

Slave narrative

The **slave narrative** is a type of literary work that is made up of the written accounts of enslaved Africans in Great Britain and its colonies, including the later United States, Canada, and Caribbean nations. Some six thousand former slaves from North America and the Caribbean gave accounts of their lives during the 18th and 19th centuries, with about 150 narratives published as separate books or pamphlets. In the U.S. during the Great Depression (1930s), more than 2,300 additional oral histories on life during slavery were collected by writers sponsored and published by the Works Progress Administration^[1] (WPA) of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration. Most of the 26 audio-recorded interviews are held by the Library of Congress^[2]

Some of the earliest memoirs of captivity known in England and the British Isles were written by white Europeans and later Americans captured and sometimes enslaved in North Africa, usually by Barbary pirates. These were part of a broad category of "captivity narratives" by English-speaking Europeans. Beginning in the 18th century, these included accounts by colonists and American settlers in North America and the United States who were captured and held by Native Americans. Several well-known captivity narratives were published before the American Revolution and they often followed forms established with the narratives of captivity in North Africa. Later North American accounts were by Americans captured by western tribes during 19th-century migrations.

For the Europeans and Americans, the division between captivity as slaves and as prisoners of war was not always clear. Given the problem of international contemporary slavery in the 20th and 21st centuries, additional slave narratives are being written and published. It is an ubiquitous issue that still persists and remains largely undocumented.

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Slave narratives as a literary genre

The development of slave narratives from autobiographical accounts to modern fictional works led to the establishment of slave narratives as a literary genre. This large rubric of this so-called "captivity literature" includes more generally "any account of the life, or a major portion of the life, of a fugitive or former slave, either written or orally related by the slave himself or herself".^[3] Whereas the first narratives told the stories of fugitive or freed slaves in a time of racial prejudice, they further developed into retrospective fictional novels and extended their influence until common days. Not only maintaining the memory and capturing the historical truth transmitted in these accounts, but slave narratives were primarily the tool for fugitive or former slaves to state their independence in

the 19th century, and carry on and conserve authentic and true historical facts from a first-person perspective. They go further than just autobiographies, and are moreover "a source for reconstructing historical experience".^[4] The freed slaves that wrote the narratives are considered as historians, since "memory and history come together".^[5] These accounts link elements of the slave's personal life and destiny with key historical events, such as the American Civil War and the Underground Railroad

In simple, yet powerful storylines, slave narratives follow in general a plot common to all of them: starting from the initial situation, the slave in his master's home, the protagonist escapes in the wilderness and narrates the struggle for survival and recognition throughout his uncertain journey to freedom.^[6] After all, these narratives were written retrospectively by freed slaves and/or their abolitionist advocate, hence the focus on the transformation from the dehumanized slave to the self-emancipated free man. This change often entailed literacy as a means to overcome captivity, as the case of Frederick Douglass highlights. The narratives are very graphic to the extent as extensive accounts of e.g. whipping, abuse and rape of enslaved women are exposed in detail (see Treatment of slaves in the United States). The denunciation of the slave owners, in particular their cruelty and hypocrisy, is a recurring theme in slave narratives, and in some examples took a comic stance denouncing the double standards (e.g. in Douglass' narrative, his slave owner Hopkins is a very religious, but also brutal man).

According to James Olney a typical outline looks the following way:

{ {quote|A. An engraved portrait, signed by the narrator:

B. A title page that includes the claim, as an integral part of the title, "Written by Himself" (or some close variant: "Written from a statement of Facts Made by Himself"; or "Written by a Friend, as Related to Him by Brother Jones; etc.)

C. A handful of testimonials and/or one or more prefaces or introductions written either by a white abolitionist friend of the narrator (William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips) or by a white amanuensis/editor/author actually responsible for the text (John Greenleaf Whittier, David Wilson, Louis Alexis Chamerovzow), in the course of which preface the reader is told that the narrative is a "plain, unvarnished tale" and that naught "has been set down in malice, nothing exaggerated, nothing drawn from the imagination"-indeed, the tale, it is claimed, understates the horrors of slavery

D. A poetic epigraph, by preference from William Cowper:

E. The actual narrative:

1. a first sentence beginning, "I was born ... ," then specifying a place but not a date of birth;

2. a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father;

3. description of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently the victims;

4. an account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave often "pure African"-who, because there is no reason for it, refuses to be whipped;

5. record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write;

