

SUMMARY of Three Autobiographies recommended by Rosa Parks

On the last page of *Rosa Parks: A Life* by Douglas Brinkley, the author reveals to his readers an amazing recommendation from Rosa herself. Rosa felt that all Americans should read three autobiographies – *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington (1901); *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903); and *The Autobiography of an ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson (1912 and 1927).

Student News Net read all three autobiographies, which are summarized below.

***Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington (1901)**

Booker T. Washington (1858-1915) was born a slave in Virginia in the late 1850s. As a young boy, he remembers his family celebrating President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and their freedom. They moved to West Virginia to start a new life. Booker remembers as a small child wanting to learn to read. "From the time that I can remember having any thoughts about anything, I recall that I had an intense longing to learn to read. I determined, when quite a small child, that, if I accomplished nothing else in life, I would in some way get enough education to enable me to read common books and newspaper." (p. 13). With dogged determination, he was able to enroll in Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia where he worked to pay his tuition. School leaders took notice of his work ethic and success in his studies and asked him to establish a new school in Tuskegee, Alabama. In 1881, Booker T. Washington established the Tuskegee Institute, a job to which he devote the rest of his life.

Washington was passionate in his belief that his students should be trained to perform life skills while also taking classes. As the Tuskegee campus expanded, Tuskegee students designed and built their new buildings even learning how to make bricks. Washington believed his students would be in demand if they were equipped with skills needed by the community. Their skin color would not prevent them from being successful. Barriers because of race would diminish because his students' skills would be needed and valued.

Booker T. Washington was constantly traveling to raise funds to keep Tuskegee operating and expanding to meet the growing demand for institutions of higher education for black students at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. He faced many tight deadlines but successfully raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for Tuskegee. His Tuskegee Institute is today Tuskegee University.

Washington loved his work and devoted his entire life to performing at his highest level. He recommended getting routine work out of the way first each day in order to master one's work, not become its servant. And one needed to be prepared to face the day's new challenges that were sure to come.

On page 128, he says:

"There is a physical and mental and spiritual enjoyment that comes from a consciousness of being the absolute master of one's work, in all its details, that is very satisfactory and inspiring.

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My experience teaches me that, if one learns to follow this plan, he gets a freshness of body and vigour of mind out of work that goes a long way toward keeping him strong and healthy. I believe that when one can grow to the point where he loves his work, this gives him a kind of strength that is most valuable.”

Washington delivered one of his most famous speeches on Sept. 18, 1895 at the opening of the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia, which included exhibits featuring Hampton Institute and Tuskegee Institute. The closing paragraph of his speech summarizes his hope for the South for both races as they continued to recover from the Civil War 30 years before. He said both races were “practically starting empty-handed” after the war (p. 109). He promised his race would offer its “patient and sympathetic help” but called on everyone to follow the mandates of the law. He again expressed his belief that acquiring skills would help unite the South.

“...only let this be constantly in mind, that, while from the representations in these buildings [Exposition buildings] of the product of field, of forest, of mine, of factory, letters and art, much good will come, yet far above and beyond material benefits will be that higher good, that, let us pray God, will come, in a blotting out of sectional differences and racial animosities and suspicion, in a determination to administer absolute justice, in a willing obedience among all classes to the mandates of the law. This, this, coupled with our material prosperity, will bring into our beloved South a new heaven and a new earth.” (p. 109)

Not everyone agreed with Booker T. Washington's approach to dealing with the white ruling class of the South after the Civil War. W.E.B. Du Bois, the first African American to earn a doctorate from Harvard University, criticized Booker T. Washington for not fiercely advocating for civil rights for black citizens. He felt Washington was wrong to agree to be “patient and sympathetic” to white rule.

Du Bois dedicated his life to advocating for the nation to keep the promises made in the Declaration of Independence that all men are created equal. Du Bois pushed vigorously for the right to vote, civic equality, and education for black youth based on ability.

Rosa Parks read Du Bois' 1903 autobiography, the second autobiography she recommended all Americans read.

