

Reading Guide for *FREEMAN WALKER* by David Allan Cates

About the Book

Jimmy Gates spends the first seven years of his life in a bubble of paradise within a region of hell. Though born to a slave owner and his slave, he is loved by both parents who also share a mutual affection for each other. As he grows and plays in the lush green pastures of Sweet Grass Farm, the tiny boy is barely aware of his status as human chattel. At seven his father gives him papers that signify his freedom, and that is when his troubles begin.

Patriarch Gates sends his son from Maryland to a boarding school in England, where, despite his race, he is befriended by the other boys yet pines for his family, especially his dear mother. Four years later the father dies at sea and Jimmy is left penniless and dumped into a London slum to make his own way at a workhouse. The raw-sewage brutishness of 19th century urban England spews all around him. Bawdy houses, colorfully shady characters and enough filth to launch a thousand plagues surround Jimmy as he struggles into manhood. And misfortune appears to be holding him prisoner until one night he seizes upon an opportunity to make his own luck via a weak miscreant's vulnerability.

So with ill-gotten gains he sails back to America. In Europe his race had elicited friendly curiosity. Seldom would reactions in United States be positive. They would range from verbal hostility to attempted homicide. But like a magician Jimmy can perform a trick with his top hat. When he covers his woolly hair with it, he is taken for a white man and treated with respect and congeniality. When his race is exposed trouble is coming, with or without delay.

Still he is determined to make his fortune, and find his mother—who has been sold from Sweet Grass—and buy her back. His American journey marches him through the death and mayhem of the Civil War. He saves the life of Col. Cornelius O'Keefe, a world famous fighter for justice, never knowing that much later the Irishman will return the favor.

While a soldier he is captured as a slave and freed only through the most hideous bargain since *Sophie's Choice*. And he takes the name of Freeman Walker for his mode of transportation and his blood-won liberty.

Out West, during the Great Gold Rush, he sees big skies and great, Godly landscapes. It is where a man can define himself, unless he encounters those who already have defined him. Along with his fellow miners, he strikes gold. But the land is lawless, unless one counts the rule of the lawless. So what is to protect a black prospector and his gold?

He yet longs to see his mother. But before this can happen, fate has other plans.

Freedman Walker explores the meanings liberty, suffering, justice, destiny, and the ideas that humans are at once free and not in control. David Allen Cates has written a monumental tale that shapes life's heart-breaking mysteries into a wondrous journey readers will long remember.

About the Author

Born and raised in Madison, Wisconsin, David Allan Cates has led a life of smart adventure. He has played professional basketball in Costa Rica, taught English in Japan, worked as a translator for aid workers in Honduras, and raised three daughters in Montana with his wife, Rosalie. "Things just worked out for me in a nice way," he says.

Aside from other adventures, he has produced three books, numerous short stories and magazine articles, and garnered a litany of writing awards. *Freeman Walker* is his third novel.

Interview with the Author

Why did you choose to write about a mulatto? Did a bi-racial character give you more possibilities to work with as a writer?

I have never made conscious choices like those with any of my books. The narrator grew out of the narrative.

I started by focusing on the first governor of the Montana territory, an Irish revolutionary named Thomas Francis Meagher. This guy had a life very similar to a key to Col. Cornelius O'Keefe's life in my novel. He had an idealism associated with his being an Irish revolutionary. He was in his 40s when he came to the West and had failed in most of the things he tried to do in life. He had tried to get a canal built Central America. This guy was my original interest. I asked myself, how am I going to tell his story? I can give him some kind of colleague or buddy. I started telling the story from the point of view of an ex-slave who is down and out. He was someone who had come to the gold camps where the world had come trying to reinvent themselves

The narrator emerged more and more as I wrote. Writing about Freeman was not a choice. He truly developed from the narrator talking about his background. A lot of the things that came out were discovered when I started talking in his voice. And I realized, after a year, my narrator has a better story. Holy Smokes! I thought. He has all the elements that the other guy (O'Keefe) has, but he is more accessible because we can immediately identify with a young boy losing his mother.

You set your story at a historical point of the 19th century. There are those who suggest people today have a dangerous ignorance of history. Do you think this is true?

It's such a birthplace of how we are today. The country is very young and the 19th century was central in its formation.

By not knowing history we do not know ourselves and we are therefore more capable of deluding ourselves. Knowing history makes the universe huge and I feel free and happier. It is liked blowing the windows open.

We're standing on soil that is soaked with the blood of genocide, and we don't even think about it. That was not such a long time ago.

Most people would ask, What am I supposed to do about genocide or slavery? All civilizations are bloody and guilty of atrocities. I believe a positive reaction would be not to create more suffering or to act as if we're innocent. Knowing history allows us embrace all of what we are.

In the West, Jimmy Gates finds fantastic landscape, grand potential, and sad disappointments. Does this at all mirror your experiences and understanding of the West?

I tried to see the landscape through the eyes of Freeman Walker. I grew up in narrow valleys of Southwest Wisconsin. I don't know if anybody could know me without knowing how much I loved it.

I came to Missoula when I was in eighteen. I was impressed by the openness. There were no boundaries. It was vast and clear for a great distance.

As a teenager, on the way to college in Montana, my friends and I drove across the plains and stopped in the Badlands. At night the sky was covered with stars. I remember lying on my back and thinking, oh my God my life is beginning.

