

Journey Toward Freedom: The Story of Sojourner Truth Short Guide

Journey Toward Freedom: The Story of Sojourner Truth by Jacqueline Bernard

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Contents

Journey Toward Freedom: The Story of Sojourner Truth Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	12
For Further Reference.....	14
Copyright Information.....	15

Overview

Bernard decided to write about Sojourner Truth while she was an undergraduate student at the University of Chicago. She writes in her author's note that reading an anthology of black writings provided her with her "first inkling that Negroes had made any contribution to American history beyond the well-known fact of their slave labor," and she found Sojourner Truth interesting because "Sojourner's powerful personality, her strong-minded opinions and no-nonsense behavior—as well as the very practical inspiration she brought to her struggle for her people's rights—made me suspect I had been missing a great deal."

On one level, Bernard's book tells the story of Sojourner Truth, "a frightened, lonely slave child" who rose from being "the hardworking, obedient slave of a master whose sole claim to her gratitude was that he was reasonably kind" to achieving national recognition as a leading spokesperson for the rights of blacks and women. On another level, *Journey Toward Freedom* is an introduction to nineteenth-century American social and cultural history. The book focuses on individual people to show the brutality of slavery, the struggle against slavery, and the gradual evolution of rights for women and blacks. Bernard offers a well-told story about an inspiring woman, and brings history to life by showing the people who made it.

Journey Toward Freedom was published in 1967 at the height of the civil rights movement. Though it is about a woman who lived in the nineteenth century, the book addresses social concerns and themes that apply equally well to the twentieth century.

About the Author

Jacqueline de Sieyes Bernard was born on May 5, 1921, in Le Bourget du Lac, Savoie, France. She attended Vassar College from 1939 to 1941 and the University of Chicago from 1941 to 1942, then married Allen Bernard in 1943. They had one son and later divorced. She was found dead, apparently from strangulation, in her New York apartment on August 1, 1983.

Before her death, Bernard established credentials as a journalist, a social reformer, and an author. She worked as a journalist and in advertising for several employers from the late 1940s onward. In 1956 she co-founded Parents Without Partners, an organization for single parents and their children, and served as its vice president for over a year. Later she worked against the Vietnam War and for women's rights and minority rights. These last two interests unite in her most significant book, *Journey Toward Freedom*, published in 1967.

Setting

Sojourner Truth's journey away from bondage and her travels between different geographic locations roughly correspond with her emotional and intellectual growth. Her journey also generally illustrates the gains in freedom made by blacks and by women in the nineteenth century.

Slavery has been a part of American history for nearly two hundred years before Sojourner is born on Colonel Johannes Hardenbergh's farm in Ulster County, New York, in about 1797. Although slavery is economically impractical in New York, and the state is gradually phasing it out, Sojourner spends her first twenty-eight years as a slave. At birth she is named "Isabelle," but most people simply call her "Belle."

Sold to Mr. and Mrs. John Neely when she is about twelve, Belle lives with these cruel shopkeepers for a year. Mr. and Mrs. Martin Schryver, tavernkeepers and farmers, then own her for a year before selling her to John J. Dumont of New Paltz, where she remains for sixteen years. These early moves establish a pattern of traveling that Belle follows the rest of her life.

Belle is freed in 1827, when the state of New York emancipates all slaves aged twenty-eight or older. She leaves the New Paltz area in 1829 for New York City. In 1843 she leaves New York, takes her new name of Sojourner Truth while walking across Long Island, and travels through Connecticut to Northampton, Massachusetts, where she joins a commune for three years.

She leaves the commune in 1850 to speak against slavery and serve as a delegate to the first national Women's Rights Convention in Worcester, Massachusetts. By this time some states have banned slavery, others have placed restrictions on it, and many abolitionist groups are working against it, but more than four million blacks remain slaves in America. Sojourner speaks against slavery and for women's rights in Ohio, New York, Indiana, and other states, and in 1856 establishes her permanent home in Battle Creek, Michigan.

Although the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, passed in 1865, bans slavery in the United States, blacks still find it difficult to buy land, vote, and find good work following the Civil War.

Sojourner begins her last major effort to counteract discrimination, an effort that takes her through New York, Pennsylvania, Iowa, and Kansas. She dies at her home in Battle Creek in 1883.

