TEACHERS & WRITERS

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Using Douglass' *Narrative*

To Inspire Student Writing

by Charles Kuner

I HAVE FOUND THAT ONE OF THE MOST successful pieces of literature for motivating students to read and write is the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. It opens up so many issues of adolescence, such as self-esteem, identity, rebellion against unjust authority and laws, individual dignity, and control over one's life and working conditions. Add to this a poetic writing style, and one readily understands why students become absorbed in the *Narrative*.

Farragut Career Academy, where I have taught since 1965, is located in the inner city on Chicago's Southwest side. Our students are Hispanic (eighty-five per cent) and African-American (fiteen per cent). A large portion of them are on public aid and below grade level. Much of their energy is expended in a day-to-day struggle against gang-bangers and other social ills.

I use the *Narrative* in my American history and ethnic studies courses. Students in these classes are upperclassmen.

What makes it easier for me to teach the *Narrative* is my admiration for Douglass. Indeed, he's one of my personal heroes. Besides the *Narrative*, I've read the two later autobiographies, *My Bondage and My Freedom* and *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, as well as other material, such as the recent biography by William McFeely. So in teaching the *Narrative*, I can give my classes a rich background on the historical period and on the man.

Many students are not aware of Douglass; others may have only a vague recollection of hearing about him in history class. Before we begin reading the book, I give some background information on his period and on slavery. In addition, I show a documentary movie—unfortunately out of print—on the life of Douglass entitled *House on Cedar Hill*. (You might substitute the PBS video *When the Lion Wrote History*.)

I should say, in all honesty, that students do struggle with the book, due to low reading levels, lack of experience in reading and discussing literature, and problems with

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English as a second language. These difficulties arise in the writing assignments as well. One way of dealing with these problems is to have the students make a little book of notes for each chapter. They make a title page and label the subsequent pages by chapter. Each chapter page contains important points for that chapter as it's summarized in class discussion.

Also, I go through most of the chapters with the class, reading certain excerpts orally, asking questions, and making connections with the current situation in our society. There will be two or three key chapters that students will read very carefully, using guide questions for class discussion. Bilingual help is given by some of my students who act as tutors for those who are limited in English proficiency.

Until they read the *Narrative,* most of my students are unaware of how inhumane slavery was. Some become visibly angry about what they learn. I attempt to channel that anger into constructive actions that they can take for themselves and others, using Douglass as their role model. For instance, I show them that they can have better control of their destiny by empowering themselves with better literacy skills.

Moreover, I point out that Douglass exemplified self-respect, strong moral character, aggressiveness, courage, intelligence, and a deep sense of racial pride and responsibility. For Douglass, struggle was more important than compromise, dedication to the freedom of his people more important than his own safety. He felt responsible for secretly educating his fellow slaves, and for helping them escape from their bondage. The message to students: fight against prejudice using reason, using literacy skills. Don't enslave yourselves with voluntary ignorance, drugs, gangs, or early teenage pregnancy. Help others as you have been helped.

While reading the *Narrative,* the students keep journals. Not surprisingly, I get many moving entries inspired by certain sections of the book. In the early part of the *Narrative,* Douglass writes about the significance of the spirituals sung in the fields by the slaves. One class heard recordings of some of these "sorrow songs" and one of our music teachers gave a special presentation showing the link between spirituals, blues, and gospel music. One Hispanic student who's not afraid to cross racial boundaries has some close African-American friends. One of these friends invited him to attend a church service. For the young Hispanic it was a beautiful spiritual revelation. He wrote, "Believe me there's nothing like a black church service! It cannot be copied! The preacher preaches up a storm and gets reactions from the congregation. Then there would be the singing of the church choir. That church would rock. One could feel welling up within oneself a sense of love—a sense of faith—a sense of unity—a sense of hope."

Douglass' two-hour fight with the "slave breaker" Edward Covey elicited another student's comment: "I envy Douglass' courage in fighting Edward Covey and to escape his master. Never have I heard a story like this—the way he conquered his problems."

In the first chapter, Douglass relates how he hardly knew his mother, and that when she died, it was as if a stranger died. That led to this poignant journal entry: "I'm really sorry about Douglass' family that he lost or never saw. I know how Douglass feels because I never saw my mother because we got separated just like Douglass did."

What we have here are prime examples of how a powerful poetic writing style helped these Hispanic students identify with an intelligent, courageous black slave and, thereby, narrowed some cultural and ethnic gaps.

Another writing activity I have the class do involves elements of a "twilight zone" experience. Students are to pretend it's 1845 and to write a letter to Douglass indicating their reactions to and feelings about his *Narrative.* But within the letter they will crisscross between the past and present.

The format for the letter is as follows. In the first paragraph they introduce themselves and write about three scenes in his book that horrified them. The second paragraph contains examples of courage and intelligence shown by Douglass. In the third paragraph, students request advice from Douglass and describe the racial tensions at Farragut. Then students suggest, in the fourth paragraph, two things they would do to reduce these problems and, in a final paragraph, they may say whatever they wish.

Students have no problem in straddling the timelines and usually enjoy doing the assignment. However, for those who wish an alternative assignment, I offer the essay topic: "If Frederick Douglass were alive today, what message would he bring to Farragut Career Academy students about improving racial relations?"

Another activity involves the use of large white posterboards. Small groups of students complete a posterboard book report on the *Narrative* by doing what I call story mapping. In the middle of the board goes the title, author, and publisher.

