



Jackie Robinson: A Biography

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The extraordinary life of Jackie Robinson is illuminated as never before in this full-scale biography by Arnold Rampersad, who was chosen by Jack's widow, Rachel, to tell her husband's story, and was given unprecedented access to his private papers. We are brought closer than we have ever been to the great ballplayer, a man of courage and quality who became a pivotal figure in the areas of race and civil rights.

Born in the rural South, the son of a sharecropper, Robinson was reared in southern California. We see him blossom there as a student-athlete as he struggled against poverty and racism to uphold the beliefs instilled in him by his mother--faith in family, education, America, and God.

We follow Robinson through World War II, when, in the first wave of racial integration in the armed forces, he was commissioned as an officer, then court-martialed after refusing to move to the back of a bus. After he plays in the Negro National League, we watch the opening of an all-American drama as, late in 1945, Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers recognized Jack as the right player to break baseball's color barrier--and the game was forever changed.

Jack's never-before-published letters open up his relationship with his family, especially his wife, Rachel, whom he married just as his perilous venture of integrating baseball began. Her memories are a major resource of the narrative as we learn about the severe harassment Robinson endured from teammates and opponents alike; about death threats and exclusion; about joy and remarkable success. We watch his courageous response to abuse, first as a stoic endurer, then as a fighter who epitomized courage and defiance.

We see his growing friendship with white players like Pee Wee Reese and the black teammates who followed in his footsteps, and his embrace by Brooklyn's fans. We follow his blazing career: 1947, Rookie of the Year; 1949, Most Valuable Player; six pennants in ten seasons, and 1962, induction into the Hall of Fame.

But sports were merely one aspect of his life. We see his business ventures, his leading role in the community, his early support of Martin Luther King Jr., his commitment to the civil rights movement at a crucial stage in its evolution; his controversial associations with Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, Humphrey, Goldwater, Nelson Rockefeller, and Malcolm X.

Rampersad's magnificent biography leaves us with an indelible image of a principled man who was passionate in his loyalties and opinions: a baseball player who could focus a crowd's attention as no one before or since; an activist at the crossroads of his people's struggle; a dedicated family man whose last years were plagued by illness and tragedy, and who died prematurely at fifty-two. He was a pathfinder, an American hero, and he now has the biography he deserves.

From the Hardcover edition.

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From Reader Review Jackie Robinson: A Biography for online ebook

Caroline Brewer says

One of 10 books I have recently read about Robinson and clearly the most authoritative. Mere words are inadequate to sum up the amazing, thrilling, chilling, and groundbreaking life that was Jackie Robinson's, but Arnold Rampersad has done a fabulous job of breathing life into words and into the man who helped change America in the most startling and powerful ways imaginable. And indeed, for the better.

Joe says

I enjoyed this biography because it does not look at Robinson's life through hagiographic lenses, but at the same time treats him with respect. The relationship between Dodger owner Branch Rickey and Jackie is especially interesting and moving in the great admiration they had for each other up to Rickey's death. Over half the book is spent on Jackie's life after retirement involving the civil rights movement of the 1960's and is quite interesting in how his life sometimes was in conflict with some black leaders of his generation such as Adam Clayton Powell and white political leaders such as Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon. Highly recommended.

Saathvik Vangati says

This book chronicles the life of Jackie Robinson, the first African American professional baseball player. Robinson's courage of conviction and the support of his family and friends enabled him to cross the color barrier in baseball, Robinson challenged his critics and the naysayers to accept him as he was: a man, an athlete, and a very talented baseball player. In my opinion, this was one of the best books I have ever read on the fact of how one man has created a legacy for the whole sport of baseball. Would definitely recommend this book to everyone as it really shows the struggles of a young man doing what he loves.

Gaye Ingram says

Back when people listened to baseball games on radio, I was one of two people in my school whose favorite baseball team was the Brooklyn Dodgers. The other person was my best friend Marie, who was Italian, and she didn't listen to broadcasts of the games. I did. In my memory, they are visual. I see Jackie Robinson sliding into third base and the Giants' third baseman (It was always the Giants) and the baseline coach stomping the grass with rage at the call. Robinson gets up, dusts himself off, grins. Red Barber, the announcer, laughs. From the time I was in the third grade until the Dodgers left Brooklyn, I was faithful to them. They were my team.

