

Daisy Turner's Kin: An African American Family Saga

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Review

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Beck, Jane C. *Daisy Turner's Kin: An African American Family Saga*. University of Illinois Press, \$24.95 ISBN 9780252080791

Preserving a Rich Oral History of Slavery and Freedom

Daisy Turner was 100 years old when folklorist Jane C. Beck began interviewing her in 1983 — but first, Beck had to answer one question: “Are you a prejudiced woman?” For Daisy, an African American daughter of freed slaves who safeguarded four generations of family history, questions of race and equality compelled her to act and advocate for herself throughout her long life. When Beck stammered a satisfactory response, Daisy agreed to share her father’s memories with the white woman from Vermont. It was the beginning of a fruitful and mutually beneficial partnership between the two women. While Beck wanted to produce an educational documentary, Daisy longed to validate her father’s memories. She had two missions for Beck: first, to document her father’s Civil War service and obtain the pension he had sought his whole life; and second, to write a book containing her “memories of the slave boy from the South, so that it wouldn’t be lost” (20).

Daisy Turner’s Kin represents Beck’s decades-long effort to document the Turner family narrative. The book spans roughly two centuries and centers around Daisy’s father Alec, a man of great intelligence, strength, and determination who escaped bondage in April 1862. However, it begins in the early 1800s with Daisy’s grandfather Alessi, son of an English woman and the Yoruba man who rescued her after her ship wrecked on the West African coast. Two chapters are devoted to Alessi’s life in Africa, his harrowing journey to the United States (possibly aboard the schooner *Fenix*) circa 1830, and his life on a Virginia plantation, where he fathered his only child — Alec — with an enslaved Cherokee seamstress named Rose. Beck handles this poorly documented period in Turner history well, shrewdly teasing out the historical context of Alessi’s unique relationship with slaveowner Jack Gouldin, a yeoman farmer who

exploited Alessi's fighting prowess to win lucrative bets at athletic "meets" arranged with other plantation owners.

The rest of the book revolves around Alec and his family. A chapter on Alec's childhood on the plantation reviews well-trodden historical territory, yet his personal experiences are singular. Alec preserved stories of events that shaped his identity for the rest of his life — the white mistress throwing his prized moccasins in the fire; stopping a storm with the power of prayer at his father's funeral; and the enslaved girl who threw herself in a river to escape rape by white men. During the Civil War, Alec escaped from bondage, took revenge on his former overseer, and became a surgeon's assistant with the First New Jersey Cavalry. Alec spent the postwar period in a Freedman's Bureau camp and, later, a Maine slate quarry. Unfortunately, Beck finds that Alec had formally neither enlisted nor mustered out of the Union Army, so Daisy's quest for his pension was doomed to failure.

The final three chapters track the growth of Alec's farm and family in rural Vermont and contain Daisy's richest and most detailed recollections. Daisy's life as a working woman makes her a unique source of observations on race, gender, and class in twentieth-century American history. The Turner family's views on courtship are a subject especially ripe for cultural analysis. For example, while Alec made it clear that he disapproved of his daughters dating white men, in part because he had seen the role that rape played in slavery, several Turner sisters married white men anyway. Daisy herself had an affair with her white employer, which ultimately played out scandalously in a Massachusetts courtroom when she sued him — and won. Like Alec, Daisy chafed at injustice and racism and stood up for herself in a variety of contexts. While this book understandably focuses on the Turner family as a whole, Daisy's memories are deserving of more attention in their own right.

Beck's passion for oral history shines through in her respectful and sensitive treatment of her sources, especially Daisy. Throughout the narrative, Beck sifts evenhandedly through the natural elisions and compressions of memory to establish Daisy as a credible source of oral history. Alec took care to pass on an understanding of his life to his thirteen children, who were all born free. He did so by telling stories, singing spirituals and hymns, and painstakingly preserving mementoes. Alec's memories, lovingly preserved by Daisy in the West African oral tradition she learned at her father's knee, lend the invaluable perspective of a former bondsman to Civil War historiography. Due to Daisy's lifelong

dedication to her father's memory and Beck's diligent research, Alec left behind tantalizing details about plantation life, the hierarchy of the enslaved, passive and active resistance, white womanhood in the South, the social status of yeoman farmers, and spiritualism and religion in African American culture.

Refreshingly, Beck openly acknowledges her positionality as a white woman telling the story of a Black family. Throughout the book, Beck is sensitive to the need to avoid unduly imposing her perspective on the family's history. She delineates her narrative from Daisy's by italicizing Daisy's words, making it clear when Daisy herself "speaks" directly to the reader. However, it is not always clear what details of the Turner family narrative are grounded in oral history and which emerged from secondary research. A choice of footnotes over endnotes would have contributed to the transparency that Beck rightly sought for this nuanced history.

Beck has crafted a powerful history that might never have been. It testifies to the determination of one man — and his daughter — to establish and preserve an identity outside the institution of slavery, which had denied his very personhood. It is impossible to say whether the famously feisty Daisy, who died almost thirty years ago, would have been satisfied with the book that bears her name. Yet there is no doubt that Beck upholds her promise to Daisy to publish "this wonderful story...so that it wouldn't be lost."

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