"The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them."

— Ida B. Wells

Yours for Justice, Ida B. Wells
The Daring Life of a Crusading Journalist

Philip Dray
Illustrated by Stephen Alcorn

When Ida B. Wells was still a very young girl, the Jim Crow practices, persecution, and violence forced her from the bonds of slavery. For her family and others like them, it was a time of renewed faith in America’s promise of freedom and justice for all. Blessed with a strong will, an open mind, and a deep belief in this promise, Ida never turned away from the challenges she faced. She insisted on holding her family together after the death of her parents. She defied convention and went to court when a railroad company infringed on her rights. And she used her position as a journalist to speak out about injustice.

But Ida’s greatest challenge came after one of her friends was lynched. How could one determined young woman help free America from the “shadow of intolerance” that loomed over the country?

Historian Philip Dray recounts the amazing story of a former slave from Mississippi who became a crusader for justice, helping to bring an end to lynching in America and leading a legacy of activism for freedom and equality that would find its full expression during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s.
Yours for Justice, Ida B. Wells
The Daring Life of a Crusading Journalist
In memory of Mrs. Fannie Lee Chaney
and Dr. Carolyn Goodman

—P. D.

For Odetta,
with profound admiration

—S. A.
Jim and Lizzie Wells were slaves who belonged to a white man named Mr. Bolling. Jim was a carpenter in Mr. Bolling’s shop, and Lizzie served as the family’s cook. The Wells were treated better than many slaves. Mr. Bolling did not whip or beat them for mistakes, and he gave them enough food and clothing. But his slaves were still his property. Mr. Bolling could even choose to sell baby Ida away from her family if he wanted. When Jim and Lizzie heard rumors that there were people working to end slavery, they treasured the hope that they—and especially Ida—might one day be free.

IDA B. WELLS was born a slave in Holly Springs, Mississippi, in 1862. The Civil War had started the year before, and sometimes her town was filled with the terrible sounds of battle.

For the Wells family, though, work went on much as it had before the war.
When Ida was nearly three years old, the Civil War ended. Slavery was made illegal, and people like Ida and her parents were finally free.

Jim and Lizzie Wells began building a new life for themselves. Lizzie stopped working and stayed home to take care of Ida. Jim kept his carpentry job, but Mr. Bolling now paid him for his work.

Some whites thought that black people were not ready for the responsibilities of freedom, especially voting. As election time drew near, Mr. Bolling told Ida's father who to vote for. He made it clear that if Jim wanted to keep his job, he had better do what he was told.

On election day, Jim Wells proudly cast his votes for the men he thought would be best for Mississippi—not for Mr. Bolling's candidates. When he got back to the carpentry shop, his boss had locked him out to punish him.

Determined not to be defeated, Jim Wells bought some tools and started his own carpentry business. He also moved his family into a house away from Mr. Bolling. At the time Ida didn't understand why. But as she grew older, she realized that her father had refused to work for a man who would not respect his rights. Freedom was far too important to him.
Before the Civil War, many slaves like Jim and Lizzie were not allowed to learn to read and write. When Ida was old enough to attend Holly Springs’s new school for blacks, her mother went with her. Once Lizzie learned enough to read her Bible, she stopped going. She needed to stay home to care for her growing family. But she made sure that her children kept at their lessons. Ida found she especially loved to read. One by one, she read every novel at her school and church libraries.

Although Ida liked going to school, she often had a hard time getting along with others, especially her teachers. Even at this early age, Ida had a mind of her own and didn’t hesitate to give her opinion.

The oldest of eight children, Ida found that a strong will sometimes came in handy. She was a great help to her mother in doing household chores and in looking after her younger siblings. One of her favorite chores was reading newspapers aloud to her father and his friends at night. Reading these articles gave Ida knowledge about the world far beyond Holly Springs and she saw how powerful the written word could be.
When Ida was sixteen, a yellow fever epidemic swept through Holly Springs. Many people in her town got the horrible disease, and to Ida’s great sorrow, her parents and a baby brother died from it. Friends and neighbors argued over who should take care of the Webb children. When Ida heard them making plans to break up her family, she couldn’t remain silent. She announced that if the adults would help her find a job, she would take care of her brothers and sisters herself.

