



Juneteenth

Ralph Ellison , Charles R. Johnson (Preface by)

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NATIONAL BESTSELLER

"[A]n extraordinary book, a work of staggering virtuosity. With its publication, a giant world of literature has just grown twice as tall."--*Newsday*

From Ralph Ellison--author of the classic novel of African-American experience, **Invisible Man**--the long-awaited second novel. Here is the master of American vernacular--the rhythms of jazz and gospel and ordinary speech--at the height of his powers, telling a powerful, evocative tale of a prodigal of the twentieth century.

"Tell me what happened while there's still time," demands the dying Senator Adam Sunraider to the itinerate Negro preacher whom he calls Daddy Hickman. As a young man, Sunraider was Bliss, an orphan taken in by Hickman and raised to be a preacher like himself. Bliss's history encompasses the joys of young southern boyhood; bucolic days as a filmmaker, lovemaking in a field in the Oklahoma sun. And behind it all lies a mystery: how did this chosen child become the man who would deny everything to achieve his goals? Brilliantly crafted, moving, wise, **Juneteenth** is the work of an American master.

Juneteenth Details

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Author : Ralph Ellison , Charles R. Johnson (Preface by)

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From Reader Review Juneteenth for online ebook

Susan Emmet says

Juneteenth... "the celebration of a gaudy illusion," regarding Emancipation. And Lord knows Ellison's forty-year effort to complete this novel needed adept assistance from a good editor, John F. Callahan, Ellison's literary executor. But it's no "gaudy illusion."

It's a wonderful, entrapping book, full of sermons and dreams and music and history and folktale and layers of dialog and plot and theme. Just an amazing work pared down from 2000 pages of text Ellison left, along with boxes of notes.

By the way, the short Notes section at the end (not meant for scholars - that's another edition) is helpful as are Callahan's final words about his method of culling and including.

As with "Invisible Man," I found myself going back and forth in my reading, looking back to track and connect passages. I didn't find that hard, but necessary because it captures the rhythm of the novel. A jazz rhythm and melody.

Reverend Alonzo Hickman, Pastor and Musician Extraordinaire, raises Bliss, the supposed orphan boy of light skin, to be a pastor, even closing him in a casket during revivals in order to let him be reborn. Bliss takes off thrice in order to escape and eventually become Senator Adam Sunraider, he of penultimate racism. Hickman comes to Bliss in his hospital room as Bliss lays dying of a assassin's bullet.

This is Hickman's story; this is Bliss' story. It is the story of a deep-seated need to find common humanity amid all the horror "we" inflict on each other in the name of race or religion or politics.

Hickman says, "Keep, keep, keep to the rhythm and you won't get weary...you won't get lost. We're handicapped! Because the Lord wants us strong. We started out with nothing but The Word - just like the others, but they've forgotten it...We learned patience and to understand Job. Of all the animals, man's the only one not born knowing almost everything he'll ever know...We learned that all blessings come mixed with sorrow and all hardships have a streak of laughter...We learn to bounce back and to disregard the prizes of fools. And we must keep on learning."

See the little in order to see the big. Don't give up. It's not all a gaudy illusion.

Jennifer W says

Too twisty and stream of consciousness for me. very few real plot points, hard to follow at times. I know this was an editor's work of unfinished notes and whatnot, and maybe I would have liked the whole more, but as it stands, I wasn't that impressed.

James Klagge says

This book was excerpted from a massive novel project that remained unfinished at the author's death. So it is unclear whether the flaws derive from the project itself or from its unfinished state. A much larger edition of the project was recently published as "Three Days Before the Shooting". Perhaps the larger edition answers the many unanswered questions that hang mysteriously in "Juneteenth". I don't know. I read this in the middle of June because that is when Juneteenth falls. There is a marvelous chapter that recounts some of a Juneteenth celebration, and this was among the more impressive parts of the book. There are other storylines

that are also interesting. And much of the writing is extremely impressive. But on the whole the storyline is quite incomplete. If this were a very modern novel, perhaps that would be how it was intended, but I have a hard time believing that. The parts of the writing I liked the least were the stream-of-consciousness parts. Among the more impressive parts of the writing were passages like this (p. 103): "So God erupted Hell in answer to Man's cries of pride. For Man had told himself he no longer wished to wear the skins of beasts for warmth. He wanted to rise up on his two hind legs and be somebody. That's what he did! He had seen the sun and now coveted the warmth of the blue vault of heaven! Ah Man, ah Man, thou art ever a child. One named Hadrian, a Roman heathen, he built a tomb as big as a town. Well, brothers and sisters, it's a jailhouse now! One named Morgan built the great Titanic and tried to outfathom one of God's own icebergs. Even though they should have known God's icebergs were still God's and not to be played with. Where are they now, Lord? Full fathom five thy father lies, that's where. Down in the deep six with eyes frozen till Judgment Day. There they lie, encased in ice beneath the seas like statues of stone awaiting the Day of Judgment to blast them free." How can you not love that?

