

# ROOTS (1977 TV Series)

*For about 10 years I was the media critic for the Catholic Marriage & Family Living Magazine. The following review is reprinted from the May 1977 issue for comparison purposes—not just of the two versions of the book, but also for the settings of the series. Given the quality of the original, I am not sure why a new version is needed. We shall see, the History Channel airing the first of 4 episodes the night of Memorial Day, May 31. One thing I do know because of the vast difference in the delivery of entertainment: the huge size of the audience of 39 years ago is not likely to be matched, not with the hundreds (instead of 3) of choices now available to us.*

Were you among the vast number of Americans rooted to your TV set when ABC telecast “ROOTS” in January? If so, you were part of a historic phenomenon. You joined the largest audience ever to watch a single series—over 100 million, perhaps 130 million according to one count. Now that’s something to think about; to realize that so many of us were sharing the story of Kunta Kinte at the same time. We were the wired-together American Tribe gathered around our video campfires listening to the village storyteller—only this time ABC spun the yarn.

The critics were divided over the quality and authenticity of the show -and the reason for the show’s popularity, but without doubt something deep within us was tapped by the presentation. Perhaps it was our need or desire for our own roots. Ours has been a rootless nation, founded by those who pulled up stakes and left behind the old countries in a search for a better life. In this new land the old is often scorned and forgotten, while the new is prized and praised. We tear down Louis Sullivan buildings to make way for shiny steel and glass towers. Corporations transfer employees as a matter of routine; in fact, an executive who stays in place too long

thinks of himself as being passed over. Our elderly are stored away in crowded but expensive way-stations on the road to death. And our second generation immigrants' children try to forget the language and customs of the old country, anything which might mark them as strange or foreign. Nevertheless, within us is the need to be connected with our past, since it is our heritage which gives us stability in the midst of the rapidly changing present and hope and goals for the future.

The saga of Kunta Kinte and his descendants brought this home to us as no other media event has. "ROOTS" didn't begin this, of course, but rather, has benefited from the growing interest in our past. Television has performed a real service to the nation during the Bicentennial year by offering such productions as "The Adams Chronicles," the "Ben Franklin" series, "1776," "The Lincoln-Douglas Debates," several specials on Harry S. Truman, and many others. Which of these did you see? Did your children (if you have any) watch with you? What a good chance to talk together about our roots as a nation and at what point in time your family became a part of it—if you know.

No doubt ABC will televise "ROOTS" again, possibly this summer so that families can view it together without worrying about school the next day. (Here in Pittsburgh we were almost glad for this Winter's severe gas shortage, causing the schools to close during the week that "ROOTS" was shown. School didn't interfere with their education; they experienced more of Black history those few days than in all of their years in the classroom!) You will want to exercise your parental discretion if your children are younger than ten or eleven, as the series contains a number of strong scenes of violence and bedroom play, several of which are of questionable taste. Children should not see this without an understanding adult present—not because of a few potentially disturbing scenes, but more importantly, because of the questions which an incident might raise. Our children, five in number ranging from ten to

sixteen years, asked all sorts of questions and gained real insight into today's racial situation.

Much has been said about the stereotyping of whites in "ROOTS," but there's a more fruitful aspect of the saga I want to dwell on, one which should be of particular interest to Jews and Christians. This is the way in which the memory of Kunta Kinte was passed down from one generation to the next. Not in detail, but the essence of his story was preserved and passed on. At some important juncture the treasured memory of their African ancestor—a free man—was transmitted from the elder to the younger members of the family. The form of the story was like a creed. Indeed, it 'was a creed for the enslaved descendants of Kunta Kinte—a statement of belief, a faith that they were, despite their outward condition, a free people of dignity, not niggers, Negroes, or coloreds. And thus their longing to regain their former condition of freedom would not die.

This affirmation of their past set Kunta Kinte and his progeny apart from the other slaves whom they encountered. The others had forgotten their heritage, They had fallen prey to the white man's definition of them as niggers with no dignity or rights of their own, a subhuman species fit only to obey the whims and orders of their masters. Thus Kunta Kinte's daughter Kizzy falls in love with Sam but refuses to marry him. She explains to her son, "Sam wasn't like us. Nobody ever told him where he come from. So he didn't have a dream of where he ought to be go in '." After being sold apart from her family to another owner, Kizzy visits her former home years later in the hope of seeing her parents again. One slave recalls her father, now dead, "Oh yes, Toby. He was that crazy old man always talkiri' 'bout freedom and planning to run away." Kizzy visits his grave, and in final tribute to her proud father, she scratches out the hated white-given name on the wooden grave marker and prints "KUNTA KINTE."

The Kinte family recital is similar to the ancient creedal

formulas that recount the deeds of our spiritual ancestors. A thousand years or more before Christ the Hebrews who brought their thanksgiving harvests to the priests recited the creed found in Deuteronomy 26:5-10:

“A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders; and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And behold now I bring the first fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, hast given me.”

No details here, just the brief recounting of their past ancestors Jacob and Moses and of their wonderful deliverance from slavery. Christians, too, recite creeds. “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth ... ” Again, little detail is contained in the liturgical creeds, just the bare-boned outline of our deliverance in Christ and a listing of basic doctrines. Such creeds unite us as the family of God. They set us apart as a people with a peculiar memory of our spiritual ancestor—a former Jewish carpenter who “suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried” but who “rose again from the dead, .. ” Through our baptism we have been adopted into his family. We have roots; all the way back to his ancestors Abraham and Jacob and Moses. We might not be able to trace our human family as far back as did Alex Haley. Our ancestors might have come over on a cattle boat rather than the Mayflower: but that doesn’t matter. What does count is that we discover our spiritual roots. Paul’s is good advice: “As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the

faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving,"  
(Colossians 2:6-7, RSV)

Kizzy, Chicken George and Tom possessed a fine heritage, one that told them where they came from and gave them a dream of where they ought to be goin'. But you need not envy them, for ours is an even more ancient heritage. If you watch "ROOTS" again, especially with children, look for those times when the family "creed" is recited. During the commercial breaks compare it with the creeds of our Faith. Families usually celebrate the baptism of a child, but the child him/herself is a bit young to appreciate the occasion. Why not think of ways of celebrating the anniversary of this spiritual event so that the child will grow up with an awareness of his spiritual roots. The knowledge of these roots can help tell us who (and Whose) we are and where we are going. For family devotions, or for your "Family Night," if you've begun to follow the Reillys'\* excellent suggestions, try using Psalms 105 or 106 which commemorate the great events of God's deliverance of the people of Israel. The next time you participate in worship as a family look for those elements in the liturgy which also commemorate our roots as Christians; children afterwards can make this a game by seeing who can name the most. With the above in mind, watching the reruns of "ROOTS" can be more than eight evenings of diversion. Kunta Kinte's story can help us to discover, and add to, our own story. If that happens, television becomes more than an escape from life—it can lead us into life.

*\*This is a reference to the magazine's monthly column about activities for families written by Terry & Mimi Reilly.*

For information on the new series, go to:  
<http://roots.history.com/>