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Compelling work traces the formidable journey of an Igbo prince from captivity to freedom and literacy and recounts his enslavement in the New World, service in the Seven Years War, voyages to the Arctic, six months among the Miskito Indians in Central America, and more.

The Life of Olaudah Equiano Details

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Author : Olaudah Equiano

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From Reader Review The Life of Olaudah Equiano for online ebook

Jean says

Olaudah Equiano wrote his memoir in 1789 as a two-volume work. Following the publication of his book, he traveled throughout Great Britain as an abolitionist and author. He married Susanna Collen in 1792, and had two daughters. Equiano died in London in 1797.

The first part of the book describes Equiano's native African culture and countryside. He was born in Eboe, in what is now Nigeria. He tells of his capture as a child along with his sister and being sold into slavery. He was sent to the West Indies. He was sold again and spent some time in Virginia working on a plantation. He was sold again; this time to the owner/captain of a merchant ship and was taken to England. While the Captain was ashore, Equiano was sent to school and learned to read and write English. He also learned about Christianity. He would then go to sea with the Captain. He was sold several times and ended up sold to a Quaker merchant who employed him in a variety of positions. He saved money and purchased his freedom.

The book is well written but in the style of the 1780s. His descriptions of extreme hardship and desperate conditions are interspersed with his astonishment at new sights and experiences. He also tells of his culture shock at his introduction to European culture and their treatment of slaves. This is an important book to read as it is one of the few first-hand narratives of slavery in the 1700s. It is also important to read as slavery is still a problem today primarily in Africa.

Jeff Moon does a good job narrating the book. Moon is an actor, singer, voiceover artist and audiobook narrator.

Olivia-Savannah Roach says

This was assigned reading for university. It mostly seemed long. Although there is no doubt that Olaudah Equiano had a very interesting and testing life, and has achieved and experienced much, my personal interest was lost at some moments. He travels a lot and this is a travel narrative, but I'm not into sailing much. I was interested in the moments about how slaves and he himself were treated. Yet this just wasn't the read for me...

Obsidian says

DNF at 13 percent.

I feel bad for not finishing this, but this whole book has been a struggle, which is why it sat on my currently reading shelf for months.

The book is a stream of consciousness writing by Olaudah Equiano. Mr. Equiano also known as Gustavus Vassa was a prominent African living in London. He was a freed slave that supported the British movement to end the slave trade. This autobiography is considered to be one of the main reasons that the Slave

Trade Act of 1807 ended up being favored by many.

I feel terrible that I could not get into this book considering this is listed everywhere as a must read book for African Americans.

I just really could not get into the writing. I mean this was first published in 1789 and the wording and style of writing took a bit to get into. But at this point, the autobiography has no flow to it. There is just regurgitation of information being thrown at the reader and I can't take it anymore.

Marc Kohlman says

A moving epic autobiography! When I first saw the 2007 film "Amazing Grace", Equiano's (played by Youssou N'Dour) life, trials and accomplishments fascinated me so much that I was very eager to read his story. His prose is vivid, strong and deep with exquisite details and a human depth. As a person of African descent, I found myself identifying more with Equiano the further I read. All the while, imagining who my ancestors had been, where from Africa they hailed and how they survived the dreaded Middle Passage. This certainly is a literary work that transcends time and unveils the cruelty, perseverance and courage of the human spirit. A busy schedule drove me to put off reading this book for three years- yet I never lost interest or awe in this incredible story of a man who survived great adversity and bigotry to find hope and change the world. To be stripped of homeland, family, culture and identity is a pain no person should be dealt. Equiano endured all of these yet they did not kill his drive to learn, live and support the cause of Abolition. While the slave trade has long been abolished, there are nations and societies still rife with human trafficking, subjugation and oppression today. Just as in Equiano's era, we must take a stand and speak out against these injustices. I suggest everyone to read this book. From the first page to the last, the words will grip you and have you look not only at society but into your own heart.

Alex says

My wife was so excited when she found out I was reading this, because she says she now knows the worst possible answer to "What are you into?" "I'm pretty into 18th-century slave narratives." It's a good thing I'm already married, she says. Worst Tinder profile ever.

