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Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol



SOJOURNER TRUTH
A Life, A Symbol

NELL IRVIN PAINTER



Synopsis

Sojourner Truth: ex-slave and fiery abolitionist, figure of imposing physique, riveting preacher and spellbinding singer who dazzled listeners with her wit and originality. Straight talking and unsentimental, Truth became a national symbol for strong black women - indeed, for all strong women. Like Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass, she is regarded as a radical of immense and enduring influence; yet unlike them, what is remembered of her consists more of myth than of historical fact. Now, in a masterful blend of scholarship and sympathetic understanding, eminent historian Nell Irvin Painter goes beyond the myths, words, and photographs to uncover the life of a complex woman who was born into slavery and died a legend. Inspired by religion, Truth transformed herself from a domestic servant named Isabella into an itinerant Pentecostal preacher; her words of empowerment have inspired black women and poor people the world over to this day. As an abolitionist and a feminist, Truth defied the stereotype of "the slave" as male and "the woman" as white - expounding a fact that still bears repeating: among blacks there are women; among women, there are blacks.

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Customer Reviews

Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol undertakes an interesting challenge as historian Nell Irvin Painter attempts to produce a "historically accurate" biography of a subject that left little evidence of her life. Moreover, Painter takes on another interesting challenge by attempting to analyze the meaning of Sojourner Truth the symbol-a task that requires her to analyze the layers of evidence produced by those who did document Sojourner Truth's life. Is she successful at producing a historically

"accurate" biography? Does she successfully "peel back the myth and the legend" in the evidence left by those who documented Truth's life? I think Painter is somewhat successful at presenting a historically accurate biography. I say somewhat because, on the one hand, she presents compelling evidence assembled from primary sources that document Truth's life-newspaper accounts, monographs, etc. And she obviously has a thorough command of the secondary sources related to Sojourner Truth. What is more, I think that her methodology-what she calls "more or less uncommon research methods"-allows her to reconstruct a version of Truth's life as best as possible.

Assembling the pieces of an immense jigsaw puzzle such as this requires great patience and historical skill, both of which Painter exhibits in this work. On the other hand, her command of the supporting sources, the sources that provide context for her analysis of the primary sources, is a little less complete. For example, as Painter acknowledges, religion-popular religion-is central to understanding American culture. And I think that in this case, one must have a thorough understanding of religion and the Bible to effectively document Truth's life.

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