Social Sensitivity

Bernard tells the story of one black woman's rise from slavery to national prominence in *Journey Toward Freedom*, and she shows how this woman's life intersected with, and contributed to, shifts in history. In the course of her portrayal of nineteenth-century America, Bernard records language, attitudes, and actions unacceptable by late twentieth-century standards, and she highlights problems of racism and sexism still unsolved in the twentieth century. This honesty might raise initial questions, but few people should find it offensive.

Characters use the word "nigger" in the book. This very offensive word reflects the standards and prejudice of the times. This is more sharply shown when characters refer to blacks as animals. John Neely had "picked up a flock of healthy sheep and a sturdy looking slave child, all for one hundred dollars." Sheep and a slave child are syntactically and monetarily equal for Neely. When Bob's owners beat him and tie him up, Dumont says, "I will not permit any brute to be tied up that way."

Bernard presents this scene with reserve; she briefly summarizes the event rather than dwelling on it. Bernard displays similar sensitivity during other scenes of physical abuse and during the scene in which Sojourner exposes her breast to an audience to prove she is a woman.

Journey Toward Freedom raises questions about religion, but suggests no answers. The book shows the hypocrisy of some members of organized churches and the genuine goodness of others; it does not condemn organized religion but shows that the members of any church are human. Sam Hill withdraws his membership in a Baptist church when a deacon breaks up an antislavery meeting, but Quakers, members of another organized church, help Sojourner free herself from Dumont.

Sojourner's religion is largely personal— involving what she perceives as a direct intuitive knowledge of God's will, an awareness of an inner light—but she also respects organized religion and participates in various services.

Bernard spent much of her life working for the rights of poor people, blacks, and women, and for nuclear disarmament and a general reduction of violence in the world. Bernard shares many of Sojourner Truth's opinions about social issues and emphasizes Truth's attitudes on the perennial problems afflicting the underprivileged. With disturbing accuracy, Bernard points out the obvious relevance of Truth's attitudes to contemporary problems, demonstrating that the unpleasant facts about American history cannot be ignored. By showing one woman's great accomplishments, *Journey Toward Freedom* raises important moral, social, and historical questions.

Literary Qualities

By filling her account with details about clothing and customs, references to famous people and historical events, advertisements and photographs, and other details, Bernard establishes her credentials as a researcher, making the narrative authentic and believable.

These details also lend depth and complexity to the portrayal of Sojourner.

Journey Toward Freedom touches on conditions of blacks in the South and on the sea by including brief descriptions of the sale of Sojourner's son Peter and his later work as a sailor on a whaling ship.

Sojourner travels often, and Bernard structures the story around her most important changes in location, focusing on a few important incidents from each period. Rather than spending an equal amount of time on all periods of Sojourner's life, Bernard presents key scenes from different locales, providing a vivid backdrop of nineteenth-century American culture and geography. In reconstructing these scenes, Bernard draws heavily on Sojourner Truth's autobiography, *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth*. Bernard includes six firsthand accounts told by Sojourner Truth, and a wide variety of other sources. Most of the dialogue is recorded exactly as Sojourner remembered it in her autobiography, but a few conversations are fictionalized. Likewise, the incidents Bernard relates actually happened, though some details are based on conjecture rather than fact.

Journey Toward Freedom is entertaining as well as instructive. Despite Sojourner's overwhelming concern with very important social issues, Bernard manages to inject a good bit of humor into the story of her life. For instance, Sojourner participates in a religious revival that gets out of hand with women foaming at the mouth and weeping hysterically, and Bernard wryly notes: "If Jesus had been present when all this started, Belle was certain that he must have moved quietly on by this time just as she would have liked to do." The scene becomes even more amusing as a plump woman trips and falls, taking Sojourner down with her; others mistake the accidental fall for a "religious experience," and Sojourner soon finds that she is "pinned down even more firmly by jumping, clapping, shouting women screaming 'hallelujah' and 'Jesus saves.'"



Themes and Characters

Journey Toward Freedom is a study in self-reliance. Sojourner Truth's entire life is controlled by others as she grows up a slave. Even her last name changes every time she is bought by a new owner.

