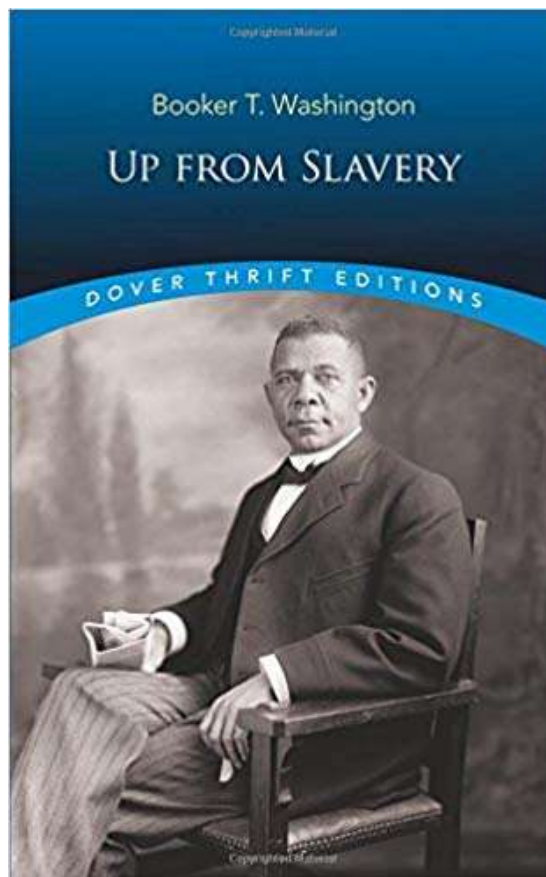


Booker T. Washington and His *Up From Slavery*

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Booker T. Washington (1856-1915)

Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Up-Slavery-Dover-Thrift-Editions/dp/0486287386/ref=sr_1_2?keywords=up+from+slavery&qid=1574301221&s=books&sr=1-2

Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) is considered to be a great African American Educationist, social activist and an African American leader who was highly respected and listened

to by African Americans, Native Americans and social justice conscious White leaders. He emphasized that African Americans, Native Americans and other minorities needed to pursue education and acquire trade (professional) skills so that they also would be able to come up in life and have their own self-dignity strengthened. Instead of advocating and following an agitational approach to seek justice and equality as well as economic prosperity for African Americans and other minorities in White dominated United States, he focused on steps that African Americans could pursue to improve their living conditions. He established a trade school for African Americans Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.

Some of the quotable quotes of Booker T. Washington are available in this link. <https://www.brainyquote.com/authors/booker-t-washington-quotes>. Reading these quotes reveal to us Booker T. Washington's approach to life, even when he suffered a lot where he grew up as the son of a slave mother. An unusually positive view of life and life struggle.

Up from Slavery is considered to be a collection of autobiographical essays. The contents of this book were serialized in a Christian newspaper called *The Outlook*. The book has 17 chapters. The titles of the chapters indicate the progress of life and living conditions as well as goals and aims of Booker T. Washington.

Chapter 1 A Slave among Slaves

Chapter 2 Boyhood Days

Chapter 3 The Struggle for an Education

Chapter 4 Helping Others

Chapter 5 The Reconstruction Period

Chapter 6 Black Race and Red Race

Chapter 7 Early Days at Tuskegee

Chapter 8 Teaching School in a Stable and a Hen-House

Chapter 9 Anxious Days and Sleepless Nights

Chapter 10 A Harder Task than Making Bricks without Straw

Chapter 11 Making Their Beds Before They Could Lie on Them

Chapter 12 Raising Money

Chapter 13 Two Thousand Miles for a Five-Minute Speech

Chapter 14 The Atlanta Exposition Address

Chapter 15 The Secret of Success in Public Speaking

Chapter 16 Europe

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Chapter 17 Last Words

Booker T. Washington writes in his Preface, “Much of what I have said has been written on board trains, or at hotels or railroad stations while I have been waiting for trains or during the moments that I could space from my work while at Tuskegee.” His last chapter Last Words presents a very hopeful future for his race as well for all races of the United States:

“If my life in the past has meant anything in the lifting up of my people and the bringing about of better relations between your race and mine, I assure you from this day it will mean doubly more. ... During the next century and more, my race must continue passing through the severe American crucible. We are to be tested in our patience, our forbearance, our perseverance, our power to endure wrong, to withstand temptations, to economize, to acquire and use skill; in our ability to compete, to succeed in commerce, to disregard the superficial for the real, the appearance for the substance ...” The book ends with a positive note for the life of Black people in the future. Most critics and Black people seem to agree that his hope did not materialize fully as Booker T. Washington believed.

