

Book Review: “Born Equal” by Akhil Reed Amar

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This second volume of a planned trilogy offers another beguiling example of Amar’s unique blend of constitutional legal analysis, history, and political science, all delivered in a fluid narrative style. He seeks to reveal what the Constitution “really means” by tracing the changes in the meaning of the Declaration of Independence’s fundamental but potentially contentious claim that “all men are created equal.” He tracks that phrase from its first use, to its primacy in President Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address in 1863, to its appearances during the long debates and eventual adoption of the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 19th Amendments that abolished slavery and extended civil and full political rights to Blacks and women. Four people dominate the narrative: Lincoln, the suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the abolitionist Frederick Douglass, and the author and abolitionist Harriet Beecher Stowe. At center stage, however, is the broader American conversation on equality that took place in every sector of American public life, from newspapers to parades, throughout the nineteenth century. Amar argues that this conversation constituted the original—and more valid—form of what is today termed “constitutional originalism,” the effort to hew to the intentions of the drafters of the Constitution. Readers will close this volume with a richer knowledge of the history of this period and a deepened understanding of the once and future meanings of “all men are created equal.”