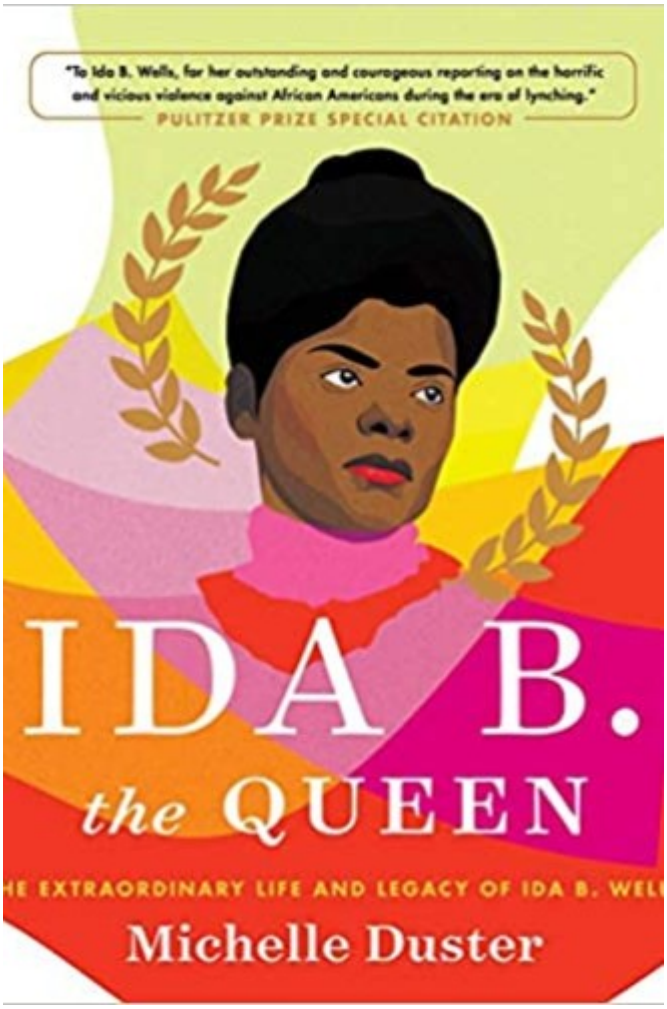
An introduction to Ida B. Wells-Barnett

Michelle Duster situates her influential great-grandmother in the history of Black life in America.

by Dawn Araujo-Hawkins in the August 11, 2021 issue

In Review



Ida B. the Queen

The Extraordinary Life and Legacy of Ida B. Wells

By Michelle Duster
Atria
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In the last decade, Ida B. Wells-Barnett has developed something of a cult following. Her devotees (among whom I count myself) have seen to it that the journalist, activist, and community organizer extraordinaire—largely ignored by the time of her death in 1931—is finally being afforded her due place in US history.

In 1892, Wells-Barnett single-handedly initiated the country's first serious anti-lynching movement after three of her friends were executed by a White mob in Memphis, Tennessee. Already an established newspaperwoman at that point, Wells-Barnett turned her skill toward a series of investigative reports that dispelled the oft-peddled excuse that lynching was simply a means of protecting innocent White women from Black sexual predators.

Lynching, she would go on to proclaim, was actually a means of terrorizing Black communities in the South. Instead of being rapists, she found that lynching victims often had committed no crime at all or only very minor ones. "For all kinds of offenses—and, for no offenses—from murders to misdemeanors, men and women are put to death without judge or jury; so that, although the political excuse was no longer necessary, the wholesale murder of human beings went on just the same," she wrote in 1900.

By then Wells-Barnett had been nicknamed the "Princess of the Press." She was also a devoted suffragist, helping to found the first all-Black suffrage club in Illinois, where she spent the second half of her life after being exiled from the South for her anti-lynching activism. In addition, she started the first Black kindergarten in Chicago, created community resources for the hundreds of thousands of Black southerners who came to her adopted hometown during the Great Migration, and helped establish the groups that would eventually become the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.

And yet, by the time she died of kidney disease at age 68, Wells-Barnett had lost most of her national luster. A petite firecracker of a woman, she was considered too

brash and outspoken within many of the groups and movements she had helped to form. They began distancing themselves from her in favor of younger, more polished representatives like W. E. B. Du Bois.

The resurgent interest in Wells-Barnett has sought to rectify that. In 2018, $48,000 was crowdsourced to erect a monument in her honor on Chicago's South Side; it was unveiled in June. A second monument followed in Memphis in July. Three years ago, thanks to the renewed interest in her life and work, a repentant *New York Times* included Wells-Barnett in "Overlooked," a series of obituaries honoring some of the women their pages had failed to note at the time of their actual deaths. It was also the impetus for Wells-Barnett's posthumous Pulitzer Prize in 2020.

This movement has been led, in part, by Wells-Barnett's great-granddaughter Michelle Duster, a seemingly tireless advocate for her ancestor's memory. So the anticipation around Duster's latest book about Wells-Barnett was high. It's not that there haven't been other books about Wells-Barnett. There have been—two of them edited by Duster herself. Yet something about both the current moment and Duster's bloodline connection felt propitious.

But I think it's important to be upfront about what this book is not. First, it is not a comprehensive biography of Wells-Barnett. For that, you will still have to turn to historian Paula Gidding's massive 2008 tome *Ida: A Sword among Lions* or, if you prefer the fewer-than-800-pages version, Mia Bay's *To Tell the Truth Freely: The Life of Ida B. Wells*.

Second, this book is not a new look into Wells-Barnett's life from a family perspective, which, to be honest, I was hoping for. In the early pages, Duster does describe what it was like to grow up in a family that was committed to keeping Wells-Barnett's memory alive while simultaneously encouraging its members not to subsume their own identities into hers. But that is as far as the family revelations go. Duster's own father, Donald, was born the year after his grandmother died, and so he had no personal recollection of her.

What, then, is this book? It's an attempt to place Wells-Barnett's story into a historical context. One section of the book is, in fact, nothing but a timeline of major events pertinent to Black life in the United States from 1619 to 2020, interspersed with dates significant to Wells-Barnett.

In many ways, *Ida B. the Queen* reads like a middle school textbook. Duster pauses to explain terms like “Reconstruction” and “the Underground Railroad” in bright yellow sidebars, and she devotes whole pages to mini-biographies—complete with pop color illustrations—of other influential figures, like Malcolm X, Stacey Abrams, Colin Kaepernick, and Hillary Clinton. The book is organized thematically rather than chronologically—Duster, for instance, does not even get to Wells-Barnett’s origin story until page 57—which makes it ideal for someone looking to understand how specific justice movements have built upon Wells-Barnett’s work.

As the mother of two tiny humans—one of whom is named after Wells-Barnett—I’m glad this book exists. I can easily see it being used as an entry point for young readers to learn not only about a heroic woman but also about US history in a way that is uncoupled from White supremacy.

It’s not the Ida B. Wells-Barnett book I was expecting when I first heard Duster was working on a new manuscript. But as more and more families work to decolonize education—both in schools and at home—and start to think creatively about education in a post-pandemic world, I think it might be exactly the one we need.