduces Northup to slavery becomes an inescapable part of his life. “It was rarely that a day passed by without one or more whippings,” Northup reports. “It is the literal, unvarnished truth, that the crack of the lash, and the shrieking of the slaves, can be heard from dark till bed time....”⁴

Northup and his amanuensis, David Wilson—a lawyer, legislator, school administrator, and minor literary figure from a town in New York’s Hudson Valley bordering on Northup’s—understood that slaveholders and their allies would attempt to discredit *Twelve Years a Slave* as a fabrication. To counter the doubters, Northup—unlike Frederick Douglass or other narrators of slave life who preferred generalities and employed pseudonyms—loaded his account with specifics, citing names, places, and dates that could be corroborated. *Twelve Years a Slave*, Northup declared, would “present a full and truthful statement of all the principal events in the history of my life, and to portray the institution of Slavery as I have seen and known it.”⁵ Contemporary journalists and later historians studied the evidence and confirmed the veracity of Northup’s narrative, often down to the smallest detail.

It is these details that are the great strength of *Twelve Years a Slave*. Northup tells of the slaves’ food and how they ate it: “The majority of slaves have no knife, much less a fork. They cut their bacon with the axe at the woodpile. The corn meal is mixed with a little water, placed in the fire, and baked. When it is ‘done brown,’ the ashes are scraped off, and being placed upon a chip, which answers for a table, the tenant of the slave hut is ready to sit down upon the ground to supper.” The rudimentary nature of slave housing matched that of the slaves’ diet: “The cabin is constructed of logs, without floor or window. The latter is altogether unnecessary, the crevices between the logs admitting sufficient light. In stormy weather the rain drives through them, rendering it comfortless and extremely disagreeable. The rude door hangs on great wooden hinges.” And so it goes, down to the mattress-less bed frames, the blank walls, and the glassless windows. Furniture, or rather lack of such, followed the same pattern: Slaves “reclined year after year [upon] a plank twelve inches wide and ten feet long [with a] pillow [that] was a stick of wood. The bedding was a coarse blanket, and not a rag or shred beside. Moss might be used, were it not that it directly breeds a swarm of fleas.”⁶

In its depth and breadth, *Twelve Years a Slave* provides an extraordinarily complete view of slavery in the plantation South in the years prior to the Civil War. But while Northup hews close to the facts, his account is no innocent chronicle. Northup writes with purpose. Although there is no evidence he was actively involved in the abolitionist movement prior to his abduction, he—like most Northern free blacks—despised slavery and how it degraded black people, free as well as slave. Enslavement stoked Northup’s generalized hatred of the institution and activated his determination to strike a blow against it. Almost immediately after he regained his freedom, Northup—doubtless encouraged by the opponents of slavery—decided to make his story known, and within two years of his return, his book was in print.

On page after page, Northup tells of the brutality of chattel bondage, the endless and often senseless beatings, the frequent, soul-crushing humiliations, the casual and callous destruction of family life—themes sure to raise the ire of white Northerners, even those who had little or no interest in the movement against slavery. He is especially attentive to the dangers slave women faced and to the seemingly endless sexual abuse they endured at the hands of white men of all classes. True to the abolitionist indictment of slavery, he

demonstrates how slavery subverted the work ethic and undermined the values of self-improvement that white Northerners believed central to the creation of the good society. *Twelve Years a Slave* is thus a window into both the institution of slavery and the abolitionist indictment of it.

Like the abolitionists, Northup emphasizes the enormous difference between black life in freedom and in slavery. Slaveholders and their apologists liked to elide the two, and indeed characterized the condition of Southern slaves as superior. To be sure, Northup hardly lived a life of ease as a free man. He appreciated how Northern racism confined black people to “those more menial positions, which seem to be especially allotted to the children of Africa.”⁷ He and his wife scrambled to make a living, often simultaneously working at two or three jobs, to support their family. It was Northup’s desire to earn a few extra dollars that allowed his kidnappers to lure him into their diabolical trap.

But Northup took enormous pride in his standing as a free man and in his free ancestry. He gloried in his father’s reputation for “industry and integrity,” his rise into the property-holding class, and the political rights that accompanied property ownership. He made much of his education, the time “employed over my books,” and his musical virtuosity.⁸ While acknowledging the limits of freedom in the North, he made certain his readers would not confuse the life of a Northern free black with that of a Southern slave.