On the left and right sides of each board there are sections for a character map of one of the protagonists, new vocabulary words, setting, plot, a symbol that students invent that represents the story, and three completed sentences about the book. At the bottom of the board, the theme or message is stated and explained. Students can be as creative as possible in putting this together, including the use of drawings and pictures. Students love working in groups and doing this kind of writing assignment. In past years, I've gotten some extremely well-done posterboard story maps that have been displayed in the classroom as well as schoolwide.

Finally, since the students have been writing about Douglass' story, I ask them to write their own stories, which students really like to do once they get over their initial reluctance or perception that their lives are dull. Realistically, how often does any authority figure ask them to write about their own souls and to make themselves the topic of a written school assignment? It gives the students a sense of personal importance, the type of empowerment discussed in the *Narrative* when Douglass relates how he secretly learned to read and write, and how that changed him from a non-thinking slave to a thinking man who became resurrected, if

you will. When the students complete their autobiographies and see them displayed in the room, it gives a needed boost to their vulnerable self-images.

Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass is an invaluable and powerful autobiography that not only inspires students to write, but also teaches them that people can transcend group distinctions, whether racial, ethnic, class, or gender. It also shows them the link between literacy and personal empowerment, that they, too, can overcome personal obstacles and become the masters of their own fates.

Bibliography

Douglass, Frederick. *Autobiographies*. New York: The Library of America, 1994.

McFeely, William S. *Frederick Douglass*. New York and London: Norton, 1991.

The House on Cedar Hill. Evanston, Ill.: Contemporary Films, Inc. (out of print).

When the Lion Wrote History. Washington, D.C.: WETA.

14 Writing Ideas

Using Douglass' *Narrative*

by Jordan Davis, Christopher Edgar, & Ron Padgett

THE IDEAS BELOW OFFER VARIOUS SUGGESTIONS for writing. Many of them can be used by people of all ages; a few would work best with students of high school age and older. The ideas connect passages in Douglass' *Narrative* with incidents and memories in the lives of students. Of course, those incidents and memories won't be (we hope) as horrific as some of Douglass'. Our motive is not to trivialize Douglass, of course, but to show students that they have had experiences not totally unrelated to his, that in fact they may have more in common with him than they might think.

These writing ideas aim to encourage complexity of thought and feeling, as in Douglass' combination of hatred for slavery and his ironic and grudging respect for it as a "grand achievement." In addition, Douglass cleverly balances horrific passages with lighter ones. Our writing ideas point to these complexities that help make the *Narrative* deeper and more interesting than a "flat" story would be.

The ideas are arranged according to the chronology of the *Narrative*. The page numbers below refer to the 1986 Penguin Classics edition of the *Narrative*. If you are using a different edition, you can still find the references fairly easily, because Douglass' chapters tend to be brief.

CHAPTER 1

1. In the book's first paragraph, Douglass' master won't tell him when he had been born. Think of a time when you wanted to know something, but an adult (or someone else) wouldn't tell you. Describe the incident in detail and be as truthful about it as possible.

THE AUTHORS of this piece are writers who work in T&W's publications program.

2. Have you ever watched a friend or sibling be spanked? Recall and describe it as clearly as you can, and tell how it made you feel.

CHAPTER 2

3. Douglass writes, "I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness" (p. 58). Do you ever sing to yourself? Under what circumstances do you sing? Why do you sing the songs you do? What kind of songs are they? What effect do they have on you?

CHAPTER 3

4. On p. 59, the temptation of the fruit in Colonel Lloyd's garden (and the punishment of tarring) has overtones of Genesis, the Garden of Eden, original sin, etc. Have you ever experienced a temptation so powerful you decided to risk everything, even though you knew you would probably be caught? If so, write about it.

CHAPTER 4

5. To Douglass, one of the great travesties of slavery was that slaves could not bear witness against white men (e.g., Mr. Gore's killing the slave at the creek, p. 67). Write an account of a particularly heinous crime from the perspective of a "voiceless" and "unbelievable" witness. Or write about a time when no one would believe something you said, even though it was true.

CHAPTERS 5 AND 6

6. On pp. 74–75 (ch. 5), Douglass says that going to Baltimore dramatically changed his life. Have you ever moved from one country to another, from a rural area to a big city, from one town to another, or even from one neighborhood to another, so that it made a big difference in your life? Write

about the move, telling how your life changed, and guess what your life might have been like if you hadn't moved.

7. Douglass comes across as amazingly generous. On p. 75 (ch. 5), he praises God for delivering him from slavery, but he doesn't curse God for allowing him to be born a slave in the first place. In other instances, Douglass finds something positive to say about some of his cruel masters. He even finds something good to say about the thing he hates most, slavery, describing it as "a grand achievement" (ch. 6, p. 78). Write about a person or thing you fear or dislike, but include something positive.

CHAPTER 7

8. Douglass is very good at seeing the other side of any idea or question. For example, on p. 84 he says, "Learning to read had been a curse rather than a blessing." Think of something that people ordinarily think of as good, and tell why it also can be bad.

9. Douglass becomes "obsessed" with the idea of freedom (p. 85). He can't think of much of anything else. Write about a time that you were obsessed with something or someone. Tell everything about it.