6. description of a "Christian" slaveholder (often of one such dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that "Christian" slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion;

7. description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year;

8. account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South;

9. description of patrols, of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs;

10. description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, travelling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation;

11. taking of a new last name (frequently one suggested by a white abolitionist) to accord with new social identity as a free man, but retention of first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity;

12. reflections on slavery

F. An appendix or appendices composed of documentary material bills of sale, details of purchase from slavery, newspaper items-, further reflections on slavery, sermons, anti-slavery speeches, poems, appeals to the reader for funds and moral support in the battle against slavery.^[7])

There is no consensus about what exact type of literature slave narratives are, whether they can be considered as a proper genre, comprised in the large category Captivity narrative, or are Autobiographies, Memoirs, Testimonials, or Novels; nonetheless, they play a big part in keeping up the memory of slavery and in approaching a topic that was considered as a taboo for a long time - especially since many denied and still deny the existence of slavery.^[8] However, because of the participation of abolitionist editors, influential historians, such as Ulrich B. Phillips in 1929, suggested that, as a class, "their authenticity was doubtful." With increased emphasis on using the slaves' own accounts and the research of broader classes of information, since the late 20th century historians have more often validated the accounts of slaves about their own experiences.^[9]

North American slave narratives

Slave narratives by African slaves from North America were first published in England in the 18th century. They soon became the main form of African-American literature in the 19th century. Slave narratives were publicized by abolitionists, who sometimes participated as editors, or writers if slaves were not literate. During the first half of the 19th century, the controversy over slavery in the United States led to impassioned literature on both sides of the issue.

To present the reality of slavery, a number of former slaves, such as Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, and Frederick Douglass, published accounts of their enslavement and their escapes to freedom. Lucy Delaney wrote an account that included the freedom suit waged by her mother in Missouri for their freedom. Eventually some 6,000 former slaves from North America and the Caribbean wrote accounts of their lives, with about 150 of these published as separate books or pamphlets. In total, it is believed that there exist 294 slave narratives.^[10]

Before the American Civil War, some authors wrote fictional accounts of slavery to create support for abolitionism. The prime example is Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The success of her novel and the social tensions of the time brought a response by white southern writers, such as William Gilmore Simms and Mary Eastman, who published what were called anti-Tom novels. Both kinds of novels were bestsellers in the 1850s.

The North American slave narratives can be broadly categorized into three distinct forms: tales of religious redemption, tales to inspire the abolitionist struggle, and tales of progress. The tales written to inspire the abolitionist struggle are the most famous because they tend to have a strong autobiographical motif, such as in Frederick Douglass' autobiographies and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs (1861).

Tales of religious redemption

From the 1770s to the 1820s, the slave narratives generally gave an account of a spiritual journey leading to Christian redemption. The authors usually characterized themselves as Africans rather than slaves, as most were born in Africa.

Examples include:

- *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert "Ukawsaw Gronniosaw", an African Prince*, by Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, Bath, England, 1772
- *The Interesting Narrative and the life of "Olaudah Equiano" or Gustavus Vassa, the African*, by Olaudah Equiano, London, 1789

- *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa: But Resident Above Sixty Years in the United State of America*, by Venture Smith, New London, 1798
- *The Blind African Slave, Or Memoirs of Boyereau Brinch, Nicknamed Jeffrey Brace* by Jeffrey Brace as told to Benjamin F. Prentiss, Esq., St. Albans, Vermont, 1810;^[11] edited and with an introduction by Kari J. WinterMadison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press 2004, ISBN 0-299-20140-6^[12]
- *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher*, by John Jea, 1811

Tales to inspire the abolitionist movement

From the mid-1820s, writers consciously chose the autobiographical form to generate enthusiasms for the abolitionist movement. Some writers adopted literary techniques, including the use of fictionalized dialogue. Between 1835 and 1865 more than 80 such narratives were published. Recurrent features include: slave auctions, the break-up of families, and frequently two accounts of escapes, one of which is successful. As this was the period of the forced migration of an estimated one million slaves from the Upper South to the Deep South through the internal slave trade, the experiences of auctions and separation of families were common to many.

