

Let's Tell It Right: Historical Inaccuracies in a Story of Lincoln and Douglass

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In this book review, we discuss *Lincoln and Douglass: An American Friendship*, a picture book by Nikki Giovanni and illustrated by Bryan Collier.¹ The book is poetic, artistically presented, and allegorical, but it also contains significant historical inaccuracies as well as misleading statements. Because of the historical inaccuracies, we believe this book should not have received the 2009 Carter G. Woodson Book Award at the elementary level. We are also concerned that teachers, who may consider using this book in their classrooms, should be aware of the errors.

Plot Summary

We checked the picture book's version of the events against Frederick Douglass's revised autobiography of 1892 and other historical sources.² In the following summary, we precede each erroneous or misleading statement in the book with a letter (a-e) so that we may refer back to it later.

The book opens at Lincoln's second inaugural celebration. Mrs. Lincoln asks the president if something is wrong, and he responds, "I am looking for my friend Frederick Douglass. I had (a) asked him to come and bring (b) his wife." Mrs. Lincoln is not pleased. The author explains that the First Lady's (c) "sympathies did not lie with the men and women of color seeking to be free. Frederick Douglass, she feared, had persuaded her husband to take up the cause of the enslaved. She did not want to see her beloved South change."

Suddenly Lincoln sees Douglass and exclaims, "Here comes my friend Douglass." The two men shake hands, and the narrative frame shifts to the past, focusing on some similarities in their personal histories. Both men began life in hardship and poverty, but rose to fame and power to become archetypes of the self-made American.³

A later illustration shows Lincoln and Douglass meeting in a restaurant as young men when (d) Lincoln was elected to Congress in 1846 and Douglass ... well, the story fails to mention any of his parallel accomplishments at this point in his life. In fact, in 1845 he had published *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* to national and world

acclaim. The book states, "A friendship flowered based on mutual values, a love of good food, and the ability to laugh even in the worst of times."

The story continues, "Both men hated slavery—Douglass because he had been enslaved; Lincoln because he had seen its evils." In addition, "Both men knew from their religion and (e) the United States Constitution that human beings should not be 'owned' by other human beings."

Numerous Problems

The idea for the book apparently came from a passage in Douglass's revised autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself*, published in 1892.⁴ Douglass describes meeting the president at the celebration of Lincoln's second inauguration.

I could not have been more than ten feet from him when Mr. Lincoln saw me; his countenance lighted up, and he said in a voice which was heard all around; "Here comes my friend Douglass."

We can check the picture book's narrative against this and other historical sources, which are indicated in parentheses and cited in the notes.

- a. In the same autobiography, Douglass writes that no colored person had ever attended an inaugural reception, so he decided to personally congratulate Lincoln on his reelection and conduct of the war. Douglass says that he decided to take that action himself, not that he was invited by the president.⁵
- b. Douglass recounts that he was accompanied to the second inauguration not by his wife (who shunned the spotlight), but by a local African American woman, "Mrs. Thomas Dorsey." The pair were initially barred from entry, but once allowed inside, Lincoln apparently shook Douglass's hand and asked his opinion of the Second Inaugural Address, which Lincoln had delivered hours before.



c. The portrayal of Mary Todd Lincoln as a Southern sympathizer who opposed the end to slavery is untrue. Mrs. Lincoln was a strong supporter of her husband's presidency, and she became an ally of Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, a leading abolitionist and Radical Republican, during the war.⁶

d. Douglass began the year 1846 in Europe and, on returning to the United States, settled in Rochester, New York. Douglass met Lincoln for the first time 17 years later, at the White House on August 10, 1863. On that occasion, Douglass lobbied Lincoln to recruit black troops for the war effort and to pay, arm, and treat them the same as white soldiers.

e. The U.S. Constitution was the legal foundation for slavery from 1789 until the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified in 1865. This fact is being “forgotten” today by popular authors and denied by politicians—including a recent presidential candidate.⁷ This picture book promotes a sugar-coated version of U.S. Constitutional history that social studies educators must vigorously reject at every grade level.