CHAPTER 8

10. In one of Douglass' rare uses of fantasy in this book (pp. 91–93), he conjures up a scene in which his aged grandmother is abandoned and isolated in the woods, culminating with: "She stands—she sits—she staggers—she falls—she groans—she dies." Think of either a person you used to know or an older relative, close your eyes, and let yourself imagine that person doing something. Try to see it very clearly, like a movie in your head. Then describe the scene, using lots of details. If you want to, use both poetry and prose (as Douglass does).

CHAPTER 9

11. Douglass describes one of his masters, Captain Thomas Auld, as "cruel, but cowardly. He commanded without firmness." Think of someone you've known who was in a position of authority, such as a teacher or gym coach, but who commanded no respect, was a pushover, etc. Describe that person and how other people reacted, and how it made you feel. You don't have to use the people's names.

CHAPTER 10

12. Douglass' fistfight with Covey (pp. 112–113) ends in a draw, but in it Douglass wins a great moral victory. Describe a fight you've been in or seen, and tell not only what happened, but how it made you feel, and how it changed the way you looked at the other person or persons. Describe your relations with your opponent after the fight.

13. The description of Douglass' imagined flight (beginning on p. 122) has a Biblical sweep: "At every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman . . . on every bridge a sentinel. . . . We were stung by scorpions, chased by wild beasts, bitten by snakes. . . ." Have you ever anticipated something so much that you experienced it before you actually did it? If so, write about it. Or try to imagine you are escaping through the wilderness, and write a poem or prose poem about what you experience, using vivid imagery.

CHAPTER 11

14. On p. 144, Douglass writes one big long sentence filled with dashes, which begins "Let him be a fugitive slave." Write one long sentence using lots of dashes. Keep it going and going. Don't worry about correct spelling or punctuation. You can take care of them later.

Douglass Resources

A good source of materials on Frederick Douglass is the Parks & History Association, P.O. Box 40060, Washington, D.C. 20016. Call (202) 472-3083 and ask for the Mail Order Dept.

Andrews, William L., ed. *Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass.* Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991.

Douglass, Frederick. *Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies.* Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, ed. New York: The Library of America, 1994. The only single-volume collection of all three of Douglass' autobiographies. Wonderful edition.

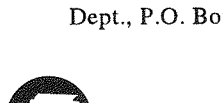
———. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.* Baker, Jr., Houston A., ed. New York: Penguin, 1992. Handy and inexpensive.

McFeely, William. *Frederick Douglass.* New York: Norton, 1991. Probably the single best account of Douglass' personal and political life. Beautiful illustrations.

Miller, Douglas T. *Frederick Douglass and the Fight for Freedom.* New York: Facts on File, 1993. Very easy reading for students grades 7 and up.

Voss, Frederick S. *Majestic in His Wrath: A Pictorial Life of Frederick Douglass.* Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995. An attractive collection of portraits, photographs, prints, and other documents.

When the Lion Wrote History. For grades 7–12. A 90-minute PBS documentary on the life of Douglass. $49.95 from PBS Video, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314-1698. (800) 424-7963. Teacher's guide $5 from WETA Educational Outreach Dept., P.O. Box 2626, Washington, D.C. 20013.



Frederick Douglass
& The Value of My Life

by Opal Palmer Adisa

I USE ANY TEXT AS AN OCCASION TO STIMULATE students to write meaningfully about their lives, their ideas, and their dreams. I believe that as an educator I must help young people to see and affirm the value of their lives, since so many young people appear confused and unsure about the future. My major objective is to use literature to stir students to write about their own lives so that they might recognize their worth and find more meaningful ways to direct their energies, the way Frederick Douglass did.

Douglass' autobiography is also an ideal text to explore with students the intersection between literature and history, and to show how a literary text such as Douglass' is grounded in a specific time. But of greater importance, Douglass' story reveals how a single person can help change the course of history. Frederick Douglass acted first for his own freedom, but then he didn't forget his fellow slaves. Instead, he raised his voice in protest against an oppressive system, thereby contributing to its demise.

Before having students read Douglass' autobiography, I would discuss the value and power of one's own personal and family history. First, have students make a family tree of living relatives. Next, have students find information about their genealogy, at least three generations in the past, by collecting data from their parents. Recommend to students that they gather more than just names and birthdates. Emphasize that knowing one's genealogy is important to one's medical record, as certain health issues, such as sickle-cell anemia and leukemia, are hereditary. Also, specific traits or characteristics or even their names can often be traced to a relative.

Methodology

To provide high school students with vital information about Douglass at a quick glance, without overwhelming them, and to create a lesson for one class period, I read through Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* and marked key paragraphs that I wanted the students to read and discuss. These I xeroxed, cut out, and pasted: twelve excerpts in all, along with some key dates in Douglass' chronology.

I was a visiting writer at Oakland High School in Judy Yeager's class and at Burckhalter Elementary in Allison Henderson's and Nicole Shannon's classes. In all three classrooms I was greeted by enthusiastic students who readily responded to the lesson.

As soon as the tenth and eleventh grade students entered the classroom, I gave each one the xeroxed hand-outs and told them to read through the material silently for ten minutes. When the time was up I wrote "Biography" and "Autobiography" on the chalkboard and discussed these two forms of writing, zeroing in on some of the distinctions between them. We spent some time talking about the idea of "truth," which many students believed is the advantage of an autobiography. I mentioned how selectivity and intention in autobiography determine the presentation of "truth." I asked, "Has anyone read an autobiography?" A few students had read Malcolm X's, Maya Angelou's, or Maxine Hong Kingston's. I then asked those students who responded to summarize the impact those works had on their lives and to say what they thought was the primary lesson of each. Our discussion nicely returned me to Douglass' text. I wrote "slave narrative" and "abolition movement" on the board, then asked students to define both phrases and the relationship between them. I explained that slave narratives served as propaganda for the abolition movement. We talked about the ways a slave narrative could aid the abolition movement. I listed all of their ideas on the board, then framed this question to them:

"Why would the detailed experiences of one slave influence people's attitude about slavery?" Students offered insightful responses, foremost among which was the elevation of an individual, such as Frederick Douglass, as opposed to a generalized group identity.

