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12 Years a Slave Examines the Old South's Heart of Darkness | Perspectives on History

10-12 minutes

The audience leaving the theater after a recent screening of *12 Years a Slave* looked deeply shaken. When asked about their intense reaction to the film, some described feeling as though they had just *experienced* slavery. The movie felt believable, they reported, due not only to the caption indicating its basis in fact, but because the settings and characters *looked* authentic. Director Steve McQueen succeeded in connecting emotions to history, making viewers care about Solomon Northup's sudden descent into slavery.



Apologists may dismiss the gut-wrenching picture of human bondage drawn in *12 Years a Slave* as over-the-top, Hollywood melodrama-arguing that master-slave relations were never as bad as the movie suggests-but McQueen has a convenient response: this is a movie based substantially on Solomon Northup's 1853 narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*. At least two historians, Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, have confirmed that Northup presented a remarkably accurate picture of antebellum slavery and plantation society near the Red River in Louisiana.

As indicated in both the book and movie, Solomon Northup lived as a free man with his wife and children in Saratoga Springs, New York. In 1841 two visitors tricked him into traveling to Washington,

DC, to earn money in a circus. Once Northup was in the nation's capital, the men drugged him, marketed him as a slave, and earned several hundred dollars for their crime. Northup was shipped to the slave auctions of New Orleans and thereafter spent 12 years laboring in the cotton and sugar plantations of Louisiana until a white carpenter from Canada sent a communication to Northup's friends in New York. After some delay, help arrived. In 1853 Solomon Northup returned to his family as a free man.

With assistance from legal authorities, Northup endeavored to make his kidnappers pay for their crime. He failed to win convictions in a court of law, but succeeded in a broader sense. *Twelve Years a Slave*, written with assistance from David Wilson, a New York lawyer, became enormously popular, selling 30,000 copies. *Twelve Years a Slave* educated Americans about slave life in the Deep South and contributed to the growth of anti-slavery sentiment before the Civil War.

Steve McQueen's movie feels more like an unrelentingly hellish view of slavery than does Northup's book, which depicts the occasional opportunities slaves had for relief from the brutal plantation regimen—a few days during the Christmas holidays for rest, celebration, and good eating. Talented slaves could experience small degrees of liberty. On Sundays, Northup visited other locales, played his fiddle for whites at social events, and kept some of the earnings. Although McQueen portrays some of these activities, his two-hour movie cannot present the full range of observations that Northup offered in his 336-page narrative. McQueen's principal message concerns the horrors of slavery, both physical and psychological. The director cannot be faulted in this choice, for virtually all of the tragic scenes in his production are documented in Northup's book.

Much of the book and movie are devoted to the ten years that Northup (Chiwetel Ejiofor) lived and worked on the plantation of Edwin Epps, played by Michael Fassbender as a deranged sadist. In the book, Northup attributes much of Epps's violence to bouts with the bottle, but also provides enough evidence to give a director license to explore a more psychological interpretation. The movie shows Epps frequently using the whip or urging its use, a portrayal Northup's narrative supports: "It was rarely that a day passed by without one or more whippings." A "delinquent" slave who failed to bring in the requisite weight of cotton "was taken out, stripped, made to lie on the ground, face downwards, when he received a punishment proportional to the offense." McQueen dramatizes another disturbing aspect of Epps's behavior. Northup wrote about Epps's sexual exploitation of a talented slave woman, Patsey. "Her back bore the scars of a thousand stripes," wrote Northup, "because it had fallen her lot to be the

slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress."



The shortcoming in McQueen's depiction of slave life lies elsewhere. The movie's persistent focus fails to capture the small ways that slaves influenced their situations, managing to establish degrees of social and economic autonomy. Some discovered ways to negotiate relationships with masters and overseers on their own terms, and the slave community sustained its members during the harshest periods of Louisiana's cotton and sugar booms. Northup's book presents a more complex picture of slave life than does the movie, which concentrates sharply on themes of oppression and victimization.

Still, *12 Years a Slave* offers many teachable moments for historians. Attention to details in the story can open opportunities for classroom discussion.