At first no one believed she could do it. But Ida would not take no for an answer. Someone suggested that she try to become a teacher in one of the smaller country schools, and Ida agreed.

Her aunt lowered the hems of Ida’s dresses and taught her to put her hair up. When she saw herself in the mirror, Ida couldn’t believe her eyes: she looked like a grown-up! A few weeks later, she passed the teachers’ exam with high marks and began her first teaching job.
Ida quickly found that passing the exam was much easier than teaching her students. Her schoolhouse looked more like a barn than a classroom, and it was usually very crowded. Many students were so poor they often didn’t have enough to eat, and this made it hard for them to learn. To make matters worse, Ida had to teach all ages at the same time. With only a few books and supplies, her work was nearly impossible.

But Ida faced up to the challenge. She carried wood for the fire to keep her students warm and helped each one through the day’s lesson. She even advised the older students about their problems at work and at home. As the months went by, many of Ida’s students began to show great progress. Some were so grateful that they brought her small gifts of eggs and other goods from their farms.
When her brothers and sisters were older, Ida was able to take a better teaching position in Memphis, Tennessee, a bustling city of streets and steamboats. To Ida, it was a whole new world.

The new teaching job was difficult, but Ida was paid more money. She was able to shop for the finest dresses, gloves, and boots—and especially stylish hats. She caught the eye of more than a few young admirers, but she had too many plans to think about marriage. While other girls she knew were beginning to marry and have children, Ida dreamed of becoming an actress, a journalist, or even a novelist.

She joined a group called a lyceum. Each Friday she and other teachers met to read essays or poetry and debate their ideas. These lively meetings, Ida said, were a “breath of life to me.”
When the editor for the lucy's journal moved away, Ida was chosen to take his place. In addition to editing the publication, she began writing simple, practical essays that addressed the problems she had seen as a teacher. While other women journalists of the day wrote mainly about family issues, Ida also covered subjects like politics and religion, and this made her writing popular with both men and women.

Many people in Memphis started to notice Ida. She attended social gatherings, parties, and concerts, and her name sometimes appeared in the pages of Memphis papers. She had found her voice, and quite a few others had begun to listen.

Sadly, Ida found plenty to speak against. Many whites still did not see blacks as equals, and they were working harder than ever to take away black people's freedoms. Some storeowners refused to sell to black customers, and they put up Whites Only signs in their windows. Certain restaurants, hotels, and even train cars were now off-limits to black customers. And new segregation laws—sometimes called Jim Crow laws—made this type of discrimination legal.
One day Ida boarded the train to her school. A few minutes into the trip, a conductor came to her seat and told her that the first-class railroad car was only for white people. He told her she had to move to a car for black people. Ida replied that she had bought a first-class ticket and would remain in her seat.

Ida’s response made the conductor very angry. He asked some other men to help him, and they forced Ida out of her seat. Ida was frightened, but she would not be bullied. Rather than ride in another railroad car, Ida chose to get off the train. But, like her father, she would not give up her rights without a fight.
Unfortunately, Ida’s joy was short-lived. The railroad appealed the decision to the Tennessee Supreme Court, and it overturned Ida’s victory. She was disappointed for her loss, but most of all Ida was heartbroken for all the black people who would continue to live under Jim Crow laws. “I had hoped for such great things from my suit for my people...,” she wrote in her diary, “and just now if it were possible [I] would gather my race in my arms and fly away with them.”

When Ida got back to Memphis, she hired a lawyer to help her sue the railroad company. She hoped the courts would rule that the conductor and the laws that protected him were wrong. Perhaps if she won her case, it would set an example for fighting Jim Crow laws across the nation.

Months later, Ida was delighted when a white judge in Memphis ruled that the railroad would have to pay her $500. She had fought to defend her freedom and she had won!
She had lost one battle, but Ida looked for other ways to fight the Jim Crow laws. An editor of a church publication called the Living Way asked her to write an article about her court case against the railroad. Her article was so successful that it was reprinted in newspapers around the country.

Although Ida was still teaching, she continued to write for the Living Way. Both men and women found that her practical, informative articles helped them in their daily lives. Soon her fans were calling her “the Princess of the Press.”