Examples include:

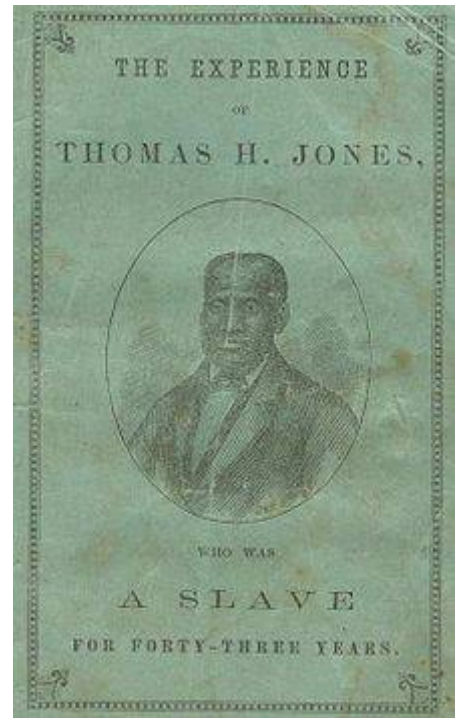
- *Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave* by William Grimes, New York, 1825
- *A Narrative of Some Remarkable Incidents in the Life of Solomon Bayley Formerly a Slave in the State of Delaware, North America*, by Solomon Bayley, 1825
- *The History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, by Mary Prince, London, 1831
- *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man* by Charles Ball, Lewistown, 1836
- *A Narrative of Adventures and Escape of Moses Roper from American Slavery* by Moses Roper, London, 1837
- *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane, Formerly of Raleigh, N.C. Embracing an Account of His Early Life, the Redemption by Purchase of Himself and Family from Slavery and His Banishment from the Place of His Birth for the Crime of Wearing a Colored Skin*, by Lunsford Lane, 1842
- *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* by Frederick Douglass, Boston, 1845
- *Narratives of the Sufferings of Lewis and Milton Clarke, Sons of a Soldier of the Revolution, during a Captivity of More than Twenty Years among the Slaveholders of Kentucky* Boston, 1846
- *Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave*, by William Wells Brown, Boston, 1847
- *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, by Henry Box Brown, Boston, 1849
- *The Life of Josiah Henson, Formerly a Slave, Now an Inhabitant of Canada, as Narrated by Himself* Josiah Henson, Boston, 1849
- *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* by Henry Bibb, New York, 1849
- *The Fugitive Blacksmith, or Events in the History of James W.C. Pennington*, by James W. C. Pennington, London, 1849
- *Twelve Years a Slave*, by Solomon Northup, Auburn, and Buffalo, New York and London, 1853
- *Slave Life in Georgia: A Narrative of the Life, Sufferings, and Escape of John Brown, a Fugitive Slave, Now in England* by John Brown, 1855
- *The Life of John Thompson, A Fugitive Slave* Worcester, Massachusetts, 1855
- *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed, Being the Personal Recollections of Peter Still and his Wife "Vina," after Forty Years of Slavery*, by Kate E. R. Pickard, New York, 1856
- *The Rev. J. W. Loguen, as a Slave and as a Freeman, a Narrative of Real Life* by Jermain Wesley Loguen, 1859
- *Running a thousand Miles for Freedom, or the Escape of William and Ellen Craft from Slavery*, by Ellen and William Craft, London, 1860
- *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, Boston, 1861
- *The Experience of a Slave in South Carolina* by John Andrew Jackson, London, 1862
- *Narrative of the Life of J. D. Green, a Runaway Slave from Kentucky* by Jacob D. Green, Huddersfield, 1864
- "Recollections of Slavery by a Runaway Slave", *The Emancipator*, August 23, September 13, September 20, October 11, October 18, 1838, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/runaway/menu.htm> retrieved 09/15/2014^[13]

Tales of progress

Following the defeat of the slave states of the Confederate South, the authors had less need to convey the evils of slavery. Some gave a sentimental account of plantation life and ended with the narrator adjusting to the new life of freedom. The emphasis of writers shifted conceptually toward a recounting of individual and racial progress rather than securing freedom.