At this point I turned to the hand-out I distributed at the beginning of the class and asked, "What do you learn about Douglass at a quick glance from these dates? What is the importance of the dates?" We addressed how dates serve as reference points and provide clues to contemporaneous events. Next I asked for volunteers, each student to read one of the twelve excerpts aloud, and told readers that after reading, they should be prepared to convey the main idea or message Douglass wants to communicate in each paragraph. I also asked them to identify the main emotion in each paragraph. The excerpts, along with their locations in the Penguin edition of Douglass' *Narrative*, were:

- I was born in Tuckahoe . . . a slave who could tell of his birthday (ch. 1, p. 47).
- I never saw my mother . . . the proud name of being a kind master (ch. 1, p. 48).
- I have often been utterly astonished . . . the same emotion (ch. 2, p. 58)
- I was seldom whipped . . . laid in the gashes (ch. 5, pp. 71–72).

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• We were not regularly allowanced . . . and few left the trough satisfied (ch. 5, p. 72).
• Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld . . . discontented and unhappy (ch. 6, p. 78).
• I lived in Master Hugh's family . . . anyone else (ch. 7, p. 81).
• The plan which I adopted . . . more valuable bread of knowledge (ch. 7, pp. 82–83).
• We were all ranked together . . . both slave and slaveholder (ch. 8, pp. 89–90).
• In August, 1832, my master attended . . . his slaveholding cruelty (ch. 9, p. 97).
• When we got about half way to St. Michael's . . . now prepared for any thing (ch. 10, p. 128).
• His answer was, he could do nothing . . . subjected its bearer to frightful liabilities (ch. 10, pp. 133–34).

After the reading and discussion of the paragraphs, I asked, "Has anyone heard of Sojourner Truth? Like Douglass, she was a slave, but she was also a mother and a feminist who advocated the abolition of slavery as well as suffrage for women. Think about the mood and tone of this poem of hers.

Ain't I a Woman?

That man over there say
    a woman needs to be helped into carriages
and lifted over ditches
    and to have the best place everywhere.
Nobody ever helped me into carriages
    or over mud puddles
        or give me a best place . . .
And ain't I a woman?
    Look at me
Look at my arm!
    I have plowed and planted
and gathered into barns
    and no man could head me . . .
And ain't I a woman?
    I could work as much
and eat as much as a man—
    when I could get to it—
and bear the lash as well
    and ain't I a woman?
I have born 13 children
    and seen most all sold into slavery
and when I cried out with a mother's grief
    none but Jesus heard me . . .
and ain't I a woman?
    that little man in black there say
a woman can't have as much rights as a man
    cause Christ wasn't a woman
Where did you Christ come from?
    From God and a woman!
Man had nothing to do with him!
If the first woman God ever made
was strong enough to turn the world
    upside down, all alone
together women ought to be able to turn it
    rightside up again.

"This poem is also autobiographical, as Sojourner Truth uses the personal details of her life as the basis of her argument for women's right to vote. Reflect on your life for a moment. Are there any similarities to Douglass'? What questions about your heritage do you have? What is your relationship with your parents, or any other significant relative? What are your memories of where you were born? Can you describe a plan or goal you set out to accomplish? Are there things about you that people might misunderstand or misinterpret? Quickly review the hand-out paragraphs from Douglass' autobiography and select one that speaks to you. Write a poem or a few paragraphs about your life that in some ways reflect either the subject or mood of one of Douglass' paragraphs. You might want to copy down the first line of the paragraph you choose, so I'll know which one stimulated your ideas. However, you might want to respond in general to a key sentiment from Douglass' text."

Because discussion was so absorbing, only five minutes remained in the period. I requested that students spend at least twenty minutes of quiet, reflective time doing the written assignment for homework and turn it in the next day. Below are some results from tenth and eleventh graders:

Question Quest

I'm questioning your morals, your belief and your ideals
And yet I need no answer.

Now imagine yourself standing on the planes of your limitless
    imagination.
Your mind and your soul at ease.
In your life you are always questioned
and with every cause an effect. Every emotion
of yours hangs in the balance and snaps like
a rope around your neck. Imagine the people
you can change with a pencil or a voice speaking
out at a crowd. So stand up and say it and remember
speak loud!!!

Imagine the damage you can do to a person who's as
fragile as a glass, those who hide behind a shell
and remember even stone can crack.

So how do you choose? Do you win or lose
in this game we all call life? It is your choice
so choose wisely . . .

—Seaton Brook

Untitled

I think education is very important, and because my ancestors had to sneak to learn to read and write, I feel that as a young black person, it is my duty to learn everything I can and that people want to teach me. That's why I think parents are so hard on their kids.

But what makes me mad are those people who don't take advantage of what the teacher tries to teach them. I try to learn everything of whatever is being taught. I really believe that is the only way to succeed in life as a black person. Because one thing they were never able to take was our minds.