As an adolescent, her life revolves around working hard to please her master, Dumont. Yet she develops independence and self-reliance, and in midlife, she determines her own course, listening to the God she thinks is within her, changing her name, and devoting her life to causes such as black rights and women's rights. By showing the values Sojourner discovered as she grew into herself, Bernard's book becomes a study in personal and social ethics.

Sojourner's name change marks the shift between the two periods of her life.

She develops from a frightened, lonely slave to a witty, wise, fiercely independent, and brave woman. Her deep faith, self-reliance, high ethical standards, her capacity for hard work, and her physical strength remain constants in her life as she establishes a national reputation for herself as a writer, a lecturer, and a reformer. A believer in democracy and the equality of all people, Sojourner sees blacks and women as the most oppressed people of the time.

When in 1864 she learns that men from Maryland repeatedly raid the Freedman's Village in Washington, D.C., and carry off black children to slavery, she counsels the mothers to fight back. They successfully drive off the men. The action illustrates Sojourner's typically swift, constructive reaction to difficulties.

Because Sojourner travels so widely during her life, Bernard's account abounds with secondary characters.

Sojourner's owners include the Hardenberghs, the Schryvers, the Dumonts, the cruel Neelys, and the kind Van Waganens, who are devout Quakers.

Her deeply religious mother, Ma-Ma Betts, and her aged father, Bomefree, are able to do nothing to help her in these transfers from master to master.

Sojourner's first love, Bob, is beaten by his masters for visiting her. Tom, her husband, has been married twice before and is much older than Sojourner when she marries him. Peter, Sojourner's son, is a more fully developed character than her other children. After he is sold, Sojourner successfully works within the legal system to rescue him after he is sold to owners in the South, and she tries to help him recover from this experience. Other secondary characters include Sojourner's grandson Sammy, who often accompanies her on travels; her friend Laura Haviland; and Mrs. Whiting, her employer in New York.



Bernard portrays Sojourner meeting with several widely-known leaders while working for social reform. While living in the Northampton commune, she meets the abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison, editor of *The Liberator*, Frederick Douglass, a fugitive slave, speaker, and writer; and Wendell Phillips, an inspiring public speaker. She continues to work with these people after leaving the commune and also works with other abolitionists, including George Thompson, Frances Gage, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

She even makes a trip to Washington during the Civil War to meet President Abraham Lincoln.



Topics for Discussion

1. Bernard writes that "as she had for so many years, she [Sojourner] continued to travel and to speak for women's rights. She also spoke up for prison reform, for temperance, and for the rights of working men. Wearing a bright red shawl, she gave the Michigan State Senate her views on capital punishment. The person who wants to see his fellow beings hung by the neck until dead has a murderous spot in his heart, she said." Here and in numerous other places in the book the reader learns about Sojourner's opinions. Based on what you know about nineteenth-century history, do you think Sojourner's opinions were justified?

2. If Sojourner were alive today, would she still see the same social problems she objected to during the nineteenth century?

3. Bernard writes: "In Kosciusko County [Indiana], a rumor was circulated that Sojourner was an impostor, a man disguised in woman's clothing. A large number of proslavery people turned up at one of the meetings. Their leader, a local doctor, had bet forty dollars that Sojourner was a man."

Sojourner proves to the crowd that she is a woman. Do you think Sojourner would have had the same impact as a leader if she had been a man, given the circumstances presented in the book?

4. *Journey Toward Freedom* contains photographs, paintings, advertisements, and other documents from the period. What effect is Bernard trying to achieve by including these documents?

Is she successful?

5. Do you see similarities between the way Sojourner Truth reacted to adversity and the peaceful civil disobedience Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King practiced in the twentieth century?

Do you think nonviolence is an effective way to react?

6. Explain Sojourner's religious beliefs.

7. When Belle learns the Dumonts have sold her son Peter and she complains, Mrs. Dumont responds, "Ugh! A fine fuss to make about a little nigger."

How do you feel about the use of the word "nigger" in this and other passages in the book? Should the word be changed? Would the book be as effective if the word were changed?

8. Some people have criticized *Journey Toward Freedom* because it reminds blacks of a painful part of their history from many years before. These people would like to leave



the past behind. Do you agree that specific accounts of slavery should best be forgotten? Should we look toward the future, rather than rethinking the past?