Examples include:

- *The Life of James Mars, A Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut* Hartford, 1864
- *A Colored Man's Reminiscences of James Madison* by Paul Jennings, 1865
- *The Freedman's Story* by William Parker, published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1866
- *Behind the Scenes: Or Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, by Elizabeth Keckley, 1868
- *The Underground Railroad Records* by William Still, 1872, recounts the experiences of hundreds of slaves
- *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or Struggles for Freedom* by Lucy Delaney, 1892 - this is unique as the only first-person account of a successful freedom suit
- *Thirty Years a Slave: From Bondage to Freedom* by Louis Hughes, Milwaukee, 1897
- *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, Garden City, New York, 1901
- *Before the War, and After the Union: An Autobiography* by Sam Aleckson, Boston, 1929



Slave narrative of Thomas H. Jones published in 1871

WPA slave narratives

During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the New Deal Works Projects Administration (WPA) employed writers and researchers from the Federal Writers' Project to interview and document the stories of African Americans who were former slaves. Most had been children when the Thirteenth Amendment was passed. Produced between 1936 and 1938, the narratives recount the experiences of more than 2,300 former slaves. Some interviews were recorded; 23 of 26 known audio recordings are held by the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.^{[2][14]} The last interview of a former slave was with Fountain Hughes, then 101, in Baltimore, Maryland in 1949.^[2] He was a grandson of a slave owned by President Thomas Jefferson at Monticello.

North African slave narratives

In comparison to North American and Caribbean slave narratives, the North African slave narratives in English were written by British and American white slaves captured (often at sea or through the Turkish Abductions) and enslaved in North Africa in the 18th and early 19th centuries. These narratives have a distinct form in that they highlight the "otherness" of the Muslim slave traders, whereas the African-American slave narratives often call slave traders to account as fellow Christians.

Some captives used their experiences as North African slaves to criticize slavery in the United States, such as William Ray in his book *Horrors of Slavery*. Slaves in North Africa suffered from many of the same conditions as their African counterparts in the United States, including hard labor, poor diet, and demeaning treatment. But, unlike those in America, slaves in North Africa and could sometimes escape their condition by forced conversion to Islam and adopting North Africa as their home through Dhimmitude, be subject to eunuch servitude, or in some cases could be ransomed by European powers. The Barbary pirates made a business out of capturing Europeans at sea and for ransom.

Narratives focused on the central themes of freedom and liberty which drew inspiration from the American Revolution. Since the narratives include the recurrence of themes and events, quoting, and relying heavily upon each other it is believed by scholars that the main source of information was other narratives more so than real captivities.^[15] Female captives were depicted as Gothic fiction characters clinging to the hope of freedom thus more relatable to the audience.^[16]

Examples include:

- *A True and Faithful Account of the Religion and Manners of the Mahometans* by Joseph Pitts (1663 –1735) tells his capture as a boy age 14 or 15 by pirates while fishing off Newfoundland. His sale as a slave and his life under three different masters in North Africa, and his travels to Mecca are all described.
- *Tyrkja-Gudda*, 1952 and 2001
- *The History of the Long Captivity and Adventures of Thomas Pellow in South Barbary*, 1740 by Thomas Pellow.
- *A Curious, Historical and Entertaining Narrative of the Captivity and almost unheard of Sufferings and Cruel treatment of Mr Robert White* 1790^[17]
- *A Journal of the Captivity and Suffering of John Foss; Several Years a Prisoner in Algiers* 1798^[18]
- *History of the Captivity and Sufferings of Mrs Maria Martin who was six years a slave in Algiers; two of which she was confined in a dismal dungeon, loaded with irons, by the command of an inhuman Turkish officer. Written by herself. To which is added, a concise history of Algiers, with the manners and customs of the people* 1812^[19]
- *Sufferings in Africa*, 1815, by Captain James Riley
- *The Narrative of Robert Adams An American Sailor who was wrecked on the West Coast of Africa in the year 1810; was detained Three Years in Slavery by the Arabs of the Great Desert* 1816
- *The Captives, Eleven Years a Prisoner in Algiers* by James Leander Cathcart published in 1899, many years after his captivity

Women slave narratives

Some well-known slave narratives by women slaves include the memoirs of Harriet A. Jacobs, Mary Prince, Mattie J. Jackson, and "old Elizabeth," among others. Some of these accounts were edited and published in the late 1800s by white authors seeking to raise white opposition to slavery

In her narrative, Mary Prince, a Bermuda-born woman and slave discusses her deep connection with her master's wife and the pity she felt for the wife as she witnessed the "ill-treatment" the wife suffered at the hands of her husband.^[20] Prince also recounts her experience of becoming literate after being taught English by one of her mistresses.^[20] Literacy, however, was not a common theme for all slave women. The life story of "old Elizabeth" was transcribed from her oral account at age 97.^[1]

Many women slave narratives, such as those of "old Elizabeth" and Mattie J. Jackson, reveal the importance of spirituality and relationships in the lives of women slaves. These narratives, many published and edited by white women, may represent early efforts of racial and feminist solidarity in the United States.