I will now focus on Chapter 1 Slave among Slaves. Booker T. Washington is not sure of when he was born. He was not sure of where he was born, except the knowledge it was in a plantation in Franklin Country, Virginia. He writes, “My life had its beginning in the midst of the most miserable, desolate, and discouraging surroundings. ... I was born in a typical log cabin, about fourteen feet by sixteen feet square. In this cabin I lived with my mother and a brother and sister till after the Civil War, when we are all declared free.” “Of my ancestry I know almost nothing. In the slave quarters, and even later, I heard whispered conversations among the coloured people of the tortures which the slaves, including, no doubt, my ancestors on my mother’s side, suffered in the middle passage of the slave ship while being conveyed from Africa to America.” Booker T. Washington did not know who his father was: “Of my father I know even less than of my mother. I do not know even his name. I have heard reports to the effect that he was a white man who lived on one of the near-by plantations.” He did not “provide in any way in rearing” him. Booker T. Washington does not blame him: “He was simply another unfortunate victim of he institution which the Nation unhappily had engrafted upon it at that time.”

“The cabin was not only our living place but was also used as the kitchen for the plantation.” “There was no wooden floor in our cabin, the naked earth being used as a floor. In the centre of the earthen floor there was a large, deep opening covered with hoards, which was used as a place in which to store sweet potatoes during the winter. ... While the poorly built cabin caused us to suffer with cold in the winter, the heat from the open fireplace in summer was equally trying. ... The early years of my life which were spent in the little cabin, were not very different those of thousands of other slaves. My mother had little time in which to give attention to the training of her children ...”

Slaves had to steal chicken, etc. in the night to feed their children: “One of my earliest recollections is that of my mother cooking a chicken late at night and awakening her children for the purpose of feeding them. How or where she got it I do not know. I presume, however, it was

procured from our owner's farm. Some people may call this theft. If such a thing were to happen now, I should condemn it as theft myself. But taking place at the time it did, and for the reason that it did, no one could ever make me believe that my mother was guilty of thieving. She was simply a victim of the system of slavery."

Booker narrates several episodes of his hard work and suffering in this chapter. "During the time that I spent in slavery I was not large enough to be of much service, still I was occupied most of the time in cleaning the yards, carrying water to the men in the fields, or going to the mill to which I used to take the corn, once a week, to be ground."

This chapter, as in the other chapters, clearly reveal the suffering of the slaves and their miserable living conditions. The treatment they received from the Whites was described in painful words, but not hatred is expressed through these words and descriptions. For example, consider this quote: "In order to defend and protect the women and children who were left on the plantations when the white males went to war, the slaves would have laid down their lives. The slave who was selected to sleep in the "big house" during the absence of the males was considered to have the place of honour. Anyone attempting hard "young Mistress" or "old Mistress" during the night would have had to cross the dead body of the slave to do so." He also declares that "there are few instances, either in slavery or freedom, in which a member of my race has been known to betray a specific trust."

To understand and appreciate Black Literature written by leading Black writers and to understand their psychological and social foundations, Booker T. Washington's autobiography will be a good beginning. Booker T. Washington's positive attitude and emphasis on education and acquisition of trade and professional skills present one aspect of the ideology of Black Literature and Black History. The other aspect of agitational approach, while emphasizing education and acquisition of professional skills, calls for a different attitude and assessment of current living conditions of the Black people. The living conditions of his childhood and boyhood described by Booker T. Washington are relevant and widely found in many areas of Indian life as well.

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Reference

Washington, Booker T. 1901. *Up From Slavery*. Kindle Edition.