

Book festival Northern Arizona

***Douglass' Women*, by Jewell Parker Rhodes Book Review Martha Blue**

The great abolitionist Frederick Douglass' first wife, the black Anna Murray Douglas, and his most well-known white mistress, the German Otilie Assing, alternate narrating this historical novel that reeks with heartbreak.

Both women are stalwart and history-shaping in their loyalty and love for this enigmatic abolitionist, former slave Frederick Douglass. The black Anna is a rarely-treasured marriage mate who bears most of their children in his absence. As well, she assumes the sole financial support of herself and their children while Frederick is abroad for years. The white Otilie often supports Frederick as well as laboring at his abolitionist work.

Neither woman received recognition by the unreliable Frederick or the public. To boot, Frederick is irresponsible in satisfying his sexual desires with these two intimates and only demonstrates occasionally any tenderness.

The settings alone of the United States East Coast and the cities of Europe ring with the dissonance of race relations. That dissonance is enhanced by the agendas of the other white male characters in the book.

Both women had the advantages of being raised by parents who deeply loved each other. Anna's mother, a pragmatist, defined the ultimate condition of loving between husband and wife as made up of "little things", while the Otilie's mother, a romantic, talked of true, great love. Douglass, with a white slave owner his father and a mother who died in his early years, had no mentors for marriage or indeed love, just for pure lust. Lust stamps his relationships with all women and he is unable to match either woman's definition of love. In Douglass' obsession to be treated as a white man he forgot or never found his humanity to women.



The female characters come boldly alive whether they are with Frederick or without him, though in his absence their yearning twists and torments them. Each though in her respective realms—Anna in doing her daily household chores and cooking, and Otilie in her intellectual pursuits—often transcends the overriding shadow of their love for Frederick Douglass in an almost Zen-like performance of their work. The seemingly opposite women, one illiterate with several children and the other an intellectual with no children, share the realm of human emotion.

The author's command of dialogue and emotion rings true. The introductions to the switch of narrator include short historical quotes from the real life characters. Though short, the quotes surprisingly form the theme of the following chapter/chapters. These two poignant love stories, with rare moments of mutual fulfillment and heavy dollops of angst, transcend race, the nineteenth century, and the human heart.

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April 11-13, 2003

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