Other historical slave narratives

As slavery has been practised all over the world for millennia, some narratives cover places and times other than these main two. One example is the account given by John R. Jewitt, an English armorer enslaved for years by Maquinna of the Nootka people in the Pacific Northwest. The *Canadian Encyclopedia* calls his memoir a "classic of captivity literature"^[22] and it is a rich source of information about the indigenous people of Vancouver Island

- *Narrative of the Adventures and Sufferings of John R. Jewitt, only survivor of the crew of the ship Boston, during a captivity of nearly three years among the savages of Nootka Sound: with an account of the manners, mode of living, and religious opinions of the natives.* Middletown, Connecticut, printed by Loomis and Richards, 1815^[23]

Maria ter Meetelen (1704 in Amsterdam – fl. 1751), was a Dutch writer of an autobiography. Her biography is considered to be a valuable witness statement of the life of a former slave (1748).

- Maria ter Meetelen, *The Curious and Amazing Adventures of Maria ter Meetelen; Twelve Years a Slave (1731- 43)* Translated and Introduced by Caroline Stone (Hardinge Simpole, 2010)^[1].

Contemporary slave narratives

A contemporary slave narrative is a recent memoir written by a former slave, or ghost-written on their behalf. Modern areas of the world in which slavery occurs include the Sudan, and two narratives, *Escape from Slavery: The True Story of My Ten Years in Captivity – and My Journey to Freedom in America* (2003) by Francis Bok and Edward Tivnan, and *Slave* by Mende Nazer and

Damien Lewis, derive from slavery experiences in the Sudan.

In his fictional novel The Underground Railroad (novel), National Book Award winner Colson Whitehead traces the escape of Cora, female slave on a cotton farm in Georgia through the Underground Railroad.^[24] It was well-received and said to possess "the chilling, matter-of-fact power of the slave narratives collected by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s, with echoes of Toni Morrison's Beloved (novel)' and can hence be considered as a modern-tale fictional slave narrative.^[25]

On December 18, 2016, filmmaker Michelle Williams launched a film series called "Another Slave Narrative".^[26] Inspired by an interview with a former slave, she decided to tell the stories of previously enslaved people in a series of short movies. A cast of 22 actors of mixed gender, race, and age, reads out individual slaves' interviews from the Slave Narrative Collection that includes more than 2,300 interviews conducted from 1936-38. Williams' aim is to document every single fate and hence approach the taboo of slavery, as well as to keep the memory of the slaves alive through these videos.

Neo-slave narratives

A neo-slave narrative — a term coined by Ishmael Reed while working on his 1976 novel *Flight to Canada* and used by him in a 1984 interview^[27] — is a modern fictional work set in the slavery era by contemporary authors or substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effects of enslavement in the New World.^[28] The works are largely classified as novels, but may pertain to poetical works as well. The renaissance of the postmodern slave narratives in the 20th century was a means to deal retrospectively with slavery and to give a fictional account of historical facts from the first-person perspective.^[29]

Examples include:

- Madison Smartt Bell, *All Souls' Rising* (1995), first of trilogy about the Haitian Revolution
- David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident* (1981)
- Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (1979)
- Noni Carter, *Good Fortune* (2010), young adult novel
- David Anthony Durham, *Walk Through Darkness* (2002)
- Marie-Elena John, *Unburnable* (2006)
- Edward P. Jones, *The Known World* (2003)
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)
- William Styron, *Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967)
- Natasha Trethewey, *Native Guard* (2006)
- Margaret Walker, *Jubilee* (1966)
- Sherley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (1986)
- Évelyne Trouillot, *The Infamous Rosalie* (2003)
- Manu Herbstein, *Ama: A Story of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (2001)
- Manu Herbstein, *Brave Music of a Distant Drum* (2011)

See also

Literature

- African-American literature
- Caribbean literature

Biographies of individuals with slave narratives

- William J. Anderson
- Jared Maurice Arter
- Lewis Charlton
- Lucinda Davis
- Moses Grandy
- Lunsford Lane

- [J. Vance Lewis](#)
- [Moses Roper](#)

Other links

- [Unchained Memories](#)- HBO documentary with readings from slave narratives (2003)

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External links

- ["Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938"](#), *American Memory*, Library of Congress.
- ["North American Slave Narratives, Beginnings to 1920"](#) *Documenting the American South* University of North Carolina.
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