The significance of the name Jimmy Gates takes, Freeman Walker, is tied to his primary mode of transportation. Do you have a predilection for walking, too?

Yes, I like to walk. I have always walked a lot. Maybe I got that from my father. One time when I was seventeen, we walked from Northern to Central Wisconsin, about 130 miles in 4 days.

I do not do marathons, though. And I probably walk no more than many people.

At times, in order to tell the story, the narrator speaks directly to the reader. Why did you take that approach?

I was playing around with that—talking directly. Something I have always wanted to do as a writer is write a story in which first person narrator says, 'Hey, this is my story; listen to it. If you don't believe it throw it away.'

There are so many unlikely things that happen in this book. I wanted to look the reader directly in the eye and say you might not believe this.

Is there any aspect of your book you think you should have approached differently?

I felt the dialects could have been done better. I did as well as I could. They could have been richer.

Because of his British influence, reversals of fortune, and struggles to better himself, Jimmy Gates may remind readers of a character in a book by Charles Dickens. Would you say that Dickens has influenced your writing?

I read a number of Dickens books when I was younger. When I had finished *Freeman Walker*, I reread *Great Expectations*. Something I got deliberately from Dickens is an idea from *Tale of Two Cities*. There is a passage in which a barrel of wine falls into the street, and desperate people start licking the cobblestone. I tried to convey the same sense of desperation when the boy's apple cart overturns as Jimmy Gates is arriving at the London workhouse.

Who are your favorite writers? What books have you read recently?

So many writers have influenced me, I can't name them all: William Faulkner; Ernest Hemingway; Virginia Woolfe; James Joyce; Saul Bellow; Tolstoy; Shakespeare. Some of my favorite books: *Mrs. Dalloway*; *As I Lay Dying*; *To the Lighthouse*; *The Adventures of Augie March*; *Seize the Day* *Moby Dick*. *Don Quixote* is one of my favorite books of all time.

Your book obviously shows tremendous talent. It is said that writing requires more perspiration than inspiration. If you will indulge us by guessing, what parts perspiration and inspiration went into this book? And how long did it take you to write it?

You can't really measure talent. Most of the time I was working I felt like I didn't have enough talent. I would look at my hands and think I don't have enough blood in me to write this book. It took four years. I know I worked harder on it than on anything in my life.

In the context of the times, it is not surprising that in America Jimmy Gates cannot escape racism (except for the times that he disguises his race). Apparently, however, to this day racism shadows this nation and others. Do you think it will always be with us?

I know to this day it shadows the nation. Without trying to sound pessimistic, I think racism is in our genes. Tribalism is part of being human to the point of being a physical attribute. We all have the ability to be racist and hateful. In order to not be, we have to be aware and vigilant. If anybody ever tells me, "I'm not racist", I don't believe it. To be fair and broad-minded and step outside our own pettiness is a life we should always strive for.

Are you working on another book or story right now? Can you tell us about it?

Right now I am very tired. I was working on the final revisions for the book as recently as May. I do, however, have an unfinished manuscript that is several years old, and I think I may complete that and submit it for publication.

Otherwise, I am just reading a lot. I am resting. In fact, I think I will go for a swim.

Questions for Discussion

1. Does this novel remind you of any other books? What are they? Why?
2. If there is a reason why Jimmy Gates/Freeman Walker was put on earth, what does the story suggest that reason is? Why do you think people are placed on earth? Is existence a matter of randomness or design?
3. What do you think of the protagonist's father Mr. Gates or his mother Jennyveeve Gates? Is his father despicable for being a slave holder? Is his mother to be pitied for being a slave?
4. What is the best time in Jimmy's life? His early boyhood on Sweet Grass Farm? His time at the English boarding school? Another period? What is the worst part of Jimmy's life?
5. Is *Freeman Walker* an inspiring story? A sad tale? Both?
6. What does the story imply about the consequences of race? Does it hold out any hope for a more just world? If so, how?
7. The hero's adventures take him to mid-nineteen century England. What does it have common with America in the same era?

8. Freeman contemplates suicide more than once. Considering the horrific suffering he has experienced, would suicide be a reasonable alternative to his harsh life? Why or why not?
9. When the Yankee captain gives Freeman the “evil choice” at the grave, who is ultimately responsible for the decision Freeman makes? Did your view of him change after that incident? If you were Freeman, what would you have done?
10. The hero gets in deeper and deeper trouble as the novel progresses. Did you ever want him to choose an easier path? Why or why not?
11. Is Captain Cornelius O’Keefe insane? Does he deserve the protagonist’s loyalty?
12. Does self-forgiveness and forgiveness of others play a role in this story? How?
13. Is this a story about the precariousness of fate? Why or why not?
14. Col. O’Keefe says, “Perhaps it is natural for the strong to prey on the weak. But it’s also natural for humans to imagine otherwise. And to act in accordance to what we have imagined.” What do you think of those ideas?
15. Do you feel you learned anything from this novel? What?

Recommended Reading

Hunger in America by David Allen Cates
David Copperfield by Charles Dickens
Great Expectations by Charles Dickens
The Known World by Edward P. Jones
Hallam’s War by Elizabeth Payne Rosen
Little Big Man by Thomas Berger
Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West by Dee Brown
Shiloh by Shelby Foote
Cold Mountain by Charles Frazier
Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs