



The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

James Weldon Johnson

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First published in 1853, “Twelve Years a Slave” is Solomon Northup’s harrowing memoir of being tricked into slavery. Northup, who was a free African American living in Saratoga, New York, had no idea what was in store for him when he was approached by two circus promoters with an offer of a brief high paying job as a musician with their traveling circus. A skilled violinist, Solomon gladly accepted the offer and traveled with the two men to Washington, D.C. When he awoke one morning drugged and bound in a cell for slaves he discovered the men’s true intentions of selling him into slavery. What followed was twelve years of bondage during which Northup experienced the gamut of both kindness and cruelty afforded to slaves in the Southern United States just prior to the American Civil War. While the book was originally a bestseller, having sold over 30,000 copies it languished in relative obscurity for nearly a hundred years until the work was resurrected during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Having secured the Academy Award for Best Picture for its 2013 motion picture adaptation, “Twelve Years a Slave” now finds itself firmly placed within the canon of the great slave narratives.

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