

Remarks prepared for YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction

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Good morning and thank you. I am honored to be in the company of this esteemed group of writers and librarians.

Today, I speak to you not only as an author, but as a child of the public library. I grew up in a town outside New York City that had no bookstores. But I was lucky. We had the majestic Mount Vernon Public Library filling the void.

My regular trips to this Andrew Carnegie legacy were a ritual, full of wonder. The leap from the downstairs Children's Room to the Main Floor was a rite of passage. With a prized adult card in hand, I climbed a grand marble stairway in what felt like a temple. That library made me a reader. I had no idea it was making me a writer. Today, I stand here in grateful awe.

Nearly thirty years ago, I wrote *Don't Know Much About History* – a collection of questions and answers about America's past. Over time, one question perplexed me more than any other: How could men who

had risked all in the struggle for “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” go home to plantations utterly dependent upon enslaved people?

I called this the Great Contradiction – that a nation “conceived in liberty” was also born in shackles. For years, I sought to unravel that contradiction by examining America’s Founders. But the answer always fell short.

So I chose to flip the narrative and explore the lives of five people enslaved by four great American presidents. Long hidden by history, these stories must be heard. They help us grapple with slavery’s poisonous legacy, still felt today in America’s deep racial chasm.

William Lee was purchased by George Washington at an estate sale –the way we might buy some heirloom silver. Lee spent more than three decades as manservant to Washington. Attending the General every day of the Revolution, he crossed the Delaware and suffered at Valley Forge. Lee was the only person emancipated at Washington’s death.

Born in bondage, Ona Judge was the daughter of an enslaved

seamstress and indentured servant Edward Judge – the tailor who sewed Washington’s uniform when he left for Philadelphia in 1775.

Twenty-one years later, Ona Judge was in Philadelphia as Mrs. Washington’s personal maid, fixing her hair and helping her dress. One evening, Ona walked out. She fled after learning that she would be made a wedding gift to Martha Washington’s ill-tempered granddaughter. Furious at Ona’s escape, President Washington spent three years tracking her down.

Isaac Granger was born enslaved into what Thomas Jefferson called his Monticello “family.” In 1781, five-year-old Isaac was captured by British troops. He was in Yorktown –along with thousands of other enslaved people – as this tobacco port was shelled in the Revolution’s final battle. Later, Isaac told how Washington returned him to bondage. “Master Jefferson,” said Isaac, “was mighty happy to see his people.”

Paul Jennings also witnessed war up close. Born enslaved at James Madison’s Montpelier, he was taken to the White House – a ten-year-old

child serving Dolley Madison and the President. One day, during the War of 1812, Paul set the table. But British troops would enjoy the cider and wine he had laid out before they torched the White House.

Alfred Jackson was born enslaved at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage. In 1838, Alfred attended a Christmas party. Singing, dancing, and drinking led to a fight; a man was killed. Alfred and two other Hermitage men were tried for murder. No friend of abolition, an aging President Jackson went into debt to pay for their defense and attended every day of the trial; all three were acquitted. Remaining at Jackson's plantation through the Civil War and long after, Alfred died there in 1901; a man enslaved by the seventh president survived into the 20th century.

That is how close we are to these lives. This is not ancient history.

Through these five stories, *In the Shadow of Liberty* explores the central role slavery played in America's founding. Sadly, that role has been reduced to dry legalisms and textbook accounts of compromises and constitutional amendments.

But American slavery was a crime against humanity of epic

proportions –a tragedy that must be told first as a story of real people.

There is –in closing—another lesson from this grim history. After escaping his bondage, Frederick Douglass wrote of being forbidden to learn his ABCs. White masters, Douglass knew, used ignorance to keep power over black people. Knowledge and literacy were his keys to freedom.

Congressman John Lewis understands that truth. Perhaps you’ve heard how he was denied a library card – a card meant for whites only.

Today –here—we celebrate literacy and reading. But not merely as pleasant diversions. “Some books leave us free,” wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson. “And some books make us free.”

So, I express my gratitude to you – America’s librarians – as we face threats to democracy rarely seen in our lifetimes. You are guardians of the freedom of information and the spirit of learning. You stand as what Lincoln once called, “the last best hope.”

Thank you, then, from one small boy who gained so much more

than a library card.

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