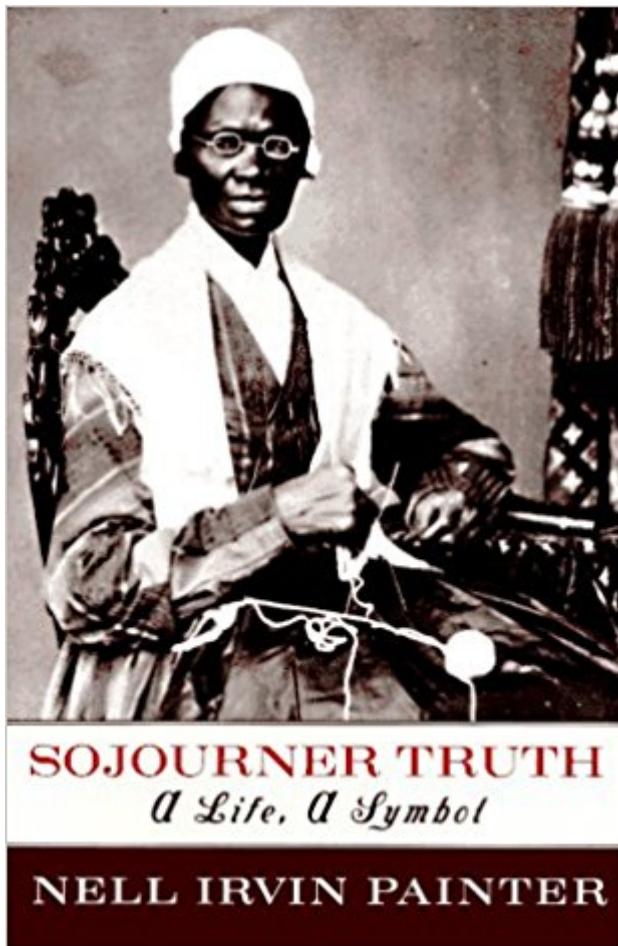


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# Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol



## **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.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Though she was born into slavery and subjected to physical and sexual abuse by her owners, Sojourner Truth, who eventually fled the South for the promise of the North, came to represent the power of individual strength and perseverance. She championed the disadvantaged--black in the South, women in the North--yet spent much of her free life with middle-class whites, who supported her, yet never failed to remind her that she was a second class citizen. Slowly, but surely, Sojourner

climbed from beneath the weight of slavery, secured respect for herself, and utilized the distinction of her race to become not only a symbol for black women, but for the feminist movement as a whole.

Because other biographies of Sojourner Truth, unusual even among ex-slave women as itinerant preacher and political activist, have been published in recent years, Painter's compelling life loses some of its edge. Yet it has additional strengths as 19th-century social history. Isabella Van Wagener, a Pentecostalist domestic born into slavery about 1797 but who reinvented herself at 59 as an abolitionist orator, then into a fiery suffragist, is seen here through the prism of the religious, social and political movements that animated her. A striking presence on the platform, the subject of an as-told-to autobiography that went through many editions and helped sustain her financially, she seemed a born survivor, shedding slavery, abuse, poverty and prejudice during her 80-odd years (admirers claimed 110?she died in 1883). Shrewd, and with a commonsense wit, possessed of such a thundering voice that skeptics wondered if she were a man, she was never, Painter asserts, a quaintly exotic innocent. Relying on biblical allusions that her "Bible-literate" audiences could amplify, she was spellbinding. Still, Painter reminds us, "Everything we know of Sojourner Truth comes through other people, mostly educated white women," for, despite decades of involvement with liberal, even radical, intellectuals, she remained illiterate. Cutting through the image-making of her contemporaries as well as later interpreters who envision Sojourner Truth as the symbol of the strong woman, "black or not," Painter persuasively offers us the real woman behind the myth.

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Painter makes unique recognition of the fact that Sojourner Truth was a self-created identity, and approaches her story through many layers: what do we know? We cannot know as much about Sojourner Truth as we can about other historic figures because Sojourner herself was illiterate. A unique figure -- an orator of historic power, but unable to write or in other ways preserve her own words. All that we can know is what other people wrote or quoted. Yet the written sources disagree: they quote her in black dialect that witnesses say she did not use! People hailed her as a uniquely talented African-born slave, when in fact she was born in New York speaking Dutch as her first language. She lived among African Americans only for short periods late in her life. Her own posed and widely-distributed photographs show only her black skin to differentiate her from any other middle-class matron. So what is truth? Who is Truth? Is this person Isabella Van Wagener, or is she really the myth she created. Painter recognizes these layers and sorts out Truth from myth and truth

from reality, without concluding that one is more important than the other. Very well done.

Nell Painter's unconventional biography of Sojourner Truth made me see how little I knew about the slave Isabella, born in upstate New York, who became a charismatic speaker for abolitionist and suffragist causes. One astonishing revelation was Sojourner's reliance on extreme religious faiths to keep her soul together. Another revelation, at least for me, was that she never learned to read and write. From Harriet Beecher Stowe to leftists of the 1950s, Sojourner's legend was shaped by those who decided they knew what was best for public consumption. Painter has done a magisterial job in presenting this remarkable woman in all her complexities.

I'm glad that I picked this biography between another of Nell Irvin Painter's biography of Sojourner Truth. Painter has certainly done her history and research on Sojourner to create this wonderful insightful biography. I am also reading Harriet Tubman's biography and am finding similarities between her biography and Sojourner's since they are both portrayed as masculine and take action as a part of fighting a cause. Both were poor but have become iconic figures within American history. This is a great enlightening read about Sojourner shedding light on relatively unknown aspects of her life and that of her children. Great historical read very insightful for anyone interested in such an iconic figure. Definitely read if you are interested, and it's at a great low price.

This is not my favorite biography of Sojourner Truth. Painter has some issues with Truth's being uneducated and kind of a rural figure that white nineteenth century thinkers could accept--in contrast to, say, Maria Stewart. But, the idea that Truth was a symbol is exactly right: she was a figure who was so needed for the anti-slavery and feminist movements: plain-spoken. I enjoyed the book

Very informative. I was shocked to find that Ms. Truth was molested by a female master.

Work by this author is always thorough and interesting. She has taken a traditional topic and established added interest in this historic figure. Another work by this writer is *The Exodusters*." Another treasured historic work

I learned so much from this biography the book was in excellent condition

All I can say is... WOW. This woman was amazing, and her story is told well by Painter. I absolutely

recommend!

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