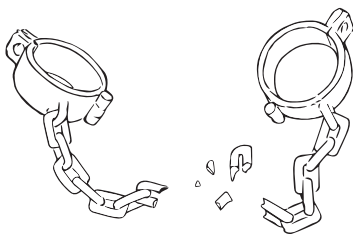


WORLDVIEW GUIDE

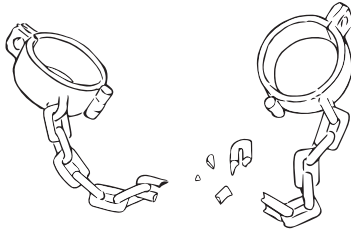
NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK DOUGLASS AN AMERICAN SLAVE



Jake Meador

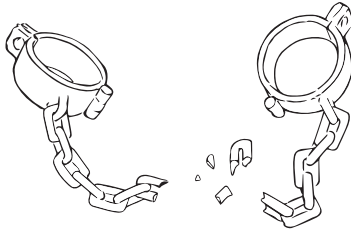
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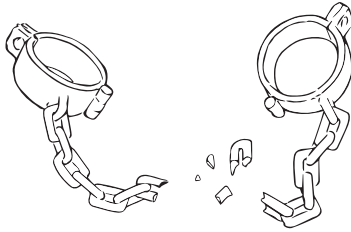
INTRODUCTION

There's an interesting moment in 2 Kings 18:4 that can easily pass you by. It says, "[King Hezekiah] removed the high places, and brake the images, and cut down the groves, and brake in pieces the brasen serpent that Moses had made: for unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it: and he called it Nehushtan." The serpent in the text refers to the incident in the book of Numbers when the Israelites are attacked by poisonous snakes as a judgment from God for their repeated unfaithfulness. God directs Moses to fashion a serpent from bronze and hoist it up above the camp. Any Israelites who looked toward the bronze serpent would be saved. Though the serpent became an idol several hundred years later, it is striking that we find God's people keeping for many, many years something that would have reminded them of their failures.

In a day when most anything can be rendered disposable, Americans are not accustomed to keeping things that

remind them of times of darkness, sadness, or failure. We do not keep the nameplate from the job where we were fired. We do not keep the bad report card or the paper that got an F. It is common for divorced couples to “purge” their homes of things that remind them of their former husband or wife. Nationally, we do not build monuments to commemorate our nation’s greatest failures. There is no Richard Nixon Memorial in Washington, nor is there a pillar to commemorate the Great Depression erected anywhere near Wall Street, though one can’t help wondering if things might have played out differently in 2008 if there were. In America we forget the bad and try to remember the positive. We are the consummate optimists.

This idea of a negative memorial, something we keep that serves as a warning to us of the dire consequences of falling into sin, is perhaps a useful starting place for considering Frederick Douglass’s remarkable *Narrative*. If we are to understand both the good and the bad in America, there may be no better text to begin with than with this book.

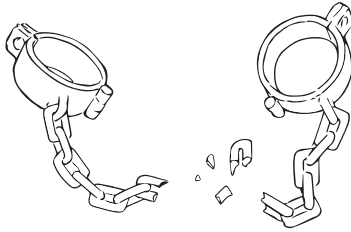


THE WORLD AROUND

Douglass was born sometime in February of 1818 in Maryland. At the time Maryland was a slave state, but its northern border was part of the old Mason-Dixon line that divided free states from slave states. Often this meant that slavery in Maryland was not as brutal as slavery in states further south, such as Alabama or Mississippi. These things are relative, of course, because slavery in Maryland was still exceedingly brutal.

In terms of the broader historical moment, at the time of his birth James Monroe was in the White House. John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were still living and Abraham Lincoln was a nine-year-old boy living in Illinois. Many of the most difficult legal battles regarding slavery were still yet to come. The nation was still in its infancy at this point, and there were a number of questions that, at Douglass's birth, were still unanswered—such as the legal status of an escaped slave living

in the North or even the basic ability of non-white people to own property. These questions would be legally resolved during Douglass's early life.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Frederick Douglass was born a slave in Maryland and escaped to freedom after teaching himself to read as a young man. After arriving in the North, he quickly became involved in abolitionist work alongside white abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, publisher of *The Liberator*. Douglass's giftedness as a communicator and speaker became quickly apparent to his new friends and he soon began speaking publicly for the cause of abolition.

The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is notable for a number of reasons. First, the sheer forcefulness of the man's prose made the book impossible to ignore. Douglass was a remarkable communicator and orator. His ability to tell the truth about American slavery is perhaps unparalleled amongst antebellum writers. Second, Douglass went on to a very successful career after the Civil War and was one of the first African Americans to hold a number of major governmental positions, working as a US Marshall