Looking back, I realize my attachment began as a political affair of the heart, an assertion of independence. I lived in Louisiana, and in Louisiana everybody was first of all devoted to the St. Louis Cardinals, then the closest thing we had to a Southern team, and to the New York Yankees. Squeaky-clean teams filled with dull

Anglo Saxons, I thought. Winners. That was what drew the boys in my classes to the Yankees. A blond, somewhat round little Anglo girl myself, I wanted nothing to do with that. I loved underdogs, folks who came from behind to squeak out a win. Boys who were discovered in some Sunday afternoon cowfield in Oklahoma and went on to glory. I'd read all those John Tunis books, and that was my style---underdogs. Also diversity, though that was not the name for it then. A team with Italians, Jews, blacks, mixed in with white southerners, preferably. I was also a democrat. I was explaining this to my husband one day. "Italians, the Dodgers had Italians, like Campanello...." He interrupted me to tell me that in Campy I had a double-winner: he was both Italian and black. Vince Scully had not mentioned that, and it would have gladdened my heart if he had.

If you love underdogs and you're into democracy and you're a girl, Jackie Robinson is the perfect player. And he and Pee Wee Reese, who was kind to Robinson and collaborated with him on double plays, became my heroes. Especially Robinson. I hated the people who were unkind to him, remembered him and his family in my nightly prayers. I spoke up on his behalf when the boys made cruel racial comments.

So as an adult, I was a little afraid to read a biography of Robinson. After all, everybody has flaws in real life. I wanted to keep the childhood memory pure. But I also really wanted to know about Robinson's life. I'd seen the PBS "Baseball" series that gave his career considerable attention, but a film is not a book. It can't tell you things a book can tell you.

That's how I came to order this book. I wanted to read a good biography of a man who had been a childhood hero. And I'm glad I found this one, which is really a well-written book. With someone like Robinson, who took so much abuse when he entered lily-white baseball, it would be easy to sentimentalize your subject, to lapse into pity from time to time. Rampersad doesn't do that. He tells a straight story, and while he obviously likes his subject, he did the kind of deep research that places Robinson in a large context. Whereas once I had admired the idea of Robinson the baseball player, as I read this book, I came to admire the character of the man.

I have lived my entire life in the American South, and I thought I could imagine the indignities to which black people had been subjected in a segregated world, but I couldn't. Rampersad's description of Robinson's trip to Florida training camp with his wife, Rachel, whom he'd met at UCLA and who was a beautiful, refined woman, was something I could not have imagined. This biographer tells a story many either could not tell or would lack the skill to tell without editorializing. Far from being disappointed in Jackie Robinson, I was disappointed in myself, that my view of him had been so shallow.

I recommend the book highly. Rampersad is a good writer. He knows how to tell a story. And what impressed me was how deeply he had researched his subject. His book fleshed out all those names from my radio-listening and sports-page-reading days, made me love Branch Rickey, taught me things about courage that all of us need to know, and satisfied curiosity I'd not known I had.

A very good read and an uplifting life!

Jim Marshall says

I am often struck by the way American popular culture cherry picks the virtues of its heroes. We all know the story of Jackie Robinson—a stellar African American athlete who starred in multiple sports at USC and was selected by Brooklyn Dodgers' manager Branch Rickey to be the first African American to play major

league baseball. Robinson was taunted and threatened, hit in the head with fastballs on multiple occasions, and often the victim of clear rule violations. Yet he remained cool, unshaken, unperturbed, and played a graceful, playful game of baseball. That is the story that the recent movie “42” gave us, it’s what Ken Burns gave us in his documentary about baseball, and it’s what the bits and pieces of oral history you might have heard at a bar and tap your father frequented when you were growing up. It’s a great story in that it bravely shows the racist side of our character while giving us a disarmingly safe and non-violent hero who withstands every challenge he faces. It’s a liberal, Rosa Parks kind of story, and it makes us feel good about how far we’ve come.

But it’s not quite the whole story, as the deeply researched and cleanly written new biography from Arnold Rampersad makes clear. Robinson did what Rickey asked him to do, but he resented it most of the time, was angry most of the time, and worried about money most of the time. He was a deeply religious, deeply conservative man who admired Richard Nixon greatly, who was critical and fearful of Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, who sold his name to a range of business interests after leaving baseball, and who engaged in a number of sharp business practices himself when he opened ventures on his own. Even to his wife, who loved him loyally and with very clear eyes, he was often insensitive, even cruel.

None of this undermines what Robinson did for baseball in his playing days nor does it tarnish the courage he showed as he walked on to the field every afternoon, especially in southern cities like St. Louis and Baltimore. But by reducing Robinson’s story to something that could be printed on the back of a baseball card, we are leaving out the very complicated reality that makes Robinson’s role in baseball history so human and so important. Robinson overcame so much in himself to do what he did; he had to conquer his own demons as well as the shitheads who were screaming at him. To render those demons invisible is to make his accomplishments a cartoon instead of an important part of history. Rampersad has fixed that for Robinson, and as the author of definitive biographies of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Arthur Ashe, he is doing a great deal to tell true stories about the African American past before those stories, like Robinson’s, slip into the limp legends that everyone knows.

