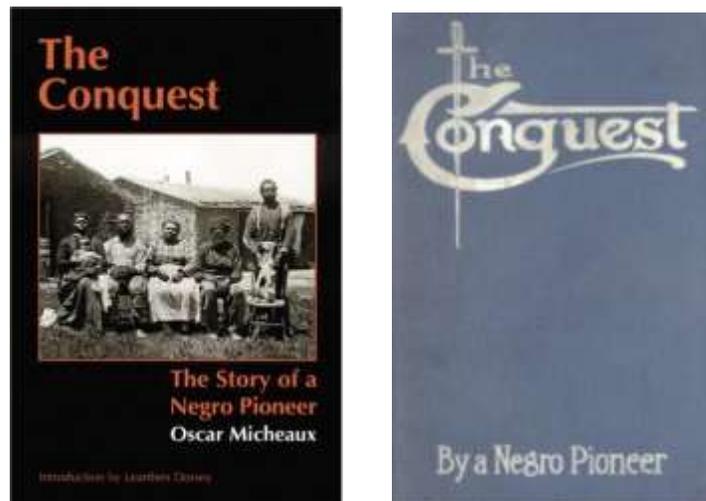


## About the Book



Oscar Micheaux. *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer*. 1913, reprint Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

### Synopsis

This semi-autobiographical novel of a black homesteader in Gregory County during the early 1900's provides a compelling story of individual bravery and creativity, the last frontier of settlement, the rise and fall of small towns, business competition, weather disasters, unrequited love, and social interaction. Micheaux, who grew up in southern Illinois and worked out of Chicago as a sleeping-car porter, made the unusual decision to become a black homesteader in South Dakota. His fiction-writing career morphed into film-making, and he emerged as the first great black film-maker in United States history.

### Summary of the Book

The writing and publication of *The Conquest* make for a remarkable story. Originally published anonymously with the author only being identified by the book's subtitle, "The Story of a Negro Pioneer," this is the account of one of those rare individuals — a black homesteader on the early twentieth century South Dakota frontier. Although Oscar Micheaux may have been slightly exaggerating in saying that he was the only dark-skinned farmer in the entire region, he was not far off the mark; few African Americans ventured into the area during the period. Micheaux testified that aside from some tensions experienced with his white neighbors, he was generally treated courteously by most of them, and they came to respect and admire him.

More remarkable even than the nature of the author and his presence in such an out-of-the-way place for black agriculturalists was the process by which the book was written, published, and distributed. Micheaux, a high school dropout, had never written anything

for publication before sitting down to compose this slightly fictionalized account of his life up to age twenty-eight. Yet, if we believe his testimony in a subsequent novel, he dashed off 10,000 words during his first day of writing and a like amount the following day, before tearing up the pages and starting over again. Then, unable to find a publisher for his manuscript, he self-published it and personally peddled it to friends and neighbors and later to thousands of readers in the upper Midwest, Southern states, and all around the country. To assist him, he hired a corps of door-to-door salesmen. During the next three decades, he wrote six more novels, two of them reconstructing his experiences on the South Dakota prairie.

But that was not all. In 1918, he refashioned himself a second time, in this instance as a movie director and producer, putting the story he had told in *The Homesteader* (a reworking of his first novel) on the silver screen. Again, he had absolutely no experience in the medium. Before he was finished, however, he produced approximately forty-five pictures, becoming in the process the first significant black film producer in the United States. Although widely known and appreciated among the African American population during the 1920's, 30's, and 40's, he remained virtually unrecognized among their white counterparts, and Hollywood's racial barriers ensured that he would never have a chance to make movies with adequate budgets, equipment, and personnel. In recent decades, however, despite the controversy that once surrounded him, Micheaux has become widely recognized as a uniquely gifted and creative filmmaker, who to a significant degree was able to transcend the hurdles and barriers confronting African Americans.

*The Conquest* was no fanciful literary offering by a man who was bored with life or who wished to indulge his creative impulses. It was written in 1912 as a desperate effort to raise cash after Micheaux, like thousands of his fellow agriculturists in south-central South Dakota, was left penniless by the devastating drought that had settled upon the region the previous year. After joining the land rush to the Rosebud Indian Reservation when it opened for settlement in 1904, he had prospered mightily for eight years, accumulating over 500 acres of land and being worth, according to his own testimony, \$20,000. Not only had his finances turned topsy-turvy because of the drought; his new wife, Orlean McCracken, had returned to the home of her domineering father in Chicago, leaving Micheaux emotionally vulnerable. Writing *The Conquest*, therefore, was an act of psychic reconstitution as well as of financial entrepreneurship.