But *Twelve Years a Slave* is about Southern slavery, not Northern freedom, and Northup shines a harsh light on slavery’s *raison d’être*: work. There are few better accounts of the slaves’ work in the plantation South than Northup’s. Following the work process from the moment a cottonseed is dropped in the ground to the backbreaking work of pulling the white tufts from the boll, Northup gives a sense of how the demands of cotton set the hours slaves worked, the intensity of their labor, and seasonal patterns that tied them to the field. Perhaps even more important, he reveals the various techniques slaves employed to protect themselves against the killing pace set by their owners. And he traces cane sugar from field to factory, again explaining how the demands of making sugar not only left slaves exhausted at day’s end but also informed the slaves’ understanding of the world in which they had been incarcerated. He understands that work—constant and unrelenting—is the terrain where the deadly struggle between slaves and their owners plays out most fully and where the slaves’ sense of self emerges.

Plantation hands have been depicted as cogs in a great machine, marching mindlessly up and down the rows of cotton or through the fields of cane, driven by an overseer’s lash. Northup reveals that even on the great plantations, slaves were often jacks-of-all-trades, laboring at a multitude of tasks: caring for stock, building fences, chopping wood, delivering messages, among dozens of other odd jobs. In the interstices of these many tasks, slaves created their own economy and their own life.

“It is the custom in Louisiana, as I presume it is in other slave States,” Northup notes, “to allow the slave to retain whatever compensation he may obtain for services performed on Sundays.” So-called Sunday money, or what historians have labeled the slaves’ economy, was only part of an elaborate set of arrangements that enabled enslaved men and women to augment the meager allowance that slave owners doled out. With it, slaves purchased tableware, extra clothes, tobacco, liquor, and occasionally “gaudy ribbons...to deck their hair in the merry season of the holidays,” requests that, if made to their owners, “would be answered with a kick, or laughed at as a joke.” With his Sunday money, Northup purchased a violin, without which, he admits, “I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage.” Northup’s account of Sunday money—including his own rise to the “wealthiest ‘nigger’ on Bayou Bœuf”—illustrates how the slaves’ economy was the material basis for an independent slave culture.⁹

Work in the fields and the workshops may have ended at sunset, but work itself continued after dusk and beyond. Having completed a day’s work, each slave, Northup recounts, “must then attend to his respective chores. One feeds the mules, another the swine—another cuts the wood, and so forth; besides, the packing is

all done by candle light. Finally, at a late hour, they reach the quarters, sleepy and overcome with the long day's toil. Then a fire must be kindled in the cabin, the corn ground in the small hand-mill, and supper, and dinner for the next day in the field, prepared."¹⁰ There would be no rest.

The pace and unrelenting nature of work broke many slaves psychologically as well as physically. Even those who survived lived in fear's shadow. It followed them to sleep and greeted them in the morning. The slave "fears he will be caught lagging through the day; he fears to approach the gin-house with his basket-load of cotton at night; he fears, when he lies down, that he will oversleep...."¹¹ Few accounts give a better sense of the terror that even the most resilient slave faced every day.

Northup was a particularly astute student of the society into which he had been forcibly inserted. Like other slaves, he knew not merely the geography and topography of the plantation and its environs—although Northup knew them well enough to sketch several maps for his book, giving it added authenticity—but also the social terrain that extended from the slave quarter to the Big House. Such knowledge was a prerequisite for survival. Slaves distinguished between successful and incompetent slave owners, for bankrupt owners would eventually send their slaves to the uncertainty of the auction block. If it was important for slaves to know their owner's bank balance, it may have been even more important to know their character—to be able to tell the mean drunkards from the harmless ones, the benevolent Christians from the vengeful ones, and those who ruled with the carrot from those who relied on the stick.

An understanding of the owners' world did not stop at the master himself but extended to those who acted on the master's behalf: stewards, managers, and overseers. None of these, however, was more important than the mistress of the plantation, who could play a role in a slave's life equally important as that of the owner. While her authority centered in the Big House, it sometimes extended to the fields. Often plantation mistresses' relations with slaves—particularly with enslaved women—were complicated by their husbands' dalliances in the quarter, where the other "mistress" resided. Northup witnessed the cruel irony of slave women who had been raped by their owner receiving yet another round of abuse from the master's wife.

