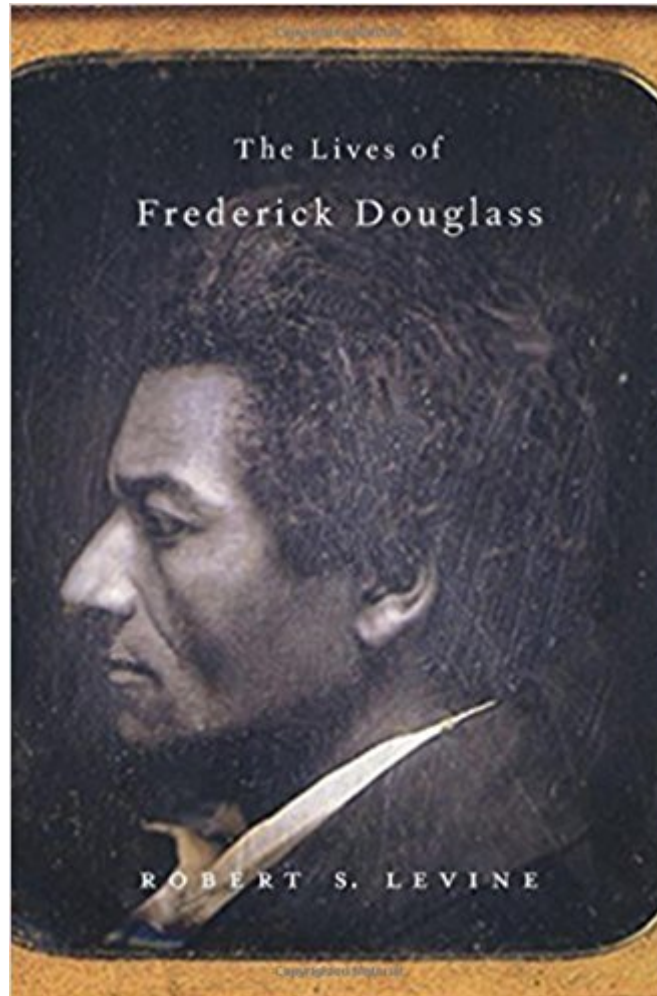




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The Lives Of Frederick Douglass



Synopsis

Frederick Douglass's fluid, changeable sense of his own life story is reflected in the many conflicting accounts he gave of key events and relationships during his journey from slavery to freedom. Nevertheless, when these differing self-presentations are put side by side and consideration is given individually to their rhetorical strategies and historical moment, what emerges is a fascinating collage of Robert S. Levine's elusive subject. *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* is revisionist biography at its best, offering new perspectives on Douglass the social reformer, orator, and writer. Out of print for a hundred years when it was reissued in 1960, *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) has since become part of the canon of American literature and the primary lens through which scholars see Douglass's life and work. Levine argues that the disproportionate attention paid to the *Narrative* has distorted Douglass's larger autobiographical project. *The Lives of Frederick Douglass* focuses on a wide range of writings from the 1840s to the 1890s, particularly the neglected *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, 1892), revised and expanded only three years before Douglass's death. Levine provides fresh insights into Douglass's relationships with John Brown, Abraham Lincoln, William Lloyd Garrison, and his former slave master Thomas Auld, and highlights Douglass's evolving positions on race, violence, and nation. Levine's portrait reveals that Douglass could be every bit as pragmatic as Lincoln—of whom he was sometimes fiercely critical—when it came to promoting his own work and goals.

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One might as well plunge into Chapter Four to find the long-disputed relationship between President Lincoln and Douglass. Lincoln requested a second meeting with Douglass at the White House on August 25, 1864, to discuss mobilizing slaves of southern Confederate states. To Lincoln, Douglass suggested he organize groups of northern blacks to infiltrate into southern lines, but Lincoln hesitated to adopt the plan. Was President Lincoln in fact willing to negotiate peace with southern slave states to preserve the Union and slavery? Levine endeavors to provide a balanced view of biographical sketches of Douglass by indicating the possibility that some of the intricate Lincoln-Douglass relationships could have been inadvertently garnished by Douglass himself or others while editing his works. The story on the Douglass-John Brown relationship is in the parenthesis for the obvious reason one can find in Chapter Four.

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