Full disclosure: I took a class with Arnold Rampersad when he was a new professor at the University of Virginia in 1975. He doesn’t remember me—I got a B---but I’ve been trying to follow his scholarship ever since.

Joel Erickson says

An engrossing book about Robinson, who was a titan of sport and then so much more after that. What’s easy to forget about Robinson is the looming figure he cast on the civil rights movement even after he was done playing, and it’s a remarkable portrait of a man who stuck to his convictions, even when those convictions drew fire from all sides. Well-reported and incredibly researched.

Brina says

Arnold Rampersad’s biography of Jackie Robinson is the monthly selection for the baseball book club for

December 2018. Rampersad, who has also written biopics of Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison, was selected by Robinson's widow Rachel to tell his story some twenty years after his passing. As a baseball fanatic I grew up knowing the basics, that in 1947, Jackie Robinson integrated baseball when he suited up for the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15. By doing so, Robinson had agreed to not fight back to abuse for the first two years of what team president Branch Rickey referred to as his noble experiment. Robinson became the leader of the Dodgers and before his playing days were over finally helped his team best the hated Yankees in the World Series in 1955. These are the stories of baseball lore that I grew up with, and, while captivating, they did not tell the full story of Jackie Robinson the person. Rampersad along with Rachel Robinson has told that story, and what a story of achieving the American dream it is.

Jack Roosevelt Robinson was born on January 31, 1919 in Cairo, Georgia, the youngest of five siblings. Georgia was still in the throes of Jim Crow laws and would not witness racial equality until the end of Robinson's life. Desiring a better life for her children, Robinson's mother Mallie made the decision to migrate to Pasadena, California as part of the Great Migration. Along with a dozen other family members, the Robinsons made their way west where Jim Crow was not as rampant. Within two years Mallie purchased a home on the corner lot of 121 Pepper Street, and the home became the sought after destination for all of the neighborhood kids. It was in this environment, albeit in a community that still held out for some vestiges of Jim Crow, that Jack Robinson grew up and developed into a four sport star. From the streets of Pasadena, Jack would graduate to Pasadena Junior College and then to UCLA where he would catch the eye of both national sports writers and of Rachel Isum, his future wife and partner in his endeavours.

Rampersad devotes the first half of the book to Jack's childhood and sports playing days in the face of segregation and integration. He did so with dignity and won the respect and friendship of most people he came across, black, white, and any color in between. Most of the sports information was a review for me, but it is always enlightening to read about Robinson, a true American citizen. While I have come to detest the current version of the Dodgers and their big budget spending, the 1940s Brooklyn Dodgers run by Branch Rickey represent to me what was wholesome about both baseball and American society in the first half of the 20th century. Despite this repeat of information, it was a treat to read about Robinson's exploits on the baseball diamond. By 1957; however, all that came to an end as the O'Malley family pushed Rickey out of the Dodgers organization and chose to trade Robinson to the crosstown rival Giants. Declining a trade, Robinson chose to retire from baseball. Within the year, both the Dodgers and Giants would relocate to California, and Jack Robinson had no space within the major league baseball community.

Jackie Robinson would devote the last fifteen years of his life to racial integration politics, both in campaigning and in business. A self proclaimed independent, Robinson supported the candidate who he felt represented the needs of black people the best. Robinson's stance would anger many in the African American community who would call him an Uncle Tom or sellout to whites; yet, Robinson stuck to his principles and would support people black or white who would give him and his family the best chance to achieve the American Dream. His work had him cross paths with luminaries as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Robert Kennedy, Hubert Humphrey, President Richard Nixon, Jesse Jackson, and Nelson Rockefeller, for whom he worked as a staff member. Robinson would serve as a role on organizations as the NAACP and worked tirelessly for the rights of African Americans, both on the road campaigning and at membership dinners across the nation. He also wrote a weekly column for the Amsterdam Newspaper out of Harlem as his opinion on race matters was one to be regarded long after his career as an athlete was over. Rachel Robinson broke barriers in her own right as psychiatric nurse on the staff of Yale Teaching Hospital. Rachel returned to get her masters degree while raising three teenaged children at a time when the glass ceiling had not been

shattered, especially for African American women. That she did so when Jack was still on the road campaigning for civil rights took a toll on their family's life; yet, Jack in his own way was proud of Rachel's achievements.