The owners of a local newspaper called the Free Speech and Headlight were impressed with Ida’s writing, and they asked her to work with them. She became a partner in the business and began to write for the paper, now renamed the Memphis Free Speech.

In the following years Ida attended several conventions for black journalists. She was elected secretary of the Afro-American Press Convention, where she met many influential people. Even T. Thomas Fortune, co-owner of a respected black newspaper called the New York Age, made a point of meeting her. This introduction would prove to be very important for Ida later on.
Ida liked writing so much that she longed to give up her teaching job, but to make a living as a journalist, she knew she would have to persuade many more people to buy the Free Speech. So she rode trains through Mississippi, Tennessee, and Arkansas, meeting people and urging them to read her newspaper.

Ida and J. L. Fleming, one of her business partners, came up with the unusual idea of printing the Free Speech on pink paper. This made the newspaper more distinctive, and even people who couldn’t read immediately recognized it as the Free Speech.

Within a year, their hard work paid off. Subscriptions to the Free Speech went from 1,500 to 4,000. Ida was now able to support herself with her writing. Although newspaper work was demanding, Ida said she was “happy in the thought that our influence was helpful and that I was doing the work I loved.”
Tom knew that he and his friends could not depend on the Memphis police for protection. They would have to defend the store themselves if any trouble developed. Tensions in the neighborhood continued to rise, and one night several white men stormed The People’s Grocery. Tom’s friends fired their guns and the attackers fled. No white men were charged, but Tom and his friends were arrested.

Tom hoped a judge would understand that they had been trying to protect their property. But before he and his friends could make their case in court, a mob of white men took them out of the jail and murdered them. This kind of execution outside the law was known as lynching.

People from all over Memphis came to the funeral or sent flowers to show their sympathy for the men and their families. Ida did all she could to comfort Tom’s wife and young daughter.

One spring day in 1892, while on a speaking tour, Ida received terrible news. Her good friend Tom Moss had been killed. Ida rushed back to Memphis at once. When she found out what had happened, she could hardly believe it.

Tom Moss and two other men ran a popular food store in Memphis called The People’s Grocery. A white man who owned a store nearby became jealous of their success and let it be known that he wanted to put Tom’s store out of business.
Hundreds of black people did just that. They fled to other places where they hoped to escape lynching and Jim Crow laws. With the *Free Speech*'s encouragement, many black residents of Memphis crossed the Mississippi River and headed west in trains, on wagons, and on foot.

Even though many people knew who had lynched Tom Moss and his business partners, not a single person would turn in the guilty men. No one was ever punished for the murders.

Ida saw that most whites in Memphis were not willing to defend the rights of black citizens. Angry and hurt, she wrote in the *Free Speech*,

“There is therefore only one thing left that we can do; save our money and leave a town which will neither protect our lives and property, nor give us a fair trial in the courts.”
With the facts she had gathered in hand, Ida began to tell her Free Speech readers the truth about lynching. Though her newspaper only reached a few thousand people, Ida was not discouraged. She believed that if good people, white and black, knew the true horrors of lynching, together they would find a way to stop it.

Despite her advice to others, Ida stayed and protested the murder of Tom Moss and his partners. Like many Americans, she had once thought lynching was a punishment used only on the most horrible criminals. But if it could happen to Tom, she realized that other innocent people were probably being killed this way too.

Ida traveled across the country to talk with people who had seen lynching up close. She read articles in the Chicago Tribune and other big city newspapers. She learned that it was most often black men—like her friend Tom—who were lynched. At the heart of the problem, she realized, was the refusal of many white people to accept that black people were now free and deserved the right to a fair trial.
Later, a group of white men broke into the offices of the *Fire Speech*. They smashed desks, lamps, chairs, and supplies and threw all the papers and books to the floor. The men left a note saying they would harm the owners of the newspaper if they tried to reopen it. But the mob never got the chance. Her partner had already fled, and Ida was on a train headed toward New York City. T. Thomas Fortune, the editor of the *New York Age*, had invited her to come for a visit.