Anyway, so I'm pretty into 18th-century slave narratives, specifically this one book, the first major slave narrative, which was a ginormous success when it was published in 1789, going to eight editions and remaining continuously in print for a century, and helping to bring about the end of slavery in Britain. (I'm also into 19th-century slave narratives!)

And Olaudah Equiano's story has it all. Slavery! Naval warfare! Shipwreck! Arctic exploration! It's so action-packed that it feels wildly improbable, but Equiano was a public figure, a leading abolitionist, and most of his story is thoroughly documented. There's some pedantic debate about whether he was born in Africa or South Carolina. (The book begins in Africa and follows his capture and passage to the Indies.) The rest of it definitely happened.

The more unfortunate thing is that it's wildly boring. Equiano has a fascinating story, but he's a horrendous storyteller. Here's a story:

Just as our ship was under sail, I went down under the cabin, to do some business, and had a lighted candle in my hand, which, in my hurry, without thinking, I held in a barrel of gunpowder. It remained in the powder, until it was near catching fire, when fortunately, I observed it.

That's incredible, right? I'm almost impressed at his ability to make such a great story that boring. Wait 'til he starts talking about God, it's *dire*.

So this is sort of the Castle of Otranto of slave narratives: it's an inventor of the genre, and responsible for codifying many of its rules, but in itself it's not great literature. As slave narratives became a popular genre in the 19th century, they followed Equiano's three-act blueprint:

- The horrors of slavery are described
- There is a dramatic escape
- The author becomes a productive member of society.

The details here are unique, mostly due to Equiano's extensive naval career, but the basic arc is in place. More gifted writers - notably Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and Solomon Northup - would make better literature with it in the coming century. Olaudah Equiano's book is important but not terrifically well-told; I can only really recommend it if, say, you're already pretty into 18th-century slave narratives.

Linda says

I went through a variety of stages while reading this book. First, I was very interested. The opening 40 pages drew me in. I was taken with this small boy being ripped from everything he knew. Then, Gustavus Vassa's interesting life got really boring. The story itself was riveting, but the writing was difficult to get through. It is, probably, typical of the time, but not for my own 21st century tastes. I powered through, because I think that this is, historically, an important book to read. Vassa's memoir is the only book that I know of in which an ex-slave documents the middle passage. As I continued to read, I became intrigued by Vassa's psychology and his conversion to Christianity. Chapter 10 was, particularly, fascinating. In it, Vassa spent a great deal of time writing about his spiritual struggles which was one of the most interesting dimensions of the book.

For his spiritual struggles, he never seemed to question his own complicity in slavery. As a free man, he purchased slaves and worked as an overseer. I don't write this as a judgment of Vassa. He lived with great integrity and, when he had the means, he fought strongly against slavery. I find it curious that as such a thoughtful person on the matters of slavery and Christianity that he did not tackle that question.

The best parts of the book were when Vassa shared of himself, not just the facts. This memoir is begging for a historical-fiction transformation. I would like to see an author keep true to the historical details of Vassa's life, but give us better writing and a more multidimensional person in Vassa.

Shovelmonkey1 says

Olaudah Equiano and his interesting narrative provide an insight into a time and situation that few people survived to record or recall, and those that did survive were rarely ever literate. For this reason, and so many

others, Equiano (or Gustavus Vassa as he was later christened) has a unique story to tell.

Kidnapped from his home in an Ibo village (Nigeria), Equiano is enslaved by people of his own race and traded between tribal groups for over nine months before he finally makes it to the coast where he is put on board a slave ship and forced to endure the horrors of what was known as the middle passage (the journey at the centre of the slavery triangle from Africa to the Americas). The mere fact that he survived this journey when millions of others died is a testament to his will to survive from the very beginning. Following this he was passed between many masters some who Equiano says "used him well" and others who treated him with cruelty and tyrannical violence. Having learned English, converted to Christianity and befriended his master (a ship's Captain), Equiano becomes a capable hand before the mast. He travels on numerous barques, sloops and brigs, making journeys from England to Spain, Portugal, Turkey, Jamaica, Georgia, Barbados and the Mosquito coast before savvy trading allows him to save enough money to purchase his deeds of manumission (essentially he bought his own freedom).

However, life as a free man is not simple in the late 18th century and life as a freed slave is even more difficult. Equiano spends half of his time being ripped off by treacherous white traders, ship captains and merchants and more than a few of the people he meets try to press gang him onto boats or sell him on as a runaway slave. Despite these set backs Equiano, ever the optimist, maintains an outlook which constantly sees the best in everyone.

From the point of view of a maritime archaeologist who lives in works in Liverpool, I found this book interesting for a number of reasons;

Equiano visit Liverpool but provides no description aside from mentioning that he sails from here to Dublin. At this time Liverpool was at its peak of involvement in the slave trade and yet despite visiting Wales, London and even the Midlands, he never make a proper visit to the city where many of the Guineamen (slave ships) were berthed. It might be that the reputation of sailors town on the waterfront precluded a long stay; press ganging, abduction and murder were not uncommon here.

Equiano provides an excellent record of the ships he sails on, noting their type, their names and sometimes their captains or owners. It is interesting to note that near the beginning of his story most of the vessels plying their trade across the Atlantic are of 50 or 60 tons, however as his narrative progresses the vessels have increased in size and now exceed 150 tons. This is indicative of the wealth of the British Merchant fleets as well as advances in Maritime and ship building technology. This kind of increase in size can also be seen in records such as Gomer Williams' History of the Liverpool Privateers 1744 - 1812.

Equiano converts to Christianity and mentally chastises himself for not living according to all ten commandments (he swear aboard ship and works on the Sabbath meaning that he's only achieving a score of 8/10 on the commandments front), yet the white, so called Christians; the very men whose religion he has adopted were the ones who enslaved him in the first place. Furthermore he rarely questions how any benevolent god can exist when millions of enslaved Africans are dying.

Equiano, as a free man, actively participates in the slave trade. He works on board boats which carry slaves and even goes to market on behalf of his employer to purchase slaves himself. At no point in his narrative does he express remorse for his part in the trade which was responsible for his own displacement or reflect on his new role at the other end of the perspective (yet he chastises himself for swearing and thus being ungodly). He even mentions that when buying slaves he preferentially selects his own countrymen. Later events in the narrative indicate that this was his way of ensuring that they were better treated and well fed; he knows that this is one way in which he can make their lives tolerable as it is not within his power to assure their comfort or safety in any other way.

Equiano also does a fantastic job of highlighting the perils of seafaring. He made dozens of voyages where some men were lucky to survive more than two or three and his narrative is full of near drownings, wreckings and head on collisions with other boats. Collisions with other vessels are in fact surprisingly numerous which is amazing when you consider the size of the Atlantic Ocean and the lack of formalised shipping lanes at this time!

A brilliant narrative and one that provides a first hand account of the slave trade - this book became a core part of the abolitionist literature when it was published. Well deserving of a place on the 1001 books list and unique in many ways.

Melissa says

Now that was, indeed, an interesting narrative! The narrative may have been written in the language of the times, but even that had a hard time making this one boring. From slavery to freedom, to various sea voyages (England to America to the Arctic to Africa and back again) and disasters just barely escaping with his life and freedom. Definitely one we should have read in school!

Celestia says

This is from my son Dallin, age 12, who read the book:

I learned that you should control your temper. If you are mad at someone and start beating up on them it's your own fault if they don't listen to you. They won't listen to you because you have been beating up on them. I learned that the Africans had slaves among themselves.

Equiano was a great man. He was the most famous anti-slavery man in England. Even more than William Wilberforce. England was a safer place for slaves to be than the West Indies. This was even before slavery in England was outlawed.

By honest trade he made forty seven pounds of sterling. He gradually made money by selling glass tumblers which he bought and then sold for a profit and then other stuff. His master told him that he thought he would run away. Even though Equiano knew that his master expected him to run away he bought his freedom and left honestly.

He helped other slaves. He was cheering. After he bought his freedom once he was paid by his master to take a cargo of slaves to Georgia. The captain of the ship bragged that he was the best navigator there ever was and kept navigating him off course. They hit some rocks. There was a hole in the bottom of the ship. The captain wanted the hatches nailed shut to keep the water from draining in and sinking the top of the boat. If the hatches were nailed shut the slaves in the hull of the ship would drown. Equiano told the men not to nail the hatches shut because the slaves would die.

He felt that the reason why they had hit the rocks was because he had sworn about the ship and felt that God was angry. Some of the whites on the ship gave up hope when the ship hit the rocks and got drunk. Equiano nailed a piece of leather over the hole and took the ship's boat and dragged all the men, even the drunkards,

in small groups, into the boat. Then they took the boat to a nearby small island.

The island was surrounded by reefs. To get over the reefs they had to climb out of the boat and drag it over with their legs. They would drop the men off on the island and go back to the ship for more. When the ship sunk all the crew and cargo slaves were safe on the island.

A few days later some of the men took the boat and off the coast of one of the Bahama islands they found a ship that was out sailing and trying to find wrecks and rescue the people from the wrecks. So all the people from Equiano's crew and the slave cargo were saved.

Kristi Fites says

A look into the life of a man stolen from Africa and his journey from that point. I loved his thoughtful tribute to his country and his family in the beginning. The middle was a little hard to get through unless you are into sailing. But the book overall provided a unique look into the life of a slave at that time. And helps build a bigger picture of the realities of that time.

Owlseyes says

The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano by Olaudah Equiano (1789)

in: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/201...>

Vaishali says

Chilling account of a man born free in Africa, sold into slavery, spends most of life on the high seas, and finally acquires freedom. He experiences the treatment of blacks in its myriad forms on 3 continents. I was struck by how singularly good he is, how thoroughly honest, even relating some flubs. This adds considerably to its validity, which for me is important viz. historicity.

Since his thoughts are mostly clear and compassionate, we have a few jewels of expression :

"Cowardice is ever the companion of cruelty."

"Is not the slave trade a bloody war with the heart of man?"

"Is it surprising that slaves when mildly treated should prefer even the misery of slavery to such a mockery of freedom?"

And lastly, from his very well-written letter to the Queen of England detailing how slavery's end would increase wealth to Great Britain:

"What is inhumane must ever be unwise."

Leni Iversen says

What a life!

The author apologises if the reader finds his story a bit dull, and maintains that it is only because he sticks strictly to the truth with no embellishments. But the truth sometimes beggars belief, and it is frankly astonishing that a life so full of wild adventure and changing fortunes can be rendered so dry and unexciting. Apparently practically everything in these memoirs can be backed up and documented by other sources, so the reader can only marvel and not disbelieve. And I would marvel, I did marvel, it's just that I would have marvelled so much more if the wildest events hadn't been tersely summarized in a few neutral sentences before moving on to the next adventure without so much as a change of paragraphs. Equiano only plays lip-service to the adventure. His focus is on showing that his people are, well... people! And that slavery is both morally wrong and economically unsound.

The Narrative is as such both Interesting and not very. But it is a well of information on the 18th century slave trade, and the conditions trafficked Africans had to live under whether enslaved or emancipated. Perhaps it is a mercy that Equiano uses a brief informative style rather than a more evocative account. The descriptions of the slave ships and the various punishments meted out to slaves in the West Indies for the smallest infractions, real or perceived, are hard enough to read as it is. But as Equiano was used to getting neither justice nor mercy from white people, he doesn't leave it at descriptions of the gross brutality and injustices encountered. No, he starts with the Bible, and tries to establish a link between the people of Africa and the lost tribe of Israel. Considering how the Jews have been treated in Europe over the centuries it seems a desperate move to base a claim to justice and freedom on such a parallel. He further argues that lack of ability stems not from lack of intelligence due to skin colour, but lack of education, nutrition and opportunity. I winced reading this, that it should be necessary to even argue this, and then I winced even more when it occurred to me that some people haven't received the memo even in the 21. century. Equiano also shows himself a more dedicated and pious Christian than most of the white people he meets, and the contemporary reader must have felt ashamed of the barbarity of their countrymen. It is not surprising that his account helped abolish slavery in Britain. It is a pity it didn't do the same for America.

