

We Will Be Free: The Life and Faith of Sojourner Truth

Nancy Koester

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Knowing the difficulties involved in documenting enslaved people's lives, Nancy Koester made multiple trips to sites where Sojourner Truth lived and traveled; she also analyzed her dictated letters, speeches, and newspaper accounts in order to construct *We Will Be Free*, an impressive chronology of this powerful figure in American history, seen through the prism of her unshakable religious convictions.

This is a fascinating portrait of nineteenth-century America with parallels to contemporary social polarization. It is engrossing to read how Truth overcame obstacles and tragic events to become an eloquent, influential preacher and orator during the turbulent decades around the Civil War. The transformation of enslaved Isabella Baumfree into formidable Sojourner Truth is riveting; Koester demonstrates her shifting perspectives as an enslaved person, freed housekeeper, and a loyal adherent to a religious zealot before she blossomed into her own as an itinerant preacher and activist. She stood down bigoted mobs, argued with Frederick Douglass, counseled presidents, and challenged allies within the antislavery and women's rights movements.

Koester centers Truth as an inspiration for Black women's activism. Although she held deep religious beliefs, she also delivered pointed criticisms of Christian nationalism and mainstream churches who "failed to live out their creed." The book conveys her intensity and confidence in speaking truth to power via quotes and eyewitness accounts. It also dispels myths about the relative humanity of Northern slavery, its entanglement in Southern agriculture and trade, and bigotry and violence in northern cities.

We Will Be Free is an insightful book that shows how Sojourner Truth's faith made her resolute and strong, helping her to share a vision of an egalitarian United States that lives up to its promise of rights and opportunities for people of all faiths, backgrounds, and genders.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (March / April 2023)

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