



Black Prophetic Fire

Cornel West, Christa Buschendorf

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An unflinching look at nineteenth- and twentieth-century African American leaders and their visionary legacies.

In an accessible, conversational format, Cornel West, with distinguished scholar Christa Buschendorf, provides a fresh perspective on six revolutionary African American leaders: Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., Ella Baker, Malcolm X, and Ida B. Wells. In dialogue with Buschendorf, West examines the impact of these men and women on their own eras and across the decades. He not only rediscovers the integrity and commitment within these passionate advocates but also their fault lines.

West, in these illuminating conversations with the German scholar and thinker Christa Buschendorf, describes Douglass as a complex man who is both “*the* towering Black freedom fighter of the nineteenth century” and a product of his time who lost sight of the fight for civil rights after the emancipation. He calls Du Bois “undeniably the most important Black intellectual of the twentieth century” and explores the more radical aspects of his thinking in order to understand his uncompromising critique of the United States, which has been omitted from the American collective memory. West argues that our selective memory has sanitized and even “Santaclausified” Martin Luther King Jr., rendering him less radical, and has marginalized Ella Baker, who embodies the grassroots organizing of the civil rights movement. The controversial Malcolm X, who is often seen as a proponent of reverse racism, hatred, and violence, has been demonized in a false opposition with King, while the appeal of his rhetoric and sincerity to students has been sidelined. Ida B. Wells, West argues, shares Malcolm X’s radical spirit and fearless speech, but has “often become the victim of public amnesia.”

By providing new insights that humanize all of these well-known figures, in the engrossing dialogue with Buschendorf, and in his insightful introduction and powerful closing essay, Cornel West takes an important step in rekindling the Black prophetic fire so essential in the age of Obama.

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Charles Wright:

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