These observations help explain the literary quality of the work. Micheaux's first serious attempt at putting words on a page should not be judged by the standards normally applied to more accomplished and professional wordsmiths. What stands out in the reading, however, is not how amateurish and unfinished the prose seems; rather, it is how compelling and authentic it is. The book is a real page-turner, and the story — or rather stories — as it unfolds provides an authentic account of prairie homesteading and town-building in Gregory and Tripp Counties during the period Micheaux lived there, from 1904, when he purchased his first 160 acres, until 1912, when he wrote the book.

The form of the book itself is ambiguous. Is it a novel or is it an autobiography? Micheaux himself probably gave little thought to the matter. Dashing off thousands of words a day in the heat of emotion, he simply wanted to capture his own experience, realize some emotional catharsis after his deeply displeasing confrontations with his father-in-law, and express some of his viewpoints about racial pride and opportunities for economic betterment. The result was less than a polished, finely wrought literary masterpiece, but it was genuinely felt, lively, and authentic. We can be certain that, with minor exceptions, the story being told adhered closely to the facts as the author understood and remembered them. Probably to spare hard feelings and to deflect possible lawsuits, Micheaux changed the names of people and places in his account. Thus, the Jackson brothers became the Nicholsons. Marvin Hughitt, president of the Chicago and North Western (C. & N.W.) Railroad metamorphosed into Marvin Hewitt of the C. & N.W. Orlean and Rev. Newton J. McCracken became the McCralines. Gregory turned into Megory, Burke was transformed into Kirk, and on down the line: Tripp County-Tipp County, Bonesteel-Oristown, Dallas-Calias, Lamoreaux-Amoreaux (Lamro-Amro), Colome-Colone, Winner-Victor, and so on. Micheaux biographers Betti VanEpps-Taylor and Patrick McGillian both conclude, however, that all three of Micheaux's novels set in South Dakota were essentially true to fact and that, of these, *The Conquest* provides the most faithful rendering of the historical and biographical record.

The first-time author obviously had no experience with blocking out sections of his material, inventing intricate plotlines, or developing character and tone. He just sat down to write, and the veracity of his story is all the better for it. Transitions sometimes got slighted, and the reader may get the feeling of being bounced back and forth at times. It might be helpful to identify the five major themes that work themselves out throughout the book.

First, there is Micheaux's own life story from childhood in "M----pls" (actually Metropolis) on the Ohio River in southern Illinois to the wheat fields of South Dakota. There is very little independent evidence to document the life of Oscar Micheaux (he changes his surname to Devereaux in the book), so the best, and often the only, information we have is what he supplies in his novels. That he was able to save several thousand dollars as a Pullman porter in a couple of years' time is testimony to his work ethic, value system, tremendous industry and application, and sense of racial pride.

The latter serves as a second theme that appears periodically in the story — his devotion to the philosophy of Booker T. Washington, to whom the book is dedicated. Micheaux would later often include framed portraits of the black educator hanging on the walls of his movie sets. The upside of Micheaux's strong sense of racial destiny was his belief in the possibilities of American life and especially in the opportunities for improvement and economic success offered to black people by the "Great Northwest" (including South Dakota). The downside was his frequent negative references to members of his own race, whom he describes as being lazy, self-indulgent, and un-enterprising. His depictions of his fellow blacks can sound as one-sided and prejudiced as those of the most vicious

bigots. It should be noted that later on in his movies he often excoriated racial prejudice and violence, such as that practiced by the KKK.

The third theme of the book, and the one that holds everything together, is that of homesteading on the Dakota frontier. Micheaux, like Laura Ingalls Wilder, who was seventeen years older than he and whose autobiographical novels depicted the prairie frontier a quarter-century earlier, provides a fairly accurate and detailed description of “the arithmetic of farming” through thick and thin, good times and bad.

Coincidental with the epic of homesteading told in *The Conquest* is the story of the towns that depended upon the surrounding farmers for their livelihood. This is all about railroads, boosterism, capitalistic competition, county-seat battles, and the machinations of self-styled entrepreneurs, such as the Nicholson brothers. A similar story is told in hundreds of local and county histories, and the sheer excitement and sometimes sordidness of the details come through strongly here.

Finally, this is a love story, but more accurately it is a narrative of Oscar’s failure to find love. Love clearly is much on Micheaux’s mind, and it is up to the reader to compare the melodrama of his treatment to that depicted in today’s romance novels and soap-opera scripts. The difference is that his story was based on fact, as viewed through his highly emotional and self-interested perspective. This would not be the last novel or movie in which Micheaux would tell of thwarted love and interracial romance. Suffice it to say, the theme of manhood played prominently in his personal life as well as in his artistry.

In sum, *The Conquest* needs to be considered for more than its sheer literary qualities. It has to be placed within its historical, social, literary, and personal contexts. If the reader can do that, he/she will discover a profound reading experience and obtain a much clearer understanding of life in early twentieth-century America.

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**Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).**

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