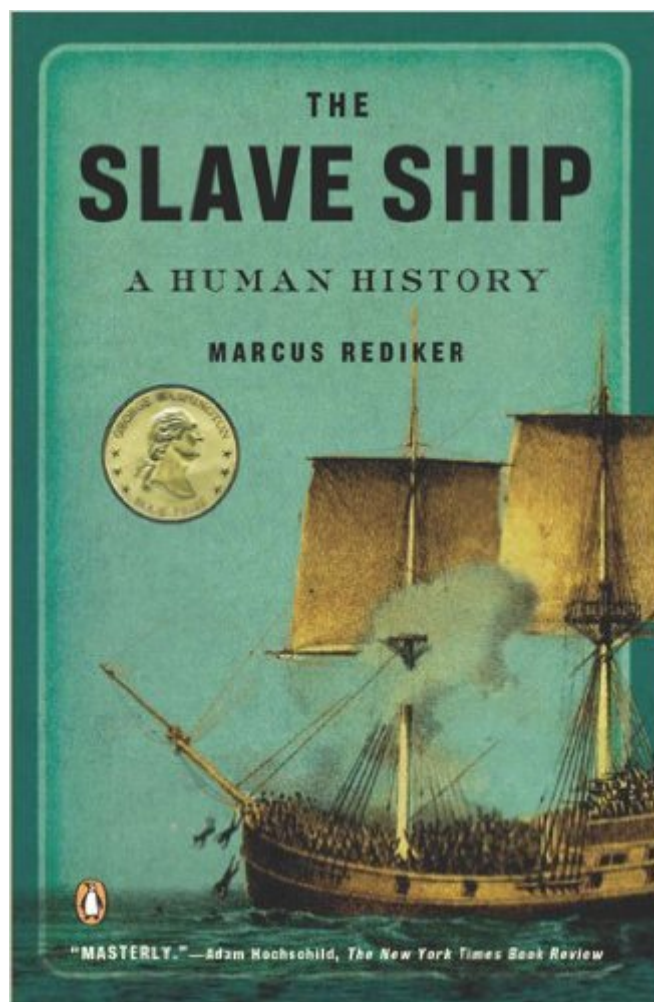


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The Slave Ship: A Human History



Synopsis

In this widely praised history of an infamous institution, award-winning scholar Marcus Rediker shines a light into the darkest corners of the British and American slave ships of the eighteenth century. Drawing on thirty years of research in maritime archives, court records, diaries, and firsthand accounts, *The Slave Ship* is riveting and sobering in its revelations, reconstructing in chilling detail a world nearly lost to history: the "floating dungeons" at the forefront of the birth of African American culture.

Book Information

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (September 30, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0143114255

ISBN-13: 978-0143114253

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 1 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 12 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (80 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Marcus Rediker subtitles "The Slave Ship" as "A Human History", and that is an accurate description of its focus and method -- and its strengths and most evident weakness. The book has as its primary focus British and American slave ships of the 18th century (when the transAtlantic slave trade was at its height and before it was outlawed), and how it shaped and warped those who sailed, voluntarily or involuntarily, aboard those vessels. Rediker constructs his history by drawing upon first-hand accounts, mostly written by seamen and ships' captains, but also some from merchants and even a few slaves. He presents the horrific details of the psychological, social, and cultural impact of such a horrific business. It is said that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Then, slave ships certainly proved -- especially perhaps to their captains -- an enormously corrupting activity. Even those who considered themselves as humane and compassionate people were inevitably stained and warped by the experience. But for all of Rediker's obvious (and sometimes perhaps too obvious) horror at what happened, I think the book

could have been even stronger and better if the author had provided more numbers and statistics to help quantify the enormity of the events; he makes passing references to studies of the numbers of Africans enslaved and the number who died in the process, but nowhere are these figures clearly presented for an overall portrait. The book makes for unsettling reading, with murder, rape, and casual brutality leaping off nearly every page (and, as Rediker demonstrates, the brutality was not confined to use against the slaves alone, but also the crews). One aspect that I had never encountered before was that not infrequently slaves being transported from Africa across the Atlantic were pressed into service to supplement the crew in sailing the ship and even fighting off enemy privateers and often (this reminded me of tales from Holocaust death camps) they acted as "trustees" to keep other slaves in line. Fans of the recent movie "Amazing Grace" will be interested to see that several historical characters from that film make appearances in the pages of this book, including Captain John Newton, Thomas Clarkson, and Olaudah Equiano.

I saw the review of this book in the *WSJ* and decided this was worth reading. As an African who comes from one of the major regions where slaves were taken, it was indeed a difficult read; I sometimes had to put it aside and reflect on what my people went through before, during, and after the passage. The material in this book does not just cover the history of the slaves taken to the Americas, but also the sailors and, especially, Africans themselves. I would implore my fellow Africans to read this book because it shows an essential part of our history that rarely gets the deserved attention. And it is only by knowing that history that we can move forward. Rediker does an impressive job showing why the stories of the slave ship should never be forgotten.

The slave ship gives a fascinating forte in the archives of slavery and the making of modern history. It was a vehicle, transporting captives whose labor was necessary for America's economic survival; it was a factory, where African men, women, and children were transformed into "cargo"; and it was an instrument of war, complete with fearsome weapons with the capability to destroy any who might challenge its gruesome mission. In Marcus Rediker's book it explores these historical uses of the slave ship by drawing on an astonishing array of archival material, revealing the voices of slaves, common sailors, pirates, captains, and traders in all their complex humanity. Rediker's talent as a writer and a historian is to bring this kind of disparate information into one solid, available and enthralling narrative.

Marcus Rediker, of Pittsburgh University's History Department, has written a brilliant account of the

machine that enabled history's largest forced migration. Exploration, settlement, production and trade all required massive fleets of ships. The slave ships, with names like Liberty, Free Love and Delight, transported both the expropriated labourers and the new commodities that they produced. The ships were weapons, factories and prisons too. These ships were the key to an entire phase of capitalist expansion. Between the late 15th century and the late 19th century, it is estimated that they transported 10.6 million people, of whom 1.5 million died in the first year of slavery. 1.8 million had died en route to Africa's coast, and 1.8 million died on the ships. So the trade killed more than five million people. The 18th century was the worst century, in which seven million people were transported, three million of them in British and US ships, from Liverpool, Bristol and London. Seven million slaves were bought in Britain's sugar islands, for toil in the plantations. For half the 18th century, Britain was at war with France or Spain, for markets and empire. The slaver merchant capitalists gained from it all. They hired the captains and the captains hired the sailors. The conflict between these two forces was the primary contradiction on board, until the ships reached the African coast, then all united against the slaves. The captains exercised the discipline of exemplary violence against slaves and sailors. Their cruelty and terror were not individual quirks but were built in to 'the general cruelty of the system'. Rediker studies the conflicts, cooperation and culture of the enslaved. He shows how the enslaved Africans were the primary, and first, abolitionists, supported by dissident sailors and antislavery activists like Thomas Clarkson. The book renders the sheer horror of the experiences that this vile trade inflicted on people. Rediker concludes, "we must remember that such horrors have always been, and remain, central to the making of global capitalism." The British Empire, so romanticised by Brown, Blair and a horde of self-publicising sycophants, was built on this murderous trade.

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