The original Constitution included the provision, known as the three-fifth compromise, for counting enslaved persons for representation in the House of Representatives and votes in the Electoral College. It also included a provision for the return of anyone who had escaped from slavery, although it did not specifically use the word “slave.”

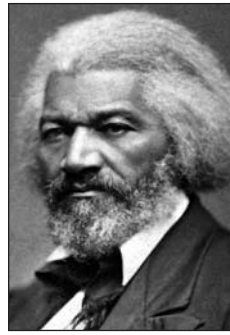
It is true that, in the 1850s, Douglass argued that other parts of the Constitution—most notably the Bill of Rights—could be used as weapon to end slavery. In 1858, Lincoln warned the nation could not continue “permanently half slave and half free,” but he never argued that the Constitution was an anti-slavery document. He issued the Emancipation Proclamation as a war-time, military measure and did not follow normal Constitutional processes.

f. The encounter between Lincoln and Douglass at the reception for the second inauguration was brief, and did not include a private moment on the balcony, according to Douglass. The reception line itself lasted for hours.

Douglass's Point of View

What is the historical record of the relationship between Lincoln and Douglass? Scholarly books have been written on the topic, but we can summarize the evidence here.

On August 10, 1863, Douglass met with Lincoln at the White House to urge the president to recruit African American troops for the war effort and to pay, arm, and command them the same as white soldiers. About one year later, on August 19, 1864, he



returned to the White House at the president's request. Douglass was impressed that President Lincoln prolonged their conversation despite the arrival of the governor of the State of Connecticut. Douglass recalled:

Mr. Lincoln said, ‘tell [the governor] to wait, for I want to have a long talk with my friend Frederick Douglass.’

... This was probably the first time in the history of this Republic when its chief magistrate found occasion or disposition to exercise such an act of impartiality between persons so widely different in their positions and supposed claims upon his attention.⁸

At this meeting, Lincoln and Douglass discussed political strategy (Lincoln's election to a second term was much in doubt) and the feasibility of deploying a guerrilla force to incite slaves to rebel in the South as an aid to Union troops (which were beleaguered at that point in the war).⁹

Finally, on March 4, 1865, the two men talked briefly at the reception following the Second Inaugural Address, according to Douglass.¹⁰ Lincoln asked him what his opinion was of the Second Inaugural Address, and Douglass replied, “Mr. Lincoln, that was a sacred effort.”

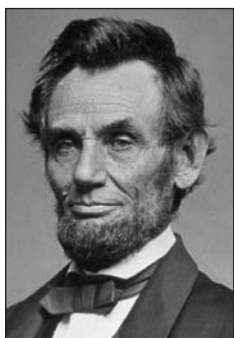
In print and in his speeches after the Civil War, Douglass was generally laudatory of Lincoln, but not entirely so. Douglass did not hesitate to describe things the way he saw them. In April 1876, he spoke at the unveiling of The Freedmen's Monument at Lincoln Park, in Washington, D.C., describing Lincoln when first elected as:

preeminently the white man's president, entirely devoted to the welfare of white men. He was ready and willing at any time during the first years of his administration to deny, postpone, and sacrifice the rights of humanity in the colored people to promote the welfare of the white people of this country. ... He was ready to execute all the supposed guarantees of the United States Constitution in favor of the slave system anywhere inside the slave states. He was willing to pursue, recapture, and send back the fugitive slave to his master, and to suppress a slave rising for liberty ... We [African Americans] are at best only his step-children ...¹¹

Yet, the picture is more nuanced. Douglass came to understand the context in which Lincoln operated and realized that a more aggressive stand by Lincoln (in 1860) would have risked losing northern whites' support. In his later years, he wrote,