Lora Shouse says

It's a shame Ralph Ellison never was able to finish his second novel. In this edition, editor John Callahan tells the story of how he was working on it for years and years, and just when he had it nearly finished, the manuscript, or at least a large part of it, was destroyed in a fire. He went back to working on it, but was never able to get it to that point again. Working with it after Ellison's death, Callahan determined that the existing material could likely have become three novels, but none of them was completely finished. What he was able to put together as the most coherent part of the narrative is Juneteenth, which was apparently intended to be the middle part of the story. I think I would have liked the story better if all the parts had been there. Senator Adam Sunraider, a politician who has built a career out of a blatantly racist attitude, is speechifying on the floor of the senate when somebody in the gallery starts shooting at him. As he is fighting for his life in the hospital, it is surprisingly an old black preacher he calls 'Daddy Hickman' that he asks for.

In a long series of flashbacks and reminiscences we learn the story of how Daddy Hickman raised Sunraider (known in childhood as 'Bliss') from birth, and of some of his exploits after he ran away from Daddy Hickman and the church.

Anyone who is a fan of good old-time black preaching will doubtless like the book, as a good portion of it is sermons from the long-ago past. The narrator, Joe Morton does an excellent job with this book.

Jackie says

The audio version is narrated very well by Joe Morton but Ellison is a complex writer and I think some sections just have to be read and digested, like the Senate speech and the sermons. I'm going to get a hard copy so I can fully appreciate it.

MJ Nicholls says

My rule with unfinished or abandoned novels is to leave them festering lonesome on shelves as embarrassing reminders of a writer's all-too-human faffiness—Gogol's *Dead Souls II* serving as the ur-example of what happens when an author fails to follow up a masterpiece and loses his sanity and reputation in the process.

Whether Ellison lost his sanity trying to complete his Untitled Second Novel is unclear—forty years trying to follow up one of the Great American Novels *Invisible Man* suggests a lack of coherence and confidence in his vision—but the posthumous papers on his desk attest to a Gogolian faff-up of towering proportions. The exception to my rule is when brave, passionate editors can cut-and-paste satisfying works from the mess—Michael Pietsch’s heroic work on DFW’s *The Pale King* being the obvious example—and John F. Callahan has whittled down the 2000+ pages into a slim and satisfying whole from various pre-published fragments and a longer excerpt to make *Juneteenth*. As a novel, the work is at its most powerful during Reverend Hickman’s oratorical rampages, and the POV makes use of radical shifts, from straight third-person to first-person merging with internal monologue, and the unusual dropping of speech marks during conversations to create a distance between the white senator Sunraider (raised by Hickman) and the Rev. The central storyline is the upbringing of Sunraider and his parentage, interspersed with all manner of fascinating episodes intended to form part of a MUCH larger saga on Black America in the early 20thC. The Modern Library released a longer attempt to sculpt the intended masterpiece in 2010 as *Three Days Before the Shooting . . .*

Jesus says

I was surprised to find that slavery still existed in America even after the death of so many of our young countrymen in a divisive though ultimately decisive war. The title of this work derives from the day in the middle of June a town in the state of Texas finally complied with what had become federal law & formally ended the practice of slavery. The too-long-delayed celebration of newly-freed individuals becomes a backdrop for understanding contemporary politics.

The other reviewers suggest that this work is somewhat different than Ellison's other novels. I agree. Perhaps a useful comparison would be to Kafka's Castle. Each of these books are unfinished masterpieces that illustrate the workings of the author's mind as much as the political atmosphere of the day.

Pat says

Juneteenth is Ralph Ellison's posthumous follow-up to *Invisible Man*. It's about a senator, Bliss, who is shot on the senate floor, and the African-American man, Hickman, who raised him. It's also about identity and how the way we identify ourselves affects our actions and how we treat others. Despite having been raised by African-Americans, Bliss grows up to become a racist, white senator. Once he decides to be white, this influences the future actions of his life, which leads to the assassination attempt.

The book alternates between first person from Bliss's point of view, to first person from Hickman's point of view, to third person. It also alternates from detailing the present relationship between Bliss and Hickman by his hospital bed to the past as told by Hickman and remembered by Bliss. This enables Ellison to tell the story from all sides and give the reader greater insight as to how the characters developed to become who they were. This aspect of the novel potentially could have made for a frustrating and incomprehensible read, but Ellison does a wonderful job