9. Dumont's other young slaves do not want him to expect them to work as hard as Sojourner works, and they resent her when she ignores their requests to work more slowly. She becomes very lonely.

Have you experienced peer pressure like Sojourner's experiences in this section or in other sections of the book? If so, have you ignored this peer pressure like Sojourner did, or have you given in to it?

What do you think about the way she responds to peer pressure?

10. Journey Toward Freedom records how people living in the nineteenth century tried to control others through expressions of disapproval and often through physical force. How have you reacted when people have tried to control you by either means? Have any of your reactions been like Sojourner's?

11. When Sojourner collects donations to buy Thanksgiving food for the members of the First Michigan Regiment of Colored Soldiers, she meets one man who "treated her rudely." As Bernard records the meeting, Sojourner asks, "'Who are you?' The only son of my mother," he snapped. She looked at him in relief. 'I am glad there are no more,' she said." This passage illustrates Sojourner's quick wit and her sometimes sarcastic humor. How else would you describe Sojourner to someone who has not read the book? What passages would you read to this person to illustrate your points?

12. Why does Sojourner change her name from Isabelle to Sojourner Truth?

What does "sojourner truth" mean?

13. Bernard writes that "whenever possible, I have used actual conversations as originally spoken and recorded in the primary sources," but she has invented some of the dialogue based on her knowledge of the characters. After Neely buys Sojourner, for example, Bernard records what he thinks as he brings her home; such thoughts are virtually impossible to prove or to disprove.

At times, then, Bernard probably has been true to the larger story in her book rather than to specific details. Should Bernard have been rigorously faithful in reporting only what she knows actually happened, or is it acceptable that she dramatizes the story by adding what she imagines characters thought or said?

14. In addition to telling the story through short dramatic scenes, Bernard summarizes some sections, and she sometimes steps back and explains the action or presents necessary background information. How does she combine scenes, summary, and exposition in the first and second chapters?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. *Journey Toward Freedom* was published in 1967, William Armstrong's *Souder* in 1969, and Paula Fox's *The Slave Dancer* in 1973. Each book is for young adults, each is about blacks in America, and each is highly regarded.

What changes occurred in the country during the 1960s that made possible this new emphasis on black characters and culture in literature for young adults? What are some other books for young adults from the 1960s onward that also show this new emphasis and new social values?

2. Compare and contrast Julius Lester's *To Be a Slave* (1968) with *Journey Toward Freedom*. Do you find the series of personal memories told in the slaves' own words more memorable, or do you prefer the fictionalized biography of Sojourner Truth?

3. Research and report on one of the abolitionists Sojourner Truth encounters. Possible choices include Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, Frances Gage, George Thompson, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

4. Trace Sojourner's travels on a map.

You might want to use several maps to show different stages of her life and different sections of the book, or you might want to use different colors to show these different periods of time. You also might want to write a brief explanation of what Sojourner's travels show about slavery in the country and about how the country developed during much of the nineteenth century.

5. Compare and contrast the lives of Sojourner Truth and another black woman who was a slave during part of her life. Harriet Tubman was a slave who escaped to freedom and who then helped three hundred other slaves escape.

Anne Petry's *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* (1955) and Lawrence Jacob's *Harriet and the Promised Land* (1968) tell this story.

Harold W. Felton's *Mumbet: The Story of Elizabeth Freeman* (1970) tells how a determined black woman successfully won her freedom in the Massachusetts courts in 1781, then fought her previous owners for her dignity and rights. Did the women share any personality characteristics? Did they propose similar solutions to problems, or different solutions? What can we learn about how to live our own lives by seeing how these women lived theirs?

6. Bernard tells how the conductor of a streetcar did not want Sojourner to ride, but "traffic blocked the track, and before the streetcar could free itself to start again, Sojourner had leaped aboard, umbrella and all....The infuriated conductor ordered Sojourner to stand on the front platform behind the horses. 'I'll put you off, if you don't do as I say,' he bellowed. Ignoring his threats, she seated herself peacefully on a bench.



I am a passenger and shall sit with the other passengers,' she said with her usual dignity." The conductor sees her as a black, but she sees herself as a passenger. Where else in the book does Sojourner show people that their classification systems are too limited and that their reasoning is consequently wrong? How do Sojourner's reclassifications show that prejudice is based on limited perceptions of people?

For Further Reference

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