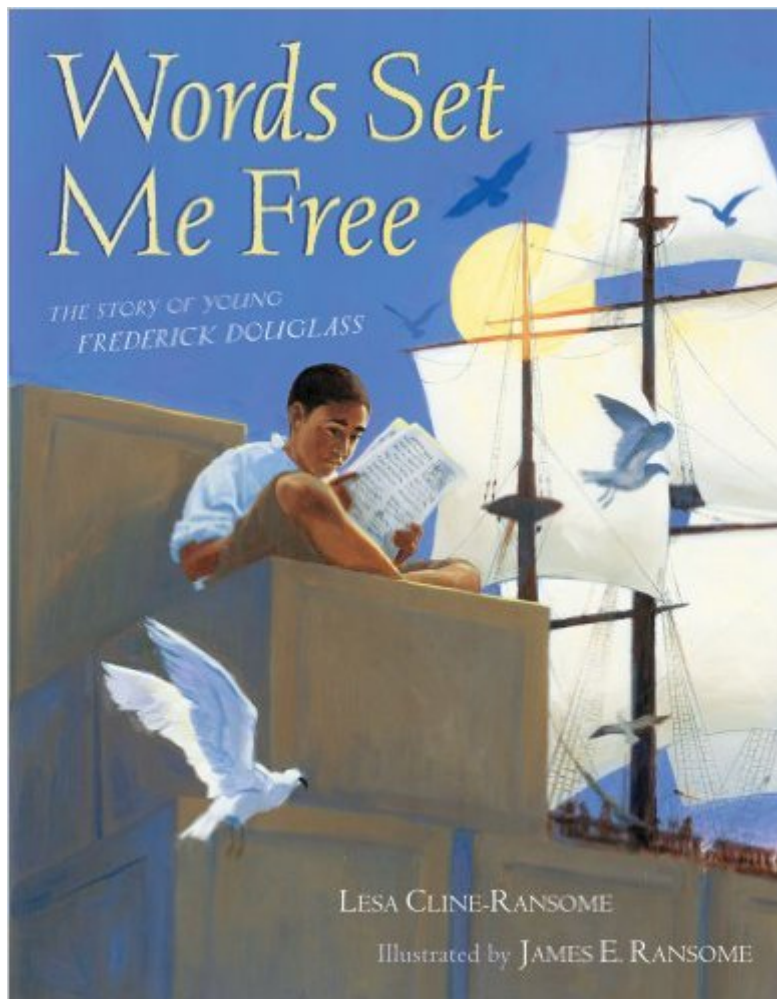


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Words Set Me Free: The Story Of Young Frederick Douglass (Paula Wiseman Books)



Synopsis

>This picture book biography chronicles the youth of Frederick Douglass, one of the most prominent African American figures in American history. Douglass spent his life advocating for the equality of all, and it was through reading that he was able to stand up for himself and others. Award-winning husband-wife team Lesa Cline-Ransome and James E. Ransome present a moving and captivating look at the young life of the inspirational man who said, "I would unite with anybody to do right and with nobody to do wrong."

Book Information

Lexile Measure: 890L (What's this?)

Series: Paula Wiseman Books

Hardcover: 32 pages

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Product Dimensions: 8.5 x 0.4 x 11 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (25 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #247,686 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #40 in [Books > Children's Books > Education & Reference > History > United States > Civil War Era](#) #402 in [Books > Children's Books > Biographies > Multicultural](#) #467 in [Books > Children's Books > Geography & Cultures > Multicultural Stories > African-American](#)

Age Range: 5 - 9 years

Grade Level: Kindergarten - 4

Customer Reviews

Children's books about slavery need to be handled with great thought and care. Although the author did a nice job of trying to explain the life of one of "the first leaders of the antislavery movement" - basing it on Mr. Douglass' own Narrative, she did not capture the true emotion that I would expect from a book like this. It read cold, and at times, choppy. In, "Words Set Me Free: The Story of Young Fredrick Douglass" the book begins with: "My Mama was named Harriet Bailey. They say my master, Captain Aaron Anthony, was my daddy. After I was born, they sent me to live with my

