

NOTES FROM: *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom*, by David W. Blight

SUMMARY: This is *such* a rewarding book, and I'm glad I powered through, even though it's long and fairly dry in some places. It's the story of Frederick Douglass, a former slave and one of the greatest American heroes ever to have lived – in the 19th century, or pretty much any *other* time.

His future was shaped by books, too. Douglass grew up never knowing his father – and being separated, tragically, from his mother – and his prospects didn't look good. As they didn't for many people of color in racist America at that time. *No one* was going to go out of their way to teach Fred to read, *so he did it himself*. He taught himself to read, and he did so to such a great extent that he became one of the best American writers *ever*, and he went on to live a *sensationally* productive and powerful life.

I'm not *so* interested in the history of slavery, but Frederick Douglass is *such* an inspiration to me – and just a really cool, super strong dude – that I absolutely *had* to read this, and there's *so much* great stuff in here. His life's story is wild, the book itself is wonderfully well-written, and if you're into American history at all, you may as well start here!

“For all who wish to escape from outward or inward captivity, they would do well to feel the pulses of this life, and to read the words of this voice. And then go act in the world.”

MK: Douglass's mother was sent to work a different farm 12 miles away, but would sometimes walk the distance at night to see her children and then walk back to return before work the next morning.

“Freedom had aroused my soul to eternal wakefulness. Freedom now appeared, to disappear no more forever. It was heard in every sound, and seen in every thing. It was ever present to torment me with a sense of my wretched condition. I saw nothing without seeing it, I heard nothing without hearing it, and felt nothing without feeling it. It looked from every star, it smiled in every calm, breathed in every wind, and moved in every storm.”

“Douglass ‘spoke with great power,’ wrote one witness. ‘Flinty hearts were pierced, and cold ones melted by his eloquence. Our best pleaders for the slave held their breath for fear of interrupting him.’”

“Law is for the protection, not for the destruction of rights.”

Abraham Heschel: “Prophets must have been shattered by some cataclysmic experience in order to be able to shatter others.”

“I would unite with anybody to do right, and with nobody to do wrong.”

Lord Byron: “They who would be free, themselves must strike the blow.”

“Power concedes nothing without a demand.”

“In no uncertain terms Douglass concluded, ‘I deny that the black man’s degradation is essential to the white man’s elevation.’ To believe otherwise, was to ‘pay a sorry compliment to the white race.’”

“Slavery had denied him a father; he would never let that happen to his children.”

“Death is the common lot of all – and the strongest of us will soon be called away. It is well! Death is a friend, not an enemy.”

“The nearly eighty-year old Joseph Graham, former sheriff of Talbot County and the man who had locked Douglass in that jail so long ago, attended the lecture in the courthouse, welcoming the former inmate and shaking his hand.”

“My joys have far exceeded my sorrows and my friends have brought me far more than my enemies have taken from me.”

“Unconscious for the final ten days, Anna Murray Douglass, a freeborn American black woman who grew up on the east bank of the Tuckahoe River in Denton, Caroline County, Maryland, the gardener, baker, cook, household manager, keeper of financial balances, shoe binder, seamstress, zealous if quiet participant in women’s antislavery fairs, protector and provider for fugitive slaves, and the unsung heroine who forged the domestic worlds of the great man she married, died on the morning of August 4, 1882. She was either sixty-eight or sixty-nine years old.”

“God thought to give the sweetest thing
In his almighty power
To earth; and deeply pondering
What it should be, one hour,
In fondest joy and love of heart
Out weighing every other,
He moved the gates of heaven apart
And gave to earth – You – mother!”

“You may say that Frederick Douglass considers himself a member of the one race that exists.”

“In forty-five years, since he first took to the platform as a Garrisonian itinerant in 1841, Douglass had logged well in excess of one hundred thousand miles on land and water in pursuit of both the cause of human freedom and equality as well as his own livelihood. More than perhaps any other American of the nineteenth century, Douglass had been traveling all of his adult life. But never like this – a private citizen on a grand European and classical Mediterranean tour intended as a vacation.”

“Douglass stressed the ‘vast and wonderful change’ since the 1860s. He marveled that he could ‘live to see the day when I could with safety to my person, to my liberty, tread the soil of Florida, of South Carolina, of Georgia.’ For so long the very names of those states ‘sent a shudder through me.’ But now, Douglass declared via Isaiah, ‘We see...a new heaven and a new earth.’”

“The crowd in the pews were on their feet cheering as Douglass reached these crescendos. Then the exhausted old orator folded his text to sit down. A reporter for the *Evening Star* recorded, ‘Thus spoke Frederick Douglass...with uplifted eyes and arms, as if to invoke heaven to bear witness, and the echoes of his words were drowned in a tumultuous storm of applause.’ Douglass remained ‘slightly bent’ during the address, wrote the journalist, but performed with ‘voice unshaken.’ Just as he had begun his career fifty-four years earlier, he fought with his only real weapon – the infinity, majesty, and power of words. Douglass concluded, ‘Based upon the eternal principles of truth, justice, and humanity...your Republic will stand and flourish forever.’ Then he dropped his arms and bowed.”

“He was the sui generis former slave who found books, the boy beaten into a benumbed field hand who fought back and mastered language and wielded a King James-inspired prose at the world’s oppressions with a genius to behold. He was spiritual and secular, consummately political and deeply moralistic, romantic and pragmatic, a philosopher of democracy and natural rights and a preacher of a firm doctrine of self-reliance. Douglass provided a living symbol by his physical presence and skill that refuted all manner of racist notions and reinforced others for the ignorant and the fearful. He rose from nowhere to the centers of power, or so it had seemed. He loved power but found he could wield it only with limits and often softly. He had made vanity and pride often into weapons alongside his words; he outlasted most of his enemies, except the ideology of white supremacy, which only seemed to transmogrify into more virulent forms in his old age. Underneath Douglass’s grand dignity, deep in his soul, ran a lode of humility born of experience and a long view of history, but embedded in that soul as well was his fierce, sometimes insecure, but often magnificent quest for respect, to compete, and to conquer his foes. Embedded there as well were an insatiable intellectual curiosity and a spirituality that sustained him through many trials. And so Douglass passed, but the words, and much more, endure.”

“When it is finally ours, this freedom, this beautiful
And needful thing, needful to man as air, usable as earth;
When it belong at last
To all...when it is finally won...
This man, this Douglass, this former slave, this Negro
Beaten to his knees, exiled, visioning a world
Where none is hunted, alien,
This man, superb in love and logic, this man
Shall be remembered.
Oh, not with statues’ rhetoric,
Not with legends and poems and wreaths of bronze alone,
But with the lives grown out of his life, the lives
Fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing.”