It has been said that only the good die young. Jackie Robinson succumbed to diabetes on October 24, 1972 at the age of 53. He had just been honored by major league baseball on the occasion of the twenty fifth anniversary of his integrating the sport. Rachel Robinson took over his fledgling Jackie Robinson Foundation, which today is run by her children Sharon and David, which awards scholarships to promising high school students of color to attend the university of their choice. In 1997, fifty years following his integration of baseball, the major leagues retired his number 42. Each year on April 15, baseball recognizes Jackie Robinson Day, and, fittingly, all players wear number 42. Yet, Jackie Robinson was more than number 42 on the Dodgers. He was a loving husband and father and a tireless campaigner for civil rights across many platforms. Awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom post humous, Jackie Robinson is regarded as one of the standout American citizens of the 20th century and a man whose life it is always a joy to read about.

4.5 stars

Jack Gamba says

I thought that this book did a great job describing the troubles Jackie had in his life on his way to the top. The author took you on a journey from his life growing up in the South ,to his first baseball game for the Brooklyn Dodgers. If you read this book you will see first hand accounts of racism described by Jackie. You also get to read about his life in the Army. Even when he was fighting for our country, he was treated badly. Because of a false conviction Jackie was discharged from the Army. All in all this was a great book and I hope everyone has a chance to read it.

Riley says

Though Jackie Robinson's place in history is obvious, I had never realized what an outspoken figure on civil rights he was. With today's politics, it seems surprising that Robinson was a vocal Republican, though that is easier to understand when you consider that the Democratic party of his time was plagued by racist southern Dixiecrats, and the GOP still had social moderates like New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller.

Peter says

I read books about baseball each summer, which is what I thought Jackie Robinson, a biography, would be primarily about, and while the author does of course cover Robinson's breaking the color barrier and all that he went through in his 11-year professional baseball career, this is also a book about the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

When he retired from baseball due to age and injuries, Robinson devoted himself to civil rights while also pursuing various business ventures to support his family. Author Arnold Rampersad helps us understand why

Robinson became a Republican and a supporter of Richard Nixon, Nelson Rockefeller and other "liberal" Republicans. He also reports on the squabbles that Robinson got into with Black leaders even including Martin Luther King Jr. whose criticism of the War in Vietnam bothered Robinson.

The qualities that made Robinson the ideal person for Branch Rickey to pick to break the color barrier also made him a leader in the fight for Black equality. He was determined, focused and principled. He didn't back down, although he often forgave.

Although he was a Republican, Robinson supported Democrats such as Humbert Humphrey when he thought their hearts were in the right place. He didn't think Blacks should tie themselves too closely to either party--a position that has proven to be the right one over the past 50 years.

Rampersad had access to key primary sources. The book reflects the thoroughness of his research and is replete with details taken from interviews, letters and the like. It is, however, well-written and always readable. There are times I wish the author had provided evidence for certain statements, but this would be a fine choice for readers who are interested in baseball, civil rights or both.

Lauren says

Really fascinating book. I love baseball, so to read about such an iconic figure during such a prejudiced time was amazing. I remember growing up watching a Disney TV movie and it mentioned him and how it inspired a child to go back playing baseball due to his color. Definitely a wonderful book to read.

Terry says

This biography traces the life of a man who climbed the podium of sports to the highest level in order to advance civil rights. Excelling in any sport he tried, it must have been especially difficult to watch his teammates stay at a luxury hotel while he had to suffer Jim Crow lodging conditions. Branch Rickey broke the color barrier with Jackie's introduction to the Brooklyn Dodgers and many fans and players hated this; nonetheless, he played ten years and in six world series. The constant compass in Jackie's life was fighting discrimination through organized non-violence. He worked with governors, presidents, business and civil rights leaders. After doing so well on this path, his rejection of violence caused other blacks to label him an Uncle Tom. Jackie drew strength from his faith and his family, but he did this far better than most of us. He used his business interests to leverage others but with limited success. He died young after many challenges but remains an inspiration. I read this along with my father who was active in social issues in the last half of Jackie's life.

Mekenzie says

I love baseball so I read this book in middle school and did a book report on it. it was a great book to read and i would recommend it to any child who likes baseball.

Bobby says

I like the book for what was the story of jackies life

Shane Goodridge says

I really enjoyed this book. Robinson's rise through baseball and his unwavering - and uncompromising- commitment to his ideals are awe inspiring. I was aware of most- though not all- of the baseball narrative; however, his political calculations, as an independent, and his relationship with Malcolm X was a revelation. Furthermore, his wife is amazing in her own right and the family dynamics were both inspiring and heartbreakng.