***The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903)**

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was born in Massachusetts three years after the Civil War ended. He lived in an integrated New England town but realized at a young age that he was different when a fellow classmate would not accept a card from him. He was a “problem” because of the color of his skin, which forced him to live under a “Veil.” He was determined to succeed in life.

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He earned his undergraduate degree at Fisk Institute in Tennessee in 1888 and his doctorate in sociology in 1895 from Harvard University.

On page 35 of his autobiography, Du Bois summarizes the reasons he believes Washington was wrong to compromise, often called the Atlanta Compromise, with white leaders of the South.

“So far as Mr. Washington preaches Thrift, Patience, and Industrial Training for the masses, we must hold up his hands and strive with him, rejoicing in his honors and glorifying in the strength of this Joshua called of God and of man to lead the headless host. But so far as Mr. Washington apologizes for injustice, North or South, does not rightly value the privilege and duty of voting, belittles the emasculating effects of caste distinctions, and opposes the higher training and ambition of our brighter minds, – so far as he, the South, or the Nation, does this, – we must unceasingly and firmly oppose them. By every civilized and peaceful method we must strive for the rights which the world accords to men, clinging unwaveringly to those great words which the sons of our Fathers would fain forget: 'We hold these truths to be self evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'" (p. 35)

Du Bois believed that after the slaves were set free by the Emancipation Proclamation, it was the duty of the nation to help former slaves begin new lives. Many people, whom Du Bois called “swindlers and rascals,” came to the South during Reconstruction and took advantage of freed slaves who wanted to start their own farms. Free black men toiled night and day to plant and harvest a crop only to have most or all of the profits go the bank to pay off debt structured in a way that made it impossible for them to thrive and grow. And in a season with a poor crop yield, many new black farmers lost their farms to the bank when they could not pay back a loan.

Du Bois speaks of a constant “Veil” under which all black citizens lived daily. Because Du Bois lived a long life, he watched discriminatory practices permeate the South into the mid 1900s. Cities passed ordinances that mandated segregation in schools, at retail stores, and on public transportation, making it increasingly difficult for blacks to make progress and support themselves. These ordinances and policies were collectively known as Jim Crow laws. It would take until the 1950s for these laws to be challenged and ultimately declared unconstitutional. Segregating white and black passengers on city buses was the reason Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white passenger in Montgomery, Alabama on Dec. 1, 1955.

On page 113, Du Bois calls for both white and black citizens to change in order to unite. “Only by a union of intelligence and sympathy across the color-line in this critical period of the Republic shall justice and right triumph, - 'That mind and soul according well, May make one music as before, But vaster.'”

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***The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson**

This book was originally published anonymously in 1912 and later in 1927 by Johnson. It is fictional yet the stories told are derived from the author's life experiences. Similar to W.E.B. Du Bois, the author has a reckoning as a young student at school when he realizes he is different from the others and ostracized for that difference. He is the son of a black mother and white father so wrestles with his identity throughout the book. With musical talent, he navigates his way through life with the ability to earn money for his talent. He travels extensively and lives in large cities in the United States (New York City and Boston) and Europe (London and Paris).

At the end of the book, he speaks of attending a meeting at Carnegie Hall in New York City about the Hampton Institute. Mark Twain spoke but the author and the audience were most interested in hearing Booker T. Washington speak:

“...but the greatest interest of the audience was centered in Booker T. Washington, and not because he so much surpassed the others in eloquence, but because of what he represented with so much earnestness and faith. And it is this that all of that small but gallant band of colored men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race have behind them. Even those who oppose them know that these men have the eternal principles of right on their side, and they will be victors even though they should go down in defeat. Beside them I feel small and selfish. I am an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money. They are men who are making history and a race. I, too, might have taken in a work so glorious.” (p. 113)

Supporting Questions

1. What school did Booker T. Washington establish?
2. What was Booker T. Washington's philosophy about educating black youth?
3. What did W.E.B. Du Bois believe was vitally important in order for the black race to prosper in the United States?

Compelling Questions

1. What was the major difference between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in terms of actions needed for black men and women to thrive in the South after the Civil War?
2. How did both Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois influence future civil rights leaders, such as Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as they fought for civil rights in the 1950s and 1960s?