—Janese Fraser

Untitled

Even those who may have sympathized with me were not prepared . . . to do so; for just at that time, the slightest

manifestation of humanity toward a colored person was denounced as abolitionism, and that name subjected its bearer to frightful liabilities.—Frederick Douglass

This sentence has a lot of meaning to me. From my point of view, Frederick Douglass was trying to say a colored person had to be very brave in order to do what he had to do. As a young lady growing up in Oakland, I have to be brave and have a straight head on my shoulders. There are a lot of people around me who are ashamed of themselves, won't speak their minds and who don't have much respect for themselves.

I have always felt pretty alone when it comes to speaking out and doing things differently. Since I'm so outspoken, with a lot of charisma, I am sometimes considered conceited. It doesn't bother me because if I wait for everyone to like me and listen to all the negative things said about me I wouldn't go anywhere in life.

I can relate to Douglass because he had to make a lot of dangerous statements and take risks by himself based on what he believed was right. I also do the same in my everyday life. If it isn't standing up for myself, it's for my friends, peers, family, etc.

No matter how many people didn't approve or dislike me because of various reasons, it won't stop me from being me.

—*Stacey Reid*

Untitled

Frederick Douglass knew of only where he was born, he didn't know the date or what time. He didn't know much about his family, ancestors, and his people, like me. I only know when I was born. I always wonder where my hometown is. My mom only told me that I was born in China. I always ask her, "Where in China?" but she never answers me. I want to know where it was, how the people are, what they do for a living, etc. There are so many questions, so little answers.

I once heard that I was born on a boat, but I'm not sure if that is true. (Ms. Opal Palmer Adisa talked about "truth.") I would like to know the truth about my birthplace.

—*Yen Phan*

"I have been often utterly astonished . . . "

When my grades have been slippin
or some boy cramps my style
instead of crying like I want
I switch on that radio dial.
The music is my escape
the refuge I create.

When the dishes aren't washed
and I need to clean my room
I don't want to crack a smile
I rather wallow in my gloom
so I turn on the radio
and crank up the volume 'cause
music is my escape
the refuge I create.

I listen to jazz, R & B and the blues
anything that suits me
and triggers my moods
I feel sorry for myself
or laugh if I choose
the music sometimes
is my only refuge.

In the paragraph it said that
slaves would use music, not as
a way to feel happy but as
a way to just feel sorry for
themselves. I sometimes do the
same thing.

—*Erika Kremp*

There are several activities to engage students in before or after having them write their poems or paragraphs. One such exercise is to have them do a venn diagram (the type with overlapping areas) to clarify what feelings they have in common with Douglass and where they differ. This might also lead to a discussion on point of view. Have one half of the students pretend to be slave masters and the other half slaves. Have slaves and masters engage in conversation centered around the sentiments expressed in the paragraphs from Douglass' autobiography. This can also lead to a writing activity, in which students are challenged to think critically and incorporate different points of view in their writing.

Another writing idea is to have students list several important dates from Douglass' life, then establish a chronology of their own lives, cautioning that they should not simply list the mundane things, but focus on specific incidents and episodes in their lives. Suggest that they write at least two sentences for each date at two-year intervals. To broaden this activity students could look up significant historical events that occurred within their lifetimes, and comment on how these events have influenced their lives.

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My approach with upper elementary students was similar, except that I tried to integrate more subject areas. Also, because the students were younger and with limited skills, I gave them less information. Rather than twelve paragraphs, I selected five and simplified the chronology.

With these students, the first question I asked was, "What's one of the most important dates in someone's life?" As expected, the students responded, "Your birthday!"

"If you were to write about your life, what would you write? What is it called when someone writes about their life? Has anyone ever read an autobiography? Whose? Well, today we're going to read some parts of Frederick Douglass' autobiography. Does everyone know who Frederick Douglass is? Let's look at some dates. When was Frederick Douglass born? How come there is no day listed? Why doesn't he know the day he was born?"

All of the students in this class, at this predominantly African-American school, had learned about Frederick Douglass the previous year, and in many books for students, Frederick Douglass' birth is listed as 1817. Two students who remembered this date pointed out that the 1818 date listed in the text I used was incorrect. Also, the encyclopedia in the

classroom listed Douglass' birth as 1817. I suggested that the discrepancy is an indication of the uncertainty about Douglass' birth, and that recent research indicates that 1818 is the correct year.

I used the chronological information to emphasize to students how important dates are when writing about the events in one's life: "How old was Douglass when he left the plantation where he was born? How old was he when his mother died? When he escaped slavery? When he wrote his first autobiography? When he died? What are some important dates in your life?" Several students mentioned dates related to their school experience, to moving, or to trips they took with their family.

Then I shifted gears. I wrote "incident" on the board and asked students to define it. Next I gave them a brief overview of Countee Cullen's poem "Incident." "This poem was written many years ago by one of the leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance. Has anyone heard of Harlem? Do you know where it is? Harlem is in New York City, and during the 1920s a large number of blacks moved from the South to Harlem, and lots of great artists like Countee Cullen lived and worked in Harlem." At this point I selected a student to read Cullen's poem aloud.

Incident

For Eric Walrond

Once riding in Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

"What is the poem about? How old is the person, the speaker, in the poem? How do you think the person is feeling? What happened? How long was the boy in Baltimore? What did he do and see in Baltimore? How do you think the boy feels? How would you feel if someone called you 'out of your name'?" After listing some words that express the boy's feeling in this poem, we returned to Douglass' autobiography.