Ever alive to the nuances of domination, Northup is especially good at revealing the everyday slights designed to demean slaves and cow them into submission by denying their manhood or womanhood. He reports how slaves learned to lower their eyes, take off their hats, and bare their heads in front of a white man—the "down-cast eyes and uncovered head—in the attitude and language of a slave"—and to step back on the sidewalk to allow a white woman to pass. He tells of how slave men were "boys" and slave women "girls," diminutives "applied indiscriminately to slaves even though they may have passed the number of three score years and ten."¹²

But the slaves had weapons of their own, and *Twelve Years a Slave* explicates the various methods slaves employed to deny masters the complete domination they so desired. Again, Northup links resistance to the very essence of slavery: work. If the demands of work drove some slaves to the edge, they also buffered the worst aspects of the slave regime. Northup emphasizes how slaves found satisfaction and pride in their daily accomplishments, even knowing they gained few benefits from the labor that made their owners rich. Celebrating their own skills and knowledge, slaves ridiculed the incompetence of their owners and of others who lorded over them. Speaking for his fellow slaves, Northup condemns the plantation not only as an exemplar of cruelty but also as a model of inefficiency. By relying on the lash rather than on positive incentives, the plantation regime could never match the productivity and profitability of free labor. Northup has nothing but contempt for his owners' work ethic and their ignorance of what presumably was their main business.

Northup liked nothing better than winning the war of wits with his owners. His diverse experience as a farmer, rafter, railroad man, and musician armed him against the torrent of mean-spirited slights that owners

poured down on slaves. Few slaves wielded their workplace skills better. His abilities gained for him the respect of his fellow slaves and even, however grudgingly, of his owners. They also allowed him to advance in the plantation hierarchy and secured him, as he says with not a little sarcasm, the “distinguished honor” of carrying a driver’s whip.¹³

As Northup well understood, his elevation was a mixed blessing. Caught between his fellow slaves and his owner, he was placed in an uncomfortable and even dangerous position. He notes that when some slaves assumed that position, they gloried in their privileged rank. To win their owner’s approval and perhaps additional privileges, they did their owner’s bidding, at times with a maniacal enthusiasm. For Northup, there is never any doubt where his loyalty stands. Forced to discipline his fellow slaves, he learns “to handle the whip with marvelous dexterity and precision, throwing the lash within a hair’s breadth of the back, the ear, the nose, without, however, touching either of them.” In this carefully choreographed collaboration, the purported victim of Northup’s whip “would squirm and screech as if in agony, although not one of them had in fact been...grazed.”¹⁴

Northup’s perch in the plantation hierarchy gave him a full view of the plantation as both an economic enterprise and a community. He was appalled by the abuse he and his fellow slaves endured, and also by the tangled, miserable society it created. Slavery brutalized “the humane and finer feelings” among the best of men and women and spurred even greater excesses among the worst.¹⁵

Yet Northup avoids stereotyping all slave masters as unmitigated brutes, distinguishing the “kind, noble, candid, Christian” William Ford—Northup’s first owner—from the “malignant tyrant” John Tibeats and the sadistic Edwin Epps.¹⁶ Such distinctions may add credibility to *Twelve Years a Slave*, but they are not merely a literary device: Northup’s depictions of his fellow slaves are equally textured. Slaves are sensible or shallow, generous or selfish, vain or self-effacing, honest or deceitful. Some are brave, others cowardly. These attributes express themselves in a variety of ways. For Northup, there is no single slave experience, and he tells his fellow slaves’ stories with compassion and insight, never allowing their shared condition or his deep sympathy to affect his judgment. The result is a complex narrative. Each of his fellow slaves has a different story to tell, and Northup uses their diverse experiences to illustrate the range of slavery’s effects on black people. He understands the essential truth that while slavery may define black people, it is not who they are.

For all its insights into the nature of slave society in the plantation South, *Twelve Years a Slave* is ultimately Northup’s story: the autobiography of a man whose life was ripped from him and who struggled valiantly to get it back. During his years as a slave, Northup continued to search for a way to regain his freedom. “There was not a day,” Northup recalls, “throughout the ten years I belonged to Epps that I did not consult with myself upon the prospect of escape.”¹⁷ Several times he believed he had found a route to freedom, but events conspired to frustrate each one, and on at least one occasion his failure nearly had catastrophic consequences. If Frederick Douglass demonstrated how one could board a train in Baltimore as a slave and disembark in Philadelphia as a free man, and Henry “Box” Brown showed how one could mail himself from slavery in Richmond to freedom in the North, Northup reveals the near impossibility of successful flight from the Southern interior. The seeming insuperability of escape wore on him. If the hope of freedom never left his mind, the grim possibility he would spend the rest of his days as a slave loomed ever larger as his years in bondage accumulated.