Madeline says

Generally regarded as one of the best slave narratives ever written, the book is Equiano describing his life, beginning with how he was kidnapped in Africa at age 11 and sold into slavery. The interesting thing about this book is that Equiano doesn't just survive the Middle Passage, but actually crosses the Atlantic multiple times, traveling from South America to England to the American Colonies to the Caribbean to the Middle East, all while trying to win his freedom. It's a passionate anti-slavery message, with Equiano unflinchingly recounting the horrors of the slave trade to make his readers cringe (I defy you to read his account of the Middle Passage, or how he mentions seeing 9 year old African girls raped by white men, without wanting to throw up) and making reasoned arguments against it. Whether or not the account is fully non-fiction (and I'll get to that), the fact remains that this is a very affecting story.

So many negative reviews of this book on Goodreads! I'm a little surprised, actually. Yes, it drags on for long stretches at a time while Equiano regales us with boring naval stories and tells us everything about his spiritual conversion, but what people are missing, I think, is that he's including these stories for a reason. He

was writing for a white, male, upper-class audience in the 18th century, and those readers probably wouldn't have been too interested in reading 200 pages on why slavery is wrong and they're total assholes for supporting it. So Equiano throws in all the seafaring crap to keep his audience interested, and also prove what a loyal British subject he is. The religion aspect is the same thing: no one wants to listen to a heathen, so Equiano makes it clear that he's a devout Christian, and then uses scripture and Christian doctrine to support his arguments against slavery. All the boring parts are, in fact, a calculated effort to get more people to read his book and listen to what he has to say. (that doesn't make it much more interesting to read in the 21st century, of course, but you can't win them all)

And now, we discuss the ESCANDALO surrounding this book:

Okay, so in the book Equiano mentions that when he lived in the American colonies he was baptized as Gustavus Vassa. There is a record of this baptism, but this is what it says: "Gustavus Vassa - a Black born in Carolina 12 years old." Then, one of the ships Equiano worked on has a record of a crew member named "Gust. Weston" or "Gust. Feston" of "S. Carolina."

After scholars found this, there was an immediate academic shitstorm because *omg Equiano might not actually have been born in Africa at all!* This (very flimsy, in my opinion) piece of evidence has been enough for some people to disregard the book entirely, because if Equiano is a liar then why should we listen to anything he has to say?

At the risk of editorializing, these people are idiots. My class read a very good, very angry article by Cathy Davidson where she rips this argument apart, and basically boils it down to three main points: 1) Equiano's master might have had a very good reason for saying that he was born in the colonies rather than Africa, so they wrote that on the baptism record; similarly, it may have been easier for Equiano to say that he was born in South Carolina. Thousands of immigrants have done similar things, and it doesn't make them liars. 2) If Equiano was born in America and never made the Middle Passage, that doesn't mean his account of it isn't true because he could have heard about it from another slave. 3) If Equiano was in fact born in America, that doesn't diminish the importance of his narrative at all. In fact, it gives the book even greater significance because it means that *the first American novelist was black*. That fact alone means that this book should not be disregarded because it might not be entirely factual - whether or not Equiano was entirely truthful in his book is not the point at all.

Read for: Colonial Imagination

Kelly says

For some reason, human suffering has always been slowly and steadily insinuating itself into what I enjoy reading. Sometimes though, the understanding of it does not seem universal anymore, at least, not like it used to be. Sympathy is not as strong as it once was, but in my house and home, I was raised to believe that all creatures were made equal, well, the human ones anyhow. A contemporary novel (and quite a thick one too!), *Cutting for Stone* by Abraham Verghese was a touching descendant of this man's story I think, at least the first few parts of it were. It was the hint that reminded me of Olaudah, whom I read of when last semester.

Olaudah captures the defining line between the "esteemed" white man and the "lowly" black man tautly, and he does not flinch from adding a few tasteful details. If I remember correctly though, there were a few things I didn't like, grammar mistakes or something rather. But the power behind every slave in time that had the guts to write about their grievances is one I wish I could carry with me day to day.

