

Oscar Micheaux. The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer. 1913, reprint Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

The writing and publication of The Conquest make for a remarkable story. Originally published anonymously with the author only being identified by the book's subtitle, "The Story of a Negro Pioneer," this is the account of one of those rare individuals—a black homesteader on the early twentieth century South Dakota frontier. Although Oscar Micheaux may have been slightly exaggerating in saying that he was the only dark-skinned farmer in the entire region, he was not far off the mark; few African Americans ventured into the area during the period. Micheaux testified that aside from some tensions experienced with his white neighbors, he was generally treated courteously by most of them, and they came to respect and admire him.

More remarkable even than the nature of the author and his presence in such an out-of-the-way place for black agriculturalists was the process by which the book was written, published, and distributed. Micheaux, a high school dropout, had never written anything for publication before sitting down to compose this slightly fictionalized account of his life up to age twenty-eight. Yet, if we believe his testimony in a subsequent novel, he dashed off 10,000 words during his first day of writing and a like amount the following day, before tearing the pages up and starting over again. Then, unable to find a publisher for his manuscript, he self-published it and personally peddled it to friends and neighbors and later to thousands of readers in the upper Midwest, Southern states, and all around the country. To assist him, he hired a corps of door-to-door salesmen. During the next three decades, he wrote six more novels, two of them reconstructing his experiences on the South Dakota prairie.

But that was not all. In 1918, he refashioned himself a second time, in this instance as a movie director and producer, putting the story he had told in The Homesteader (a reworking of his first novel) on the silver screen. Again, he had absolutely no experience in the medium. Before he was finished, however, he produced approximately forty-five pictures, becoming in the process the first significant black film producer in the United States. Although widely known and appreciated among the African American population during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s, he remained virtually unrecognized among their white counterparts, and Hollywood's racial barriers ensured that he would never have a chance to make movies with adequate budgets, equipment, and personnel. In recent decades, however, despite the controversy that once surrounded him, Micheaux has become widely recognized as a uniquely gifted and creative filmmaker, who to a significant degree was able to transcend the hurdles and barriers confronting African Americans.

The Conquest was no fanciful literary offering by a man who was bored with life or who wished to indulge his creative impulses. It was written in 1912 as a desperate effort to raise cash after Micheaux, like thousands of his fellow agriculturists in south-central South Dakota, was left penniless by the devastating drought that had settled upon the region the previous year. After joining the land rush to the Rosebud Indian Reservation when it opened for settlement in 1904, he had prospered mightily for eight years, accumulating over 500 acres of land and being worth, according to his own testimony, \$20,000. Not only had his finances turned topsy-turvy because of the

drought; his new wife, Orlean McCracken, had returned to the home of her domineering father in Chicago, leaving Micheaux emotionally vulnerable. Writing The Conquest, therefore, was an act of psychic reconstitution as well as of financial entrepreneurship.

These observations help explain the literary quality of the work. Micheaux's first serious attempt at putting words on a page should not be judged by the standards normally applied to more accomplished and professional wordsmiths. What stands out in the reading, however, is not how amateurish and unfinished the prose seems; rather, it is how compelling and authentic it is. The book is a real page-turner, and the story—or rather stories—as it unfolds provides an authentic account of prairie homesteading and town-building in Gregory and Tripp Counties during the period Micheaux lived there, from 1904, when he purchased his first 160 acres, until 1912, when he wrote the book.

The form of the book itself is ambiguous. Is it a novel or is it autobiography? Micheaux himself probably gave little thought to the matter. Dashing off thousands of words a day in the heat of emotion, he simply wanted to capture his own experience, realize some emotional catharsis after his deeply displeasing confrontations with his father-in-law, and express some of his viewpoints about racial pride and opportunities for economic betterment. The result was less than a polished, finely wrought literary masterpiece, but it was genuinely felt, lively, and authentic. We can be certain that, with minor exceptions, the story being told adhered closely to the facts as the author understood and remembered them. Probably to spare hard feelings and to deflect possible lawsuits, Micheaux changed the names of people and places in his account. Thus, the Jackson brothers became the Nicholsons. Marvin Hughitt, president of the Chicago and North Western (C. & N.W.) Railroad metamorphosed into Marvin Hewitt of the C. & R.W. Orlean and Rev. Newton J. McCracken became the McCralines. Gregory turned into Megory, Burke was transformed into Kirk, and on down the line: Tripp County-Tipp County, Bonesteel-Oristown, Dallas-Calias, Lamoreaux-Amoreaux (Lamro-Amro), Colome-Colone, Winner-Victor, and so on. Micheaux biographers Betti VanEpps-Taylor and Patrick McGilligan both conclude, however, that all three of Micheaux's novels set in South Dakota were essentially true to fact and that, of these, The Conquest provides the most faithful rendering of the historical and biographical record.

The first-time author obviously had no experience with blocking out sections of his material, inventing intricate plotlines, or developing character and tone. He just sat down to write, and the veracity of his story is all the better for it. Transitions sometimes got slighted, and the reader may get the feeling of being bounced back and forth at times. It might be helpful to identify the five major themes that work themselves out throughout the book:

First, there is Micheaux's own life story from childhood in "M----pls" (actually Metropolis) on the Ohio River in southern Illinois to the wheat fields of South Dakota. There is very little independent evidence to document the life of Oscar Micheaux (he changes his surname to Devereaux in the book), so the best, and often the only, information we have is what he supplies in his novels. That he was able to save several thousand dollars as a Pullman porter in a couple of years' time is testimony to his work ethic, value system, tremendous industry and application, and sense of racial pride.