While many of Ida’s readers applauded her strong words against lynching, the articles angered some people in Memphis. When Ida was away on a trip, her business partner J. L. Fleming got word that trouble was brewing. If he didn’t want to get hurt, his neighbor warned, he had better get out of town.
Thomas urged Ida to stay in New York and write for his paper, and he suggested that she begin with an article on lynching. *The New York Age* was one of the most popular black newspapers in America! After thinking it over, Ida happily agreed.

Thomas met Ida at the train station. She later described the meeting in her diary.

“Well, we’ve been a long time getting you to New York,” Thomas said, “but now you are here, I’m afraid you will have to stay.”

“I can’t see why that follows,” Ida replied.

“Haven’t you seen the morning paper?” He handed her a copy of the *New York Sun* and pointed to an article. It said that the *Free Speech* office had been destroyed! Ida was shocked and angry. She wanted to go back to Memphis and rebuild the newspaper. But where would she find the money? And how would she protect herself?
Ida quickly settled into her new home and began working on an article for the Age. She had once written, “The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.” This was her chance to do just that.
The morning the article appeared on newsstands, Ida walked along the street, wondering what her readers would think. Would her words really make a difference?

Much to Ida’s surprise, her article changed many lives. The well-known black leader Frederick Douglass called it a “revelation.” For the first time, people realized that scores of innocent lives were being claimed each year by lynch mobs. Ida’s article had shown lynching for what it really was: an attack on the freedom promised to all Americans.

The issue that featured Ida’s article sold 10,000 copies across the nation. At least a thousand copies were sold in Memphis alone! The mob that had silenced the *Free Speech* had actually helped Ida spread the truth about lynching.
Ida had not set out to become a crusader, but the article in the Age made her just that. She received invitations from across the country to speak about lynching. Politicians, ministers, and other leaders wanted to know more about the problem and how they could help. And as she continued to write articles and speak out, support for her cause grew. Her New York Age article appeared in 1892. By her death in 1931, lynching in America had nearly come to an end.

Ida took up many other campaigns in her lifetime, but none were more important than her difficult crusade against lynching. Putting an end to the practice would take decades of hard work by many courageous and dedicated people. Yet Ida’s firm belief in the country she loved could never be shaken. Against every fear and doubt, her voice rang out clearly: “We submit all to...the Nation confident that, in this cause, as well as all others, ‘Truth is mighty and will prevail.’”
I thought it was right to strike a blow against a glaring evil and I did not regret it.

– Ida B. Wells, Crusade for Justice

After her first major article against lynching, Ida continued to write about its horrors for the New York Age, as well as other publications that traveled throughout America and England, giving speeches about lynching. She also worked closely with other activists of the day, such as Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois. In 1899, Ida helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a group that she hoped would promote black interests. But Ida still continued doing what she did best—publishing her ideas, speaking out against injustice, and agitating for change.

While working on one of her publications, Ida met Ferdinand L. Barnett, a newspaperman and activist who shared many of her passions. She moved to Chicago to be near him, and they were married in 1895. From that point on, Ida was usually known as Ida B. Wells-Barnett. In addition to caring for her family—two children from Ferdinand’s previous marriage and four children of their own—Ida kept up her quest for social justice.

In Chicago, Ida helped stop the segregation of the city’s public schools, worked to integrate women’s clubs in the region, and founded an organization to help black men and boys, similar to the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association). She was instrumental in opening Chicago’s first kindergarten for black children.

Ida also joined the national fight for women’s suffrage. She started a black women’s suffrage club in the Chicago area and worked with Susan B. Anthony and other leaders as they struggled to gain voting rights for women. Once when she was asked to march in a separate colored section at a suffrage march, Ida refused. Instead, she single-handedly integrated the march.

Ida never gave up her battle against lynching, but as her efforts began to pay off, she found more ways to fight prejudice. She met with Woodrow Wilson, the president of the United States, to plead for the desegregation of his administration. In the 1920s, she wrote about the race riots in Illinois and Arkansas. Her writings on the news in Arkansas helped to free twelve men who had been arrested unjustly.

While Ida was in her thirties, she became one of the first black women in the country to run for a seat in the Illinois state senate. Although she lost the election, Ida took advantage of the public attention to champion the causes of freedom and justice she had fought for all her life. On March 21, 1931, Ida fell ill with a kidney disease. She died a few days later.

