

Slaves in the Family

by Edward Ball

StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 4

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Discussion questions

"I think we have two opposing myths," writes Edward Ball. "One is the myth of the gentle master. The other is the story of the rivers of blood that flowed from slavery. Where is the truth?" To what extent are we accountable for the actions of our ancestors?

C. Carr (*The Village Voice*, March 3, 1998) wrote: "Slavery in Africa was rooted in tribalism. I'd call it a war crime; terrible, but it had nothing to do with racism. Slavery in America had everything to do with racism. Ball never contemplates such nuances." What reasons did slave owners and traders use to justify slavery?

Time, December 15, 1997, quotes Edward Ball: "You have to cut the wound open to get the poison out. I believe in the power of truth telling. I've seen it suture that wound." Do you agree or disagree?

Additional readings

Charles W. Chesnut. *The House Behind the Cedars*, 1900.
Julia Peterkin. *Scarlet Sister Mary*, 1928.

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Genealogy has become a popular pursuit, especially in the last decade. Many people are interested in knowing something about their ancestors and in tracing their lineage to discover family names and the character of their bloodline, thus linking themselves with history, and with the flow of humanity from place to place over time. In digging into the stories of our ancestors, history itself—at least our particular version of it—often undergoes revision.

We are familiar with biographies of the powerful and the influential indexed on the library shelves, and from these lives we assemble the larger story of historical events. But what about the common people whose stories haven't been widely told? For instance, can we have a truly accurate history of slavery in America if lives of both masters and slaves are not scrutinized equally? Until Frederick Douglass told his first-hand account of atrocities committed upon slaves, slavery was often romanticized with images of contented slaves singing as they labored for their beneficent owners.

Similarly, in order to draw an accurate picture of a family's history, we cannot assume a widely accepted story is indeed the whole story until each and every family member has had his or her say. In *Slaves in the Family*, Edward Ball is troubled by these same concerns as he explores his family's past—a long and complicated saga of six generations owning 25 South Carolina plantations and as many as 4,000 slaves.

Edward Ball's great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather, Elias ("Red Cap") Ball, arrived in South Carolina in 1698. He was the 22-year-old son of peasant farmers from Devon, England, and he crossed the Atlantic to claim his inheritance—740 acres of South Carolina wetlands along the Cooper River north of Charleston, and 25 slaves. Through hard work, good business sense, and the sweat of an accumulating number of slaves, Elias Ball prospered in America. In two marriages, he fathered 10 children, only three of whom survived to inherit the family lands, business, and slaves.

These three, and all their many descendants, developed the Ball family plantations into a veritable empire of several thousands of acres. Over six generations the family grew rich on the planting and harvesting of rice, most of which was exported, primarily to England. Wealth also accumulated from the purchase and sale of slaves. George Austin, husband of Elias Ball's daughter Eleanor, was perhaps the largest slave trader in all the British colonies, and by age 35 he was also one of the wealthiest men in North America.

The history of Elias Ball and his descendants was complicated, but not terribly confusing in itself, until Edward Ball discovered that the original family patriarch probably also fathered two children by one of his slaves. This meant that the Ball family history rightfully included these mixed-race children and their mother and all of their descendants. In addition, Ball uncovers other instances of Ball family males fathering children with slaves, thus expanding a very complicated lineage that includes two races. The notion of sexual relations between master and slave is of course controversial, and until recently the topic was taboo, almost unspeakable. *Slaves in the Family* blows the lid off this taboo.

Edward Ball researched his family history for three years, first moving back to Charleston and living in one of the family mansions now moldering and waiting to be sold. He carefully studied old family records; as wealthy plantation owners, the Balls kept detailed accounts of their holdings, including slave ledgers. He studied newspaper ads in which his forebears advertised for the return of fugitive slaves; court records which document inheritances, family disputes, births and deaths; letters and diaries; and he interviewed as many living relatives as he could locate, both white and black. In the final chapter, he travels to Bunce Island, a former slave fort in Sierra Leone in which captured African natives were held for shipment to the colonies. In Africa he interviews descendants of tribal chiefs and others whose ancestors captured and sold slaves.

Slaves in the Family won the National Book Award for nonfiction in 1997, and was also a national best seller, reflecting perhaps the willingness of a great number of people to examine these difficult issues more closely. But at the outset of Edward Ball's quest for a broader understanding of his family's relationship to their slaves, doors were slammed in his face. From his white relatives, Ball received resistance: "To do this you will condemn your ancestors. You're going to dig up my grandfather and hang him!" or "This will court anger and it will divide people." At the outset, when he approached his black relatives, he was met with caution, sometimes anger. But on the whole, relatives eventually cooperated, sharing stories and adding an ever increasing sense of realism to the Ball family history.

Edward Ball says his motive in undertaking this arduous and controversial research was not guilt, but a sense of accountability. He felt he must be responsible to the truth, for perpetuating a family cover-up would add to the moral error of slave ownership in the first place. To face the truth, no matter how unpopular, would be a first step toward healing old wounds. "The feeling I get," says Ball, "is that people now welcome the permission to talk about . . . the purchase and sale of children, black and white sex, the slave ships. It means that people want to find a way to talk about this inheritance and the story I tell seems to help. There's too much silence about it."

About the author

Edward Ball was educated at Brown University, and is a former columnist for *The Village Voice*. *Slaves in the Family* is his first book.