I solicited five volunteers and assigned each to read one of the five paragraphs aloud. We read through all the paragraphs, stopping only to help with pronunciation and explain the meaning of unfamiliar words. After students read the paragraphs, I told them to think of words that express Douglass' feelings in each paragraph. Students came up with: *accomplished, successful, courage, determination, love, unsure, searching, plan, frustrated, outraged, sad, angry,* and *freedom* for the five paragraphs respectively. With regard to the paragraph about Douglass' mother, I asked students to try to determine the distance from their school to another part of the city that might equal twelve miles, and to imagine walking that distance after a hard day's work.

Finally I told students to use one of the paragraphs as a point of reference and to write about their own lives, either about when and where they were born, or their relationship with their mother or any relative with whom they have a special relationship, or something they accomplished or want to accomplish, or a memory of being sad and angry, or something they are unsure about. I also encouraged the sixth grade students to incorporate in their writing one of the words from the list of identification words they came up with for each paragraph. Here are samples from sixth graders:

Life of Calvin Herring

I was born in Highland Hospital at exactly 12:34 A.M. on April 14, 1984. When I was ten months I had an operation on my stomach. I was in the emergency room for about seven or eight hours.

When I was five some boys were playing fireworks in my father's greenhouse and two hours later I was in flames and that was the worst day of my father's life.

When I was ten years of age, I was going to bed, and I was running through the kitchen and I tripped over a computer cord and a drawer was open and I cut my leg. I got seventeen stitches.

—Calvin Herring

A Mother's Love

A mother's love is a special
token which can not ever be
broken. One of her loving tears can
open an eye and clean an ear.
Her love cannot be battered
even when it's almost shattered.
I'll never forget her love even
her lips as soft as a dove.
I'll never know how she felt
even when she pulled out
the belt. A mother's love, A mother's love
A mother's love . . .

—Larrie Noble

How Do You See Me?

How do you see me? Do you look at me as a little black girl living in the world day by day not knowing what's going to happen to me each step I take?

How do you see me? Do you get scared of me when I pass you walking down the street because I am different than you? Why do you walk away when I ask you a question? All I want is the answer.

How do you see me? Do you even know that I'm there? And when you pass my house in the alley why do you yell such mean things out to me?

—Julie Jones

Determined to Change

When I look outside I see trees. I look the other way and I see violence. When I think of myself I want to accom-

plish something. I want to graduate and make the world a better place for blacks and everyone else so people could learn to treat blacks like they would treat their best, best friend.

I think if everyone got along the world would be a better place. I see myself in twenty years going to college, making the world a better place.

I still see people outside with discombobulated* minds. I learn you cannot change the world, you have to change the minds.

**A spelling word for the week*

—Jasmine Perry

With the fourth graders, my presentation was similar. Before they began to write I told them that the "I" voice was important, and they should write about themselves, but think about what someone might want to learn about them. I also encouraged them to illustrate their poems or stories or to illustrate a scene from Douglass.

About Me

I was born April 13, 1985. My grandma and grandpa thought I was special and so did my great-grandmother and my mom and dad who took me home. When I was one year old my mom and dad took me to Hawaii and I had lots of fun. My cousin Marcela and my aunty Nora came with us. My aunty is really nice. When I was four I went back to Hawaii. This time my aunty Debbi and uncle Robert came with their three kids. Me and my cousin Rolle were playing and jumping on the bed. That's all I can remember of when I was little.

—Alia Padaong

Untitled

I feel like I am happy just to be who I am. For many reasons, I am happy. I'm here today. I'm happy because I'm smart learning more and more every day. I have a great teacher to learn from. I'm happy because I'm cared for by a wonderful family. I'm happy because I have a home to live in. I'm happy because I'm happy.

—Veronica Webber

All About When I Was Growing Up

I was born in California and when I was born I went to Disney World. I went to see my cousins and uncles and aunts. They all went to Disney World with me too.

My aunty Dot took me to the ice cream store when I was two, and after we came back from the ice cream store me and my cousins went swimming.

When I was three I knew how to tie my shoes and my aunts and uncles gave me two dollars each.

After I got back to California, I started going to school. When I was five I started going to Burckhalter. I've been going to Burckhalter for five years.

—Antonio Perryman

I see these writing exercises as introductions to the reading of Frederick Douglass' autobiography, and also as a way of engaging students and arousing their interest and desire to learn more about Douglass. It has great value in bridging the gap between history as something that happened in the distant past and students' own lives. I want students to realize that they are making history, and to think about how they themselves want to be remembered.

Knowledge Is Power

Frederick Douglass and the Roots of Literacy

by Lorenzo Thomas

NARRATIVE OF THE LIFE OF FREDERICK *Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) is a classic of American literature. It is also a work of writing that should not be known only in anthologized excerpts. Like the nineteenth-century platform speeches it is based on, Douglass' argument is meant to occupy an entire evening, engaging the reader in a symphonic swirl of logic and incident, pathos and polemic. One has to read the whole book, cover to cover, carry it around in a pocket. Misplace the slender paperback under a stack of household bills and find it again.

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Poet Robert Creeley put it nicely: "Usage coheres value. Tradition is an aspect of what anyone is now thinking—not what someone once thought." Douglass' *Narrative* is a classic text because it speaks powerfully to each new reader, and has done so since 1845. In recent years I have included it as a required text in my Freshman Composition course. I use the cheapest Signet paperback edition, a straight reprinting of the original text. Because the college bookstore will not buy copies back, my students, packing or unpacking for their sophomore year, will find it again.

