



Welcome to our November book, Historians!

Our next meeting will be on Tuesday, November 10 at 6:30 on Zoom. We will be discussing *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* by David W. Blight, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in History in 2019. David Blight is the Sterling Professor of History at Yale University and is the author of many books on Reconstruction and on slavery. Blight's purpose in writing this scholarly and exhaustive biography is to show us the whole man who is Frederick Douglass. Admirers during Douglass's lifetime spoke of his dignity and power in speaking and the force of his personality. As well, Douglass was an eloquent writer who proved to the world that former slaves were not intellectually inferior. His speeches were filled with insightful references to America's founding documents as well as his own experiences as a slave. He impressed everyone who met him. At the same time, his was a carefully cultivated reputation. Little was known about his private life because, as Blight shows us, there was a soap opera quality to the domestic drama of Douglass's home. Why is this important? Blight wants us to know the whole man, both to marvel at Douglass's genius and to recognize that this is yet another flawed man, like us, who fiercely defended a country that he loved, even if that country had never shown love to him. This is a timely biography for us to read in 2020.

Blight titled his book *Prophet of Freedom* for a reason. He is asking us to consider the role that Douglass played in the 19th c. Douglass was the most photographed man in of his time. He spent more than half a century touring and speaking in the United States and in Europe. Few people were more famous than him. And much of that fame was based on his oratory and on his uncanny ability to see beyond the

issues of his time to the “what next” that would inevitably come if the issues were swept under the rug. Douglass warned in 1865 that the root cause of slavery had not been eradicated by the Civil War. Much stood in the way of black men getting true political and economic freedom. Douglass was still bringing these issues to public consciousness in 1893 as he warned against the growing power of Jim Crow laws throughout the United States.

Douglass’s warnings were framed within the powerful oratory that made him famous. Blight focuses on what it meant to be a prophet, beyond clearly seeing the issues now and in the future. Writing in a review for *The Washington Post*, Adam Goodheart says that Douglass’s power as a prophet was because he was “living in the realm of Language: words of exhortation, of warning, of insight as well as foresight.” It is this aspect of Douglass’s life that Blight illuminates for the 21st c. reader. Blight calls his book “the biography of a voice.” Hence his emphasis on a close reading of Douglass’s speeches and writings.

As you read, think of the ways that Blight presents Douglass as a prophet. Do you agree that this role is key to understanding Douglass’s role in American history? Don’t get lost in the textual details that Blight presents. Read for the picture of who Douglass was then and who he is to us today. How does Douglass move from opinionated outsider to political insider during Reconstruction? Does this strengthen his voice—his role as prophet—or weaken it? And what does Douglass have to say to us today?

I look forward to discussing *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* by David W. Blight when we meet on Zoom on Tuesday, November 10 at 6:30. I anticipate a lively discussion, especially as we will be meeting post-election in a year in which the issues that Douglass cared deeply about were at the forefront for us as well.

Donna McBride