The latter serves as a second theme that appears periodically in the story—his devotion to the philosophy of Booker T. Washington, to whom the book is dedicated.

Micheaux would later often include framed portraits of the black educator hanging on the walls of his movie sets. The upside of Micheaux's strong sense of racial destiny was his belief in the possibilities of American life and especially in the opportunities for improvement and economic success offered to black people by the "Great Northwest" (including South Dakota). The downside was his frequent negative references to members of his own race, whom he described as being lazy, self-indulgent, and unenterprising. His depictions of his fellow blacks can sometimes sound as one-sided and prejudiced as those of the most vicious bigots. It should be noted that later on in his movies he often excoriated racial prejudice and violence, such as that practiced by the KKK.

The third theme of the book, and the one that holds everything together, is that of homesteading on the Dakota frontier. Micheaux, like Laura Ingalls Wilder, who was seventeen years older than he and whose autobiographical novels depicted the prairie frontier a quarter-century earlier, provides a fairly accurate and detailed description of "the arithmetic of farming" through thick and thin, good times and bad.

Coincidental with the epic of homesteading told in The Conquest is the story of the towns that depended upon the surrounding farmers for their livelihood. This is all about railroads, boosterism, capitalistic competition, county-seat battles, and the machinations of self-styled entrepreneurs, such as the Nicholson brothers. A similar story is told in hundreds of local and county histories, and the sheer excitement and sometimes sordidness of the details come through strongly here.

Finally, this is a love story, but more accurately it is a narrative of Oscar's failure to find love. Love clearly is much on Micheaux's mind, and it is up to the reader to compare the melodrama of his treatment to that depicted in today's romance novels and soap-opera scripts. The difference is that his story was based on fact, as viewed through his highly emotional and self-interested perspective. This would not be the last novel or movie in which Micheaux would tell of thwarted love and interracial romance. Suffice it to say, the theme of manhood played prominently in his personal life as well as in his artistry.

In sum, The Conquest needs to be considered for more than its sheer literary qualities. It has to be placed within its historical, social, literary, and personal contexts. If the reader can do that, s/he will discover a profound reading experience and obtain a much clearer understanding of life in early twentieth-century America.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In chapter one, the author describes his alter ego, Oscar, as lazy and work-shirking. Assuming that this is a somewhat accurate description of the real Oscar Micheaux as a young man, doesn't it seem odd that he would grow up to be so enterprising, creative, and professionally successful? What do you think changed?
2. In chapter two, as Oscar is about to travel off to Chicago, his sister tells him to "be good and try to make a man of yourself." How would you describe the challenges he faced as an African American of that place and time to become a man, and how well do you think he succeeded in responding to those challenges?
3. The author divides members of his own race into two categories: "progressives" like himself, who follow the principles of Booker T. Washington and try to better themselves through industry and application without being hamstrung by white

racial prejudice, and “reactionaries” like Rev. McCraline, who complain bitterly about discrimination and prejudice and demand equal rights, but who do little actively to take advantage of the opportunities that are available to them. Although not mentioning him by name, Micheaux takes a pot shot at W.E.B. DuBois (identified in chapter 37 as a “professor in a colored university in Georgia”), who was Washington’s chief antagonist in the debate among turn-of-the-century African American leaders about which strategies to follow to better their race. Discuss the validity of Micheaux’s approach and what you think may have motivated it.

4. In addition to his often acerbic remarks about his own race (as well as about American Indians), Micheaux harbored some deep animosities toward urban America. What evidence do you find of this? Why do you think rural homesteading in the “Great Northwest” was so appealing to him? Do you think his admonitions to his fellow blacks to take up homesteading were realistic?

5. Micheaux’s description of the homesteading process highlights the opportunities it afforded as well as its limitations and threats to economic security. Discuss.

6. Anyone who has read about early town history in the region will recognize many of the things the author discusses in describing early-day town rivalry and development. What were some of the standard elements of that narrative?

7. Describe the relationship between the protagonist and his father-in-law. Reading between the lines, do you accept Micheaux’s description of Rev. McCraline as one that is rational and accurate? What do Micheaux’s self-described words and actions in these episodes tell about him as a person?

8. What is your overall evaluation of the book as history, literature, insight into human nature and behavior, and description of landscape?

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951), America’s first significant African American filmmaker, produced his first film, “The Homesteader,” in 1919 at age 35. Based upon his earlier novel of that name, the movie is considered by film historians to be the first all-black, full-length American film. He went on to produce approximately 45 more movies in a cinematic career that lasted for three decades. Only about a third of them have been recovered. Besides not knowing exactly how many films he made or what two-thirds of them looked like, much else about Micheaux’s life remains undocumented and obscure. Most of what we know about the first quarter-century of his life derives from The Homesteader (1917), The Conquest (1913), and other novels and movies that he wrote and produced, many of which were heavily autobiographical in nature. He grew up in and near Metropolis in southern Illinois, leaving home to work in Chicago as a Pullman porter and then to homestead in South Dakota between 1904 and 1912. He wrote three novels during the 1910s and four more during the 1940s. His first marriage to Orlean McCracken in 1910 quickly ended in divorce. In 1926, he married Alice Russell, a concert soloist from Montclair, New Jersey. She later acted in several of his films and ably assisted him as his business manager until his death in 1951.

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