My students are usually amazed when, for the first time, they read Douglass' story. The *Narrative* is a well-made little book filled with eloquently recalled anecdotes, vivid perhaps because they were relatively recent in the life of the twenty-eight-year-old author, and stunning to the reader because of the horrific events they record. Following amaze-

ment is outrage. While my students see the plantation brutalities as atrocities, it is chapter 6 that really touches home. In it, Douglass describes how a kindly mistress begins to teach him to read only to have the lessons abruptly terminated by Master Hugh Auld because "it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read," even (or, perhaps, especially) a bright eight-year-old like Frederick.

Perceptive readers, of course, soon realize how the author has manipulated our feelings. This four-page chapter is almost equally divided between the aborted reading lessons and a grim description of the merciless corporal punishment suffered by the slave girls next door at the hand of the demented Mrs. Hamilton. Douglass presents the two incidents with almost no transition, thereby forcing us to recognize an equation of different forms of cruelty. Those of us who are, indeed, *reading* his book know which treatment will have the more crippling effect.

Finally, college students marvel that a man sentenced to illiteracy, a man who literally stole his education, can send them to the dictionary on every other page and startle them with the beautiful logic of his phrasing.

This last reaction is the reason that I assign the book. Indeed, the appetite for knowledge is the subject of this book. Asian-American and Hispanic students, who have no reason to cultivate a present-day guilt or resentment about "the legacy of slavery," gain as much as anyone from reading Douglass' *Narrative* because the work is a narrative of self-discovery. Compared to that theme, the author's graphic account of "the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery" is secondary.

The three incidents that seem to be the most crucial in this book appear in chapters 6, 7, and 10 and all involve *actions* that lead young Frederick toward self-determination and, in his case, literal self-mastery. The end of the reading lessons in chapter 6 leads to a determination to learn and the acquisition of a schoolbook in chapter 7. Chapter 10, however, involves a violent confrontation with a cruel slave overseer that masks the more interesting confrontation of African traditional lore and American plantation reality.

When denied reading lessons, Douglass says, "I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom." But it was obtaining a copy of Caleb Bingham's *Columbian Orator* at age twelve that really opened this pathway to Douglass. "Seldom has a single book more profoundly shaped the life of a writer and orator," notes biographer William S. McFeely. A genuine Connecticut yankee, Caleb Bingham (1757–1817) was a pioneering figure in public education for girls and the establishment of public libraries. *The Columbian Orator,* Bingham's 1797 anthology of sermons, Fourth of July speeches, Socratic dialogues, and other orations, was a popular and standard schoolbook intended by the author to "inspire the pupil with the *ardor of eloquence,* and the *love of virtue.*" Reading the book, Douglass was most impressed by a piece called "Dialogue between a Master and Slave" and another he recalled as "one of [Richard Brinsley] Sheridan's mighty speeches" but which was likely Bingham's excerpt from an oration by the Irish nationalist Arthur O'Connor.

In "Dialogue between a Master and Slave" Douglass found the words that would become true in his own life: "It is impossible to make one, who has felt the value of freedom, acquiesce in being a slave." The dialogue runs only three pages but it is an impressive early anti-slavery statement. The piece that follows must have been difficult reading for young Frederick and it is doubtful that he had any grasp of its context, but the impact of the selection on his imagination can be seen throughout the *Narrative.*

In the Irish parliament on May 4, 1795, member Arthur O'Connor—in a few years to become a political prisoner—rose in favor of a bill extending civil rights to Catholics. England, he thundered, could not have "so soon forgotten the lesson they so recently learned from America, which should serve as a lasting example to nations, against employing force to subdue the spirit of a people, determined to be free!" For O'Connor, the results of the American and French revolutions were indelible. In order for despotic governments to "effect a counter revolution in the European mind," he said, "they must abolish every trace of the mariner's compass; they must consign every book to the flames; they must obliterate every vestige of the invention of the press." It is easy to see why Bingham included this excerpt in *The Columbian Orator.* His young reader in Baltimore knew as little about Ireland as about the destinations of the ships on Chesapeake Bay, but there can be no doubt that the words in the book Frederick Douglass held in his hands struck him as true.

At the same time that Southern states were imposing ever more strict prohibitions against the instruction of slaves, Bingham's anthology found an unlikely reader who took the old New England professor's lessons very seriously. "If he could say words," writes McFeely, "say them correctly, say them beautifully—Frederick could act; he could matter in the world." As the twenty-year-old Frederick learned "the art of using my mallet and irons" in Baltimore shipyards, so he mastered language. The shipyards taught him the real (and misappropriated) value of his skilled labor and, by implication, of his clandestine letters. Douglass would conclude, in writing the *Narrative,* "to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one." Literacy is both a state of awareness and a mechanism—a *mistery* in the sense of a common craft which, of course, can be accomplished with varying degrees of excellence depending on the worker's dedication to the task.

Reading Caleb Bingham's textbook helped Douglass learn to speak in the patterns of public eloquence; and the truth of what he had to say encouraged him to—literally—"reduce to writing" what he expressed so powerfully on the anti-slavery lyceum platform. Douglass admitted his inadequate writing skills when he began his public speaking career in 1842. "Yet three years later," notes historian Benjamin Quarles, "this unschooled person had penned his autobiography. Such an achievement furnished an object lesson; it hinted at the infinite potentialities of man in whatever station of life. . . ."