The signature Ida used in promoting her writing and lectures now stands as a poignant summary of her life:

Yours for justice, Ida B. Wells.
More About Lynching

**BY DEFINITION**, a lynching occurs anytime people go outside the law to punish a person for an alleged crime. Early in America’s history, people who lived in rural areas or on the frontier often used lynching to seek justice when no legal authorities could be found. If a crime was committed, men would organize a mob to hunt down the accused person and then, without a proper trial, inflict punishment such as whipping, or tar and feathering.

After the Civil War, however, lynching became more sinister. Although black slaves like Ida were granted freedom, many whites worked to take away their new rights. Some even resorted to violence. These people used lynching to make black citizens too afraid to vote, to run for political office, or to demand to be treated as equals. Lynching mobs often ripped their victims from homes or jail cells, tortured them, and then hanged them or burned them alive. A number of white journalists and politicians praised lynching as a form of swift justice, and they convinced many others that lynching, though illegal, was necessary to keep black people in their place.

Since lynching was condoned by so many, it became nearly impossible to punish anyone involved, and the practice grew more widespread. By the early 1890s, a black person was lynched almost every other day in America.

When Ida spoke out against lynching, she knew she was taking a great risk, exposing herself as a target for lynchers. Yet the loss of her friend Tom Moss awakened in her a deep passion about the subject, and her writing and speeches inspired many around the country. Other journalists, activists, and lawmakers gradually learned the truth about lynching too, and they took action. As they won the battle for public opinion, lynching began to seem unthinkable to most Americans. In 1898, a total of 158 lynchings were reported in the United States. In 1927, only 16 lynchings occurred. In 1952, twenty-one years after Ida’s death, America recorded its first year without a lynching.

The desire of some whites to oppress blacks—a root cause of lynching—continued to find expression in practices such as race riots, voter fraud, and segregation. These problems went largely unchecked until the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, when activists like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks brought new energy and dedication to the fight for social justice. Their efforts would further realize many of the hopes once held by a strong-willed girl from Holly Springs who set out against great odds to speak the truth clearly.

“**The people must know before they can act, and there is no educator to compare with the press.”**

—Ida B. Wells, *Southern Horrors*

**TIME LINE**

1896 Supreme Court Plessy v. Ferguson ruling upholds the “separate but equal” doctrine of segregation.

1900 Ida investigates a race riot in New Orleans and publishes *Miss Rule in New Orleans*.

1905 62 lynchings in America

1909 Ida participates in the founding of what would become the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

1914 Ida founds the Illinois black women’s suffrage organization.

1914 67 lynchings in America

1919 “Red Summer” begins with race riots in Chicago and Washington, D.C., followed by other cities.

1922 Ida lobbies for passage of the Ower Anti-Lynching Bill and publishes *The Assassins Race Riot*, which helps free twelve men arrested unjustly.

1925 17 lynchings in America

1930 Ida loses bid for state senate in Illinois.

1931 Ida dies in Chicago on March 25.

1940 5 lynchings in America

1952 0 lynchings in America

1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling in U.S. Supreme Court makes school segregation illegal. Other lawsuits would follow.

1955 Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat in the white section of a bus in Montgomery.

1964 Civil Rights Act is passed.

1965 Voting Rights Act is passed.

Note: Lynching statistics provided by the Tuskegee Institute.
Bibliography

In researching and writing YOURS FOR JUSTICE, I consulted many books. The following sources were particularly useful:

Harris, Trudier, comp. SELECTED WORKS OF IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT. Oxford University Press.

"When this conscience wakes and speaks out in thunder tones, as it must, it will need facts to use as a weapon against injustice, barbarism and wrong. It is for this reason that I carefully compile, print and send forth these facts."

—Ida B. Wells, Mob Rule in New Orleans

Further reading on Ida B. Wells-Barnett for young readers:

Ages 9–12

Ages 15 and Up

Note: The quotes on pages 15, 21, 28, 34, 36, and 41 were taken directly from Ida B. Wells-Barnett's writings.
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—P.D.