After more than a decade of enslavement, another opportunity arose. Northup’s owner hired Samuel Bass, a Canadian-born itinerant carpenter, to renovate the main plantation house, and Northup was assigned to assist him. Bass was unorthodox in his opinions and shared them freely with anyone who would listen, welcoming argument seemingly for argument’s sake. Perhaps because of his Canadian birth, itinerant status, and love of disputation, Bass was tolerated in a society that rarely brooked heterodoxy. When Northup overheard Bass

openly propounding his opposition to slavery, he took a chance. Ever so cautiously, he dropped clues to his life in freedom, mentioning his travels in Canada and other places a Southern slave could not possibly visit. As Bass's curiosity grew, Northup told his story in full. At first Bass was skeptical, but Northup's evidence was convincing. Outraged by the injustice, Bass agreed to help regain Northup's freedom by mailing a series of letters to Northup's former employers and patrons in the North. Eventually, although hardly directly, the letters reached their intended destinations, setting in motion events that would at last secure Northup his liberty.

In January 1853, Northup was, once again, a free man. He celebrated with his family and friends, some of whom he did not even know he had. His experience in slavery became national news, as abolitionists publicized it widely. They encouraged him to write an account of his years in bondage. Promoted by the likes of Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Northup's book quickly became something of a best seller, going through a half dozen printings. The sales allowed Northup and his family to enjoy a modest prosperity, and, for a short time, Northup became a leading face of the movement against slavery. He brought his kidnappers to trial, but the court hearings became twisted in delays, and they wriggled free.

Northup's moment of fame faded over time, but *Twelve Years a Slave* became a classic account of slavery written from the inside. In 1984, the great photographer Gordon Parks made the movie *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century another movie of Northup's life is in the offing. The city of Saratoga, New York, around which Northup spent much of his life in freedom, celebrates Solomon Northup Day every year on the third Saturday in July, and *Twelve Years a Slave* is regularly assigned in classes in American history. More than a century and a half after its publication, it continues to be read as an essential source for understanding the institution of chattel bondage and its devastating effects on the men and women who lived it.

IRA BERLIN

1. The text reprinted here is the original and authoritative 1853 edition published by Derby and Miller in Auburn, New York.
2. *Frederick Douglass's Newspaper*, September 9, 1853.
3. Northup, 23. (This and other references to Northup correspond to the page numbers in this edition.)
4. Northup, 117.
5. Northup, 27.
6. Northup, 111.
7. Northup, 6.
8. Northup, 7.
9. Northup, 127–28, 143.
10. Northup, 110.
11. Northup, 112.
12. Northup, 119, 99.

13. Northup, 149.

14. Northup, 149.

15. Northup, 135.

16. Northup, 57, 77.

17. Northup, 159.

Suggestions for Further Reading

A good overview of African American slavery in the United States can be found in Ira Berlin's *Generations of Captivity: A History of African-American Slaves* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003).

Joe Gray Taylor's *Negro Slavery in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana Historical Association, 1963) is woefully dated, but good studies of portions of the history of African American bondage in Louisiana can be found in Adam Rothman's *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) and Richard Follett's *The Sugar Masters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820–1860* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).

Two excellent studies of black life in the North are Leon F. Litwack's *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790–1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) and James O. and Lois E. Horton's *Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest Among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). More specifically, the experience of free blacks in New York is chronicled by Graham R. Hodges in *Root and Branch: African Americans in New York and East Jersey, 1613–1863* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

Kidnapping, which was an omnipresent danger to black people in freedom, is addressed in Carol Wilson's *Freedom at Risk: The Kidnapping of Free Blacks in America, 1780–1865* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1994).

Northup was just one of hundreds of escaped slaves who told their stories, a genre discussed and analyzed in Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *The Slave's Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

Little has been directly written on Northup, but see Sam Worley, "Solomon Northup and the Sly Philosophy of the Slave Pen," *Callaloo* 20, (1997): 243–59.

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