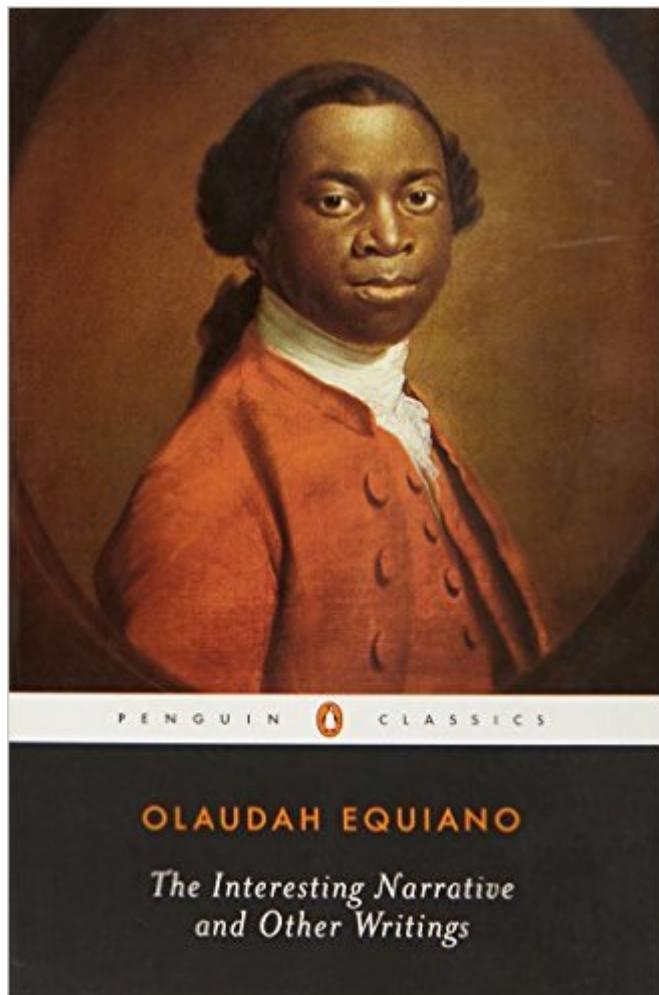


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The Interesting Narrative And Other Writings: Revised Edition (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

Completely revised and edited with an introduction and notes by Vincent Carretta An exciting and often terrifying adventure story, as well as an important precursor to such famous nineteenth-century slave narratives as Frederick Douglass's autobiographies, Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative* recounts his kidnapping in Africa at the age of ten, his service as the slave of an officer in the British Navy, his ten years of labor on slave ships until he was able to purchase his freedom in 1766, and his life afterward as a leading and respected figure in the antislavery movement in England. A spirited autobiography, a tale of spiritual quest and fulfillment, and a sophisticated treatise on religion, politics, and economics, *The Interesting Narrative* is a work of enduring literary and historical value. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

The *Interesting Narrative* (1789) is one of the earliest "slave narratives", a genre that includes classics such as Uncle Tom's Cabin (1852), *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and neo-slave narratives like Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Edward P.

Jones' *The Known World* (2003). What makes Olaudah Equiano's account unique is that it was the first slave narrative to find a wide audience, and it is not hard to understand why - not only is it a good story, but it is very well written, almost literary - it sold so well it was a cornerstone in bringing about public sympathy and support for the abolition of the slavery in England. Just about everything we know about Olaudah Equiano is from his autobiography.

Of all the firsthand accounts known to us as "slave narratives," Vassa's description is unique in many ways. To begin with, he takes his readers all the way back to his African roots, shedding historically-confirmed light on almost lost ancient traditions. His discussion of the harrowing and epically sad capture and separation of he and his sister are among the most moving in this genre. He then describes the despicable, inhumane conditions in the holds of the slave ships with a "you-are-there" writing style. Again, confirmed by other sources, these are some of the most often quoted accounts in historical texts. In this same chronological phase, Vassa also depicts the shared empathy among the enslave Africans, helping us to see how they collaborated to survive. His ongoing narrative offers one of the more balanced looks at slavery. Vassa clearly tells the horrors of this evil system and the people responsible for it. At the same time, he often shares accounts of Europeans and White Americans who befriended him. In fact, his positive statements about non-Africans lend further credence to his critique of the many evils of slavery. His narrative also contains unique elements in his descriptions of his path toward freedom and his life as a freeman. We learn that in his era, for a man of his race, it was barely more tolerable to be free, given the hatred that he still endured. Though some reviewers tend to minimize or criticize it, his conversion narrative is classic. In fact, it may well have been the standard from which later testimonies were crafted about how "God struck me dead." Perhaps the evangelical nature of his conversion turns off some. However, if we are to engage Vassa in his other accounts, we must engage him here.

Hemingway said of Tillie Olsen's "Tell Me a Riddle" that, however many readers it may have, it will never have enough. He expressed my feelings about this book. Yes, the "Autobiography of Frederick Douglass" is critical to achieve an understanding of the obscenities of black slavery in the New World, but Equiano's remarkable account dramatizes it in ways even more diverse. He summarizes in his single life the whole span of slavery, from his kidnapping as a child from Africa to the fiendish brutality of Caribbean sugar plantations. But he is also a celebration of the indomitability of the human spirit at its most resilient: from his insistence, against all odds, on his own worth as a person, his acquisition of seafaring and business skills, his achievement not only of literacy but of an

Englishman's 18th century eloquence. I didn't think I could learn more about the particular brutalities of slavery, but I did. An example: in the Caribbean some slavemasters "rented out" their slaves by the day to other masters for excruciating toil. Their temporary masters sometimes "forgot" to feed them lunch, and moreover sometimes sent them back to their masters without payment. For retribution, their masters then beat the slaves! This was a new twist for me, and reminded me that the psychological torture--imagining the starved and exhausted slaves returning to their masters, knowing what was awaiting--often outstripped physical torture for cruelty. But this is no litany of abuses, and Equiano is careful to spare us gratuitous outrages.

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