Douglass' achievement supports my belief that effective writing depends simply upon one's confidence in transcribing the words one already knows how to speak. There are some grammatical rules, of course, and also some issues of

propriety—or, better, appropriateness. Writing is a mechanical process; but the sense of what is or is not appropriate is based on our personal awareness. What we call education is really the patient assembling of an inventory of ways of speaking. Facility in writing is the practiced ability to transcribe one's own way(s) of speaking with accuracy. Asking students to tape record and transcribe oral history interviews is one effective approach to achieving this facility; a systematic search through the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the etymology of words often carelessly used is another. Once we can hear our own voices—and those of other people—we can also learn how to multiply our options for speaking. The value of a work such as Douglass' *Narrative* is that it is a self-defining model and record of the process—just as the word *neologism* is itself a neologism.

"The power of literacy," notes Eric J. Sundquist, "stood in contrast to the folk culture of slavery in Douglass' view less for any inherent reason than because literacy was a weapon of resistance . . . forbidden to slaves." Nevertheless, Douglass' text suggests that there was an active culture of resistance even among slaves unable to achieve literacy. Douglass is careful to provide a footnote saying that certain superstitions belonged to "the more ignorant slaves." But when one Sandy Jenkins gives Frederick a protective talisman—an herbal root for which Jenkins claims magic potency—the *Narrative* teasingly acknowledges the possibility that there may be more than one pathway to knowledge, if not to freedom. The root is intended to prevent Frederick from being whipped and, in the fight that follows with his overseer, he defends himself. "The truth was," he writes, "that he had not whipped me at all."

This incident in chapter 10—Frederick's bloody fight with the sadistic Mr. Covey—always creates a problem in my classroom. Bright college students don't believe in the efficacy of Sandy Jenkins's African prescription for softening a slave-breaker's "obdurate heart." Even though Sterling Stuckey has demonstrated that African systems of knowledge existed in the American slave population (extending to artisanship and farming techniques that helped enrich the plantation owners), and that—as late as the 1930s—folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett found informants who identified snakeroot as one of the ingredients for avoiding a whipping, students are skeptical about the notion that Sandy Jenkins's root enables Frederick to physically defeat Covey.

Once in a while, though, a clever student will wrestle with my Afrocentric interpretation of the magic root passage. "I'm just a construction grunt," wrote Michael Menendez,

> manually wrestling a living from the sweat of my brow and the strength of my back, but even I know there is no such thing as magic. Or is there? I dove back into the text in search of an answer to the mystical powers of the root. The magic root was the catalyst Douglass needed to break the chains which locked his whole being into slavery. Yes, most definitely, there are magic roots—pencils, typewriters, and anything else that causes us to rise up through misery and despair.

No one today, not even New Age folks, will believe in the *actual* magic of a root; we prefer to place our trust in psychology, technology, and practical explanations. In his song "Superstition," Stevie Wonder used the double-voiced coding of African-American irony as cleverly as Frederick Douglass ever did. "When you believe in things you don't understand," he sings, "then you suffer." But it was not enough that Frederick Douglass understand the system of slavery; he had also to learn how to create, in himself, the power of self-definition that would enable him to defeat the system that bound him.

My purpose in assigning Douglass' *Narrative* is explicitly stated in another book I sometimes use in the same course, for the same purpose. "A book is a loaded gun," writes Ray Bradbury in *Fahrenheit 451*. "Who knows who might be the target of the well-read man?" Among Bradbury's characters are a fellowship of wanderers who have memorized the classics in a future age when, going the antebellum South one better, the state has declared it a crime for any citizen to own books. The totalitarian state has, in effect, forced literate people to recreate an oral tradition for safeguarding ideas; and has reduced those that Matthew Arnold termed "the true apostles of equality" to fugitives. "They weren't at all certain," Bradbury writes, "that the things they carried in their heads might make every future dawn glow with a purer light, they were sure of nothing save that the books were on file behind their quiet eyes."

"What to the American slave," asked Frederick Douglass in an 1857 speech, "is your Fourth of July?" He challenged his Rochester, New York audience to confront the gulf between the nation's creed and its practice of slavery. Echoing the 137th Psalm, Douglass intoned, "To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony." But Douglass knew that slavery was maintained by more than iron fetters. In chapter 11 of the *Narrative* he recalls that the only way to attain "contentment in slavery" required accepting his master's requirement of "setting aside my intellectual nature." "But in spite of him," writes Douglass, "and even in spite of myself, I continued to think, and to think about the injustice of my enslavement, and the means of escape."

It is clear that for Douglass "the means of escape" is to be understood in both a literal and a metaphoric sense. For poet Robert Hayden, Douglass' living monument is his ability to make us see that *freedom* is not an abstraction to be worried by linguists, obfuscated by philosophers, or fetishized in "the gaudy mumbo jumbo of politicians." The meaning of freedom, and freedom itself, must be found in the liberation of the mind, in "the lives grown out of his life, the lives / fleshing his dream of the beautiful, needful thing." As with Ray Bradbury's living books, this idea of freedom is an activity that we practice in our own lives.

For me, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* is an extraordinarily efficient textbook, one that would have fit neatly into Bingham's *Columbian Orator*. As it is, Douglass' book gives to students the same gift that Bingham gave to him. That gift, that ability to whet the appetite for knowledge, is precious. Our humanness depends on our determination to always find it again.