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In Search of Our Roots: How 19 Extraordinary African Americans Reclaimed Their Past

Henry Louis Gates Jr.

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Unlike most white Americans who, if they are so inclined, can search their ancestral records, identifying who among their forebears was the first to set foot on this country's shores, most African Americans, in tracing their family's past, encounter a series of daunting obstacles. Slavery was a brutally efficient nullifier of identity, willfully denying black men and women even their names. Yet, from that legacy of slavery, there have sprung generations who've struggled, thrived, and lived extraordinary lives.

For too long, African Americans' family trees have been barren of branches, but, very recently, advanced genetic testing techniques, combined with archival research, have begun to fill in the gaps. Here, scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., backed by an elite team of geneticists and researchers, takes nineteen extraordinary African Americans on a once unimaginable journey, tracing family sagas through U.S. history and back to Africa.

Those whose recovered pasts collectively form an African American "people's history" of the United States include celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey, Whoopi Goldberg, Chris Rock, Don Cheadle, Chris Tucker, Morgan Freeman, Tina Turner, and Quincy Jones; writers such as Maya Angelou and Bliss Broyard; leading thinkers such as Harvard divinity professor Peter Gomes, the Reverend T. D. Jakes, neurosurgeon Ben Carson, and sociologist Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot; and famous achievers such as astronaut Mae Jemison, media personality Tom Joyner, decathlete Jackie Joyner-Kersee, and *Ebony* and *Jet* publisher Linda Johnson Rice.

More than a work of history, *In Search of Our Roots* is a book of revelatory importance that, for the first time, brings to light the lives of ordinary men and women who, by courageous example, blazed a path for their famous descendants. For a reader, there is the stirring pleasure of witnessing long-forgotten struggles and triumphs–but there's an enduring reward as well. In accompanying the nineteen contemporary achievers on their journey into the past and meeting their remarkable forebears, we come to know ourselves.

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