Had [Lincoln] put the abolition of slavery before the salvation of the Union, he would have inevitably driven from

him a powerful class of the American people and rendered resistance to rebellion impossible. Viewed from the genuine abolition ground, Mr. Lincoln seemed tardy, cold, dull, and indifferent; but measuring him by the sentiment of his country, a sentiment he was bound as a statesman to consult, he was swift, zealous, radical, and determined.¹²



Lincoln's Point of View

Historians have uncovered only one well-documented record of Lincoln directly commenting on Douglass. In 1864 Lincoln said that he considered Douglass to be “one of the most meritorious men in America.”¹³ These two famous and powerful men shared several hours of intense conversation during the bleakest hours of the Civil

War, when much of the nation believed that Lincoln was soon to lose a presidential election.

A few days after that meeting, Lincoln invited Douglass to tea, but Douglass had to decline due to a prior speaking engagement.¹⁴ As the midterm election approached, Douglass endorsed Lincoln for president.

A Disappointing Decision

That, in sum, is what historical evidence reveals about the interactions and relationship between Lincoln and Douglass. There might be material here for a children's picture book, but such a book should be anchored in historical fact. Based on our reading of the historical record, we believe it is a mistake to describe them as friends.

The Carter G. Woodson Book Awards were established by NCSS in 1974 to recognize books for young readers that explore ethnicity and race relations “accurately” and “sensitively.”¹⁵ While we applaud the members of the awards committee who volunteer enormous amounts of their time in reading and selecting books each year, our concern is that the committee went astray when it gave the 2009 book award at the elementary level to *Lincoln and Douglass: An American Friendship*. While the book addresses an important topic, it is seriously flawed by historical inaccuracies and misleading statements, and thus should not have received the award. 🚫

Notes

1. Nikki Giovanni, *Lincoln and Douglass: An American Friendship* (New York: Holt, 2008).
2. Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass Written by Himself* (New York: Collier Books, 1892/1962).
3. Douglass wrote, “we both start[ed] at the lowest rung of the ladder.” See Allen C. Guelzo, “Lincoln, Race and Slavery: A Biographical Overview,” *OAH Magazine of History* (2007): 17.
4. Douglass, 366.
5. Douglass, 365.
6. National First Ladies' Library, “Mary Lincoln,” www.firstladies.org/biographies/firstladies.aspx?biography=17.

7. Jonathan Capehart “Michele Bachmann's ‘Absolutely Amazing’ View of History,” *PostPartisan* (January 24, 2011), www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan.
8. Douglass, 349-350.
9. John Stauffer, *Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Twelve, 2008): 284–292. The plan resembled, noted Douglass, one of John Brown's schemes. Union armies began winning battles in 1863, and the mission was not finalized or implemented.
10. Douglass's description is the only known record of his encounter with president at the second inaugural reception.
11. Frederick Douglass, “Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln,” (1876), teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?documentprint=39.
12. Douglass, 1892, 593-594.
13. Lincoln's statement was noted by Rev. John Eaton, who in 1863 was made colonel of the 63rd Regiment of Colored Infantry, and with whom Lincoln consulted. See Stauffer, 285.
14. Stauffer, 290.
15. Carter G. Woodson Book Awards, www.socialstudies.org/woodson.

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Response

The Carter G. Woodson Book Awards Review Committee is charged with selecting “outstanding social science books for young readers that treat topics related to ethnic minorities and relations sensitively and accurately.” This current discussion of a past selection raises appropriate issues, and we welcome the authors' well-articulated criticism of the book. Fundamental to social studies is reasoned debate and criticism of our work, which can occur in many formats—teaching, research, and in this case, the selection of a book for the highly respected Woodson Book Award.

NCSS is dedicated to its members and supports any endeavor to assist the work of the volunteers on its many committees. The policy and resulting procedures of the Carter G. Woodson award are solidly in place and frequently reviewed, and that review process will continue to be an agenda item for discussion. At the 2011 NCSS Annual Conference, the Committee reviewed the Award's standards and procedures to assure that committee members select literature for young people that best represents the Woodson Award.

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