In the film's early scenes, Northup and other chattel are shipped from Washington, DC, to the market in New Orleans as part of the interstate slave trade that historian Ira Berlin has called the "Second Middle Passage." Those relocations created profound disruption in the lives of more than a million slaves. In the movie's scenes of a slave market in New Orleans, McQueen characterizes the slaves as helpless victims, never suggesting the degree of agency over their lives that some historians have argued slaves achieved. In *Soul by Soul* (1999), for instance, Walter Johnson shows the ways that slaves sometimes manipulated relationships in the marketplace, influencing potential buyers through facial expressions, body language, and responses to questions.

McQueen's movie gives a brief nod to Eugene D. Genovese's influential book *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (1974). Genovese argued that religion created an important survival mechanism for the slaves. Near the end of the film, Northup suffers emotional pain while members of the slave community sing the spiritual "*Roll, Jordan, Roll*." Gradually, Northup finds comfort in the music's message and adds his robust voice to the singing.

In the book and in the movie, Northup's first master is a kindly man, who treated Northup and his other slaves relatively well. Yet, rather than diminish Northup's hunger for freedom, Master Ford's generosity stoked it. *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* provided a memorable and similar commentary on this idea: "I will give Mr. Freeland the credit of being the best master I ever had, till I became my own master."

Historians have long asked why so many slaveless whites, victims too of a political and economic system that favored slaveholders, defended the "peculiar institution." McQueen's film suggests that poor whites felt elevated socially through their oppressive behavior toward blacks. Northup believed southern whites acted with excessive aggression in their relationships with each other because they had long been in the habit of beating slaves. Slavery fostered a culture of violence, a fact that historians have documented extensively.

Audiences may be curious about events that occurred after the film ends. Information about Northup's last years is incomplete. He purchased property with the \$3,000 he earned from sales of his book and lived for several years with his wife and son in the home of his son-in-law. The date of Northup's death is not known. Samuel Bass, the Canadian carpenter who was instrumental in Northup's rescue, remained in Louisiana. Whites living near the plantation where Northup worked did not learn about Bass's role in Northup's freedom because Northup refused to reveal Bass's name to the press. Bass died in 1853 at the home of a free black woman.

In 1863, when Union troops invaded the region of Louisiana where Northup worked, a New York lieutenant recorded in a diary that his men were in the vicinity of "old Epp's plantation," a man "made famous by the circumstance of his owning Solomon Northup." Later, when Union troops pulled out, 4,000 of the region's slaves quickly chose freedom. They marched off with the Union army.

The unique character of Northup's narrative made his book an unusually attractive subject for cinematic development. Most of the popular slave narratives of the antebellum period describe an individual's escape from slavery to freedom. Northup's case involved the unusual trajectory of freedom to slavery.

Audiences can easily relate to the protagonist's situation, since Northup is depicted early in the movie

as a proud, hard-working family man. The setting is 1841, but viewers cannot miss the connections to middle-class life in our times. McQueen's drama follows Northup as he descends into the hell of slavery.

Hollywood has produced several history-based films about wars and famous people in recent years, but has largely overlooked the subject of American slavery. Now, with the screening of *12 Years a Slave*, curiosity about slavery in the antebellum South has been refreshed. Commentators on radio and television have been discussing the veracity and relevance of the portrayals in McQueen's film. Several movie reviewers have suggested *12 Years a Slave* could receive several Oscars. Interest in Solomon Northup's once-obscure book is now intense. Electronic and print copies of his 1853 narrative are selling briskly. In recent weeks executives at the History Channel have announced they will sponsor a remake of the famous 1977 television miniseries *Roots*. The popularity of *12 Years a Slave* evidently influenced that decision. These reactions suggest that Steve McQueen's searing depiction has engaged the public's interest in a tragic chapter from American history.

Robert Brent Toplin, University of North Carolina (emeritus), was project director and a principal creator of a two-hour dramatic film, *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (a.k.a. *Half Slave/Half Free*), which appeared in 1984 on PBS's *American Playhouse* and later on the Disney and Starz television networks. It is available from Monterey Media and for instant viewing as *Half Slave/Half Free* and as *Twelve Years a Slave: Solomon Northup's Odyssey* from Amazon Instant. Toplin served for two decades as movie review editor for the *Journal of American History*, and he is editor of *Masters at the Movies*, a series of articles in *Perspectives on History*. Toplin has published several books about film, history, and politics.