

If Uncle Tom's Cabin had a library



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

While driving on the UNCA campus, I saw a student walking with her eyes gazing down at something in her hands. Take a guess. Wrong. I was too. She was ... reading a book. That's right, a book. Not texting; not talking on a phone; not staring at a screen—reading a real book.

I'd give her an "A," no matter what she was reading.

As for books, I've been reading two: "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (1852) and the "Life and Times of Frederick Douglass" (1893). Both works were highly controversial in their day, shaking the conscience of the nation.

The great orator and writer, Frederick Douglass, mastered the art of telling the horrific story of slavery in words that shock the emotions while stirring the mind.

As a young slave in Baltimore he was intrigued by the power of the printed word.

"The frequent hearing of my mistress reading the Bible aloud ... awakened my curiosity in respect to this mystery of reading, and roused in me the desire to learn."

Mrs. Auld began to teach him to read the Bible but when her husband learned of it, he put a stop to the lessons, sternly reminding his wife of "the true philosophy of the slave system." "If he learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave. ... If you teach him how to read, he'll want to know how to write, and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself."

Douglass felt his master "clearly comprehended" the nature of slaveholder and slave. The unintended consequence of the master's cold-hearted lecture was an awakening for Frederick. It was a "new revelation" to recognize that "knowledge unfits a child to be a slave."

"From that moment I understood the direct pathway from slavery to freedom." Douglass reflects that his master's determination "to keep me in ignorance only rendered me the more resolute to seek intelligence."

The rest, as they say, is history, and



Harriet Beecher Stowe

it's the history of one man who escaped chattel slavery to tell the story of liberation through education and self-determination.

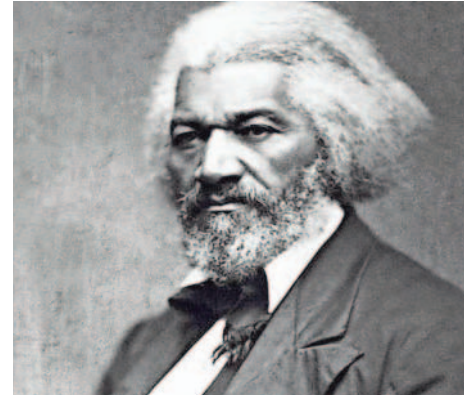
While reading Douglass' dramatic narrative I was making my way through Harriet Beecher Stowe's evocative book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin." First printed in serial form on the pages of an abolitionist newspaper in 1851 (10 years before the Civil War) the book itself was published in 1852. It sold 10,000 copies in the first week, 300,000 copies in the first year and over a million copies in Great Britain. The Bible was the only book to outsell "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in the whole of the 19th century.

Stowe was the daughter of a brilliant mother and a popular minister. Most of her brothers became influential preachers. Harriet was steeped in anti-slavery religion from a young age which inspired her to write her famous novel. Her religious beliefs drive the narrative.

The main character, Tom, is literally "sold down the river," taken from his family in Kentucky to a plantation near New Orleans. His strong faith not only sustains him through the brutality of his experiences but kindles his fervent desire to see everyone, slave and slaver, become Christians.

As with young Douglass, Tom and his fellow slaves didn't have books because they couldn't read. The only book they had read to them was the Bible. Tom learned to read short passages of the Bible with help from young master George in Kentucky and then Tom quotes scripture throughout the novel.

The cruel irony in Uncle Tom's Cabin is that the main character earnestly



Frederick Douglass PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHRIS HIGHLAND

prays to be reunited with his family, only to be killed by a heartless master. Tom becomes a Christ-figure, inspiring others to convert. His old master George lectures the slaves he was freeing, encouraging them to think of their freedom and faith each time they pass by the cabin.

Calling someone an "Uncle Tom" refers to the mentality that accepts and endures one's servitude as God's will. Christian teaching and biblical preaching often supported that thinking.

The Fugitive Slave Law was enacted just before Stowe published her popular novel. In the newspaper where selections from her book first appeared I noticed an editorial boldly criticizing the capture of runaway slaves. The editor uses biblical examples to address the issue. I thought one example was an excellent rebuke to those who commonly used the Bible to condone slavery. Presenting Pharoah as a slaveholder and Moses as an escaped slave, he raises the pertinent question: Should Moses have been captured and returned?

What if Tom had learned to read like Frederick, if there had been a library in his cabin?

What would happen to ignorance, injustice and hate, if all people were free and encouraged to read and think for themselves?

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.