Grandmamma, and my Mama to another plantation". I found the first page of the book to be the least smooth. It also lacked explanation. If this book was meant to be geared toward children 5-9, it might have been a good idea to explain the idea of slavery, 'masters', plantations, etc. One of my favorite children's books, "Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad", has a much more simple but straight to the point introduction... "Henry Brown wasn't sure how old he was. Henry was a slave. And slaves weren't allowed to know their birthdays". I felt that there were less moments when reading "Words" to open up an appropriate dialogue with my students. Some of the wording of "Words" is also tricky, for example, "Mama took sick". I think I understand what the author was trying to do... use excerpts from Douglass' own book. The problem with this is that it doesn't quite translate well into a children's book. As an adult, I did enjoy the book but I had a hard time reading it and working through it with my 6-7 year old students. It ends with such hope yet you turn the page to the Author's Note, and it says "Fredrick Bailey did not escape that evening". You find out he was jailed, and it took three more years until he was able to actually escape! It was just thrown in there in an "oh, by the way..." kind of tone. My students had a much better time understanding, creating dialogue, and reacting with empathy, with other books. I did however enjoy the and Timeline in the back of the book. This definitely was a nice attempt (and with gorgeous illustrations!), but I feel that it is not the most effective or well written book for the target audience. It does not do Fredrick Douglass enough justice.

I must confess to a passion for beautifully-illustrated picture books, especially biographies, historical incidents and/or depicting resourceful children, and this one scores on all points. Using information from Douglass' own writings, the author tells the story of a young boy born into slavery and left orphaned at age six. Rented out by the Master at age eight, he travels (supervised and in rope shackles) to Baltimore. There the woman of the house, unfamiliar with the plantation-style management of slaves, teaches him to read at night. Her husband angrily puts an end to it saying, "...if you teach him to read...(he) will be forever unfit to be a slave". At that moment Frederick resolves to make learning to read and write the central focus of his life. Allowed to travel from the house for errands and work, he searches for words in the environment, memorizing and collecting them in his mind, and eventually buying a newspaper. After eight years in Baltimore he is sent back to the plantation where he was born and begins an informal clandestine school on Sundays with other slaves who wish to learn. The end of the book tells of a plan to steal a boat to escape and even shows a handwritten note that he fabricated as part of the plan, giving permission to travel over the Easter holiday. I think children will be particularly interested in this. I agree with other

reviewers that young readers might want to know more about his eventual successful escape. The very last page fills in broad details of his free life, including his work in the anti-slavery movement including the establishment of the newspaper *The North Star*, but I think a few more pages would have made a more satisfying story arc. I think this is a book for 6-8 year olds. Those children familiar with slavery as it was practiced in our history will likely be aware of the (carefully mentioned) things human beings might have had to endure. For those for whom this is a new topic, it might be helpful to explain that slavery has existed in many forms and at many periods all over the world. As a five-year old child once explained to me, "I know what slavery is! It's when they make you work and they don't pay you for your work!" Adults who might purchase this book may want to know about brief mentions of brutality towards slaves: ("...whipped bloody for being too slow..." and "whose thumb was chopped off"). Still, the strength and courage (not to mention adult success) of this young man will be an inspiration to anyone who hears it. Further, the lesson that learning has the power to change people's lives is certainly one that cannot be repeated too often.

This is the story of a young Frederick Douglass, born Frederick Bailey, before he escaped to freedom. Cline-Ransome places Douglass in the roll of narrator, as opposed to simply stating the facts. I thought this was a very smart move, allowing readers to better connect with Douglass. "Much of my time was my own as I was not yet old enough to work the fields. We ate our two meals a day out of a trough just like the animals in the barn. We were always hungry so we shoved down our meals of cornmeal mush with shells and dirty hands. But even the animals were rested in the heat of the afternoon sun, and they were never whipped bloody for being too tired or too sick or too slow." The above is from the second page, adjacent to the text is a picture of young slaves eating out of a trough. For me those two pages were the most powerful. Ransome paints the ugliness with such beauty. As the biography progresses Douglass comes more into himself, allowing people to get a glimpse of the man he would become. "For seven years I worked for my master and his missus down at the shipyard, lifting and laboring, and back at their house, toting and hauling- always pretending to be something I was not - content to be a slave." *This Word Set Me Free*, is a very fitting title, when Douglass understands the power of words he's determined to learn how to read regardless of the consciousness. This was a good biography on Frederick Douglass. The longer I look at it the more I appreciate how well the text and illustrations complement each other. The author includes an epilogue. There is also an author's note and a small timeline. The author was able to incorporate many names and states throughout the biography but few dates. So I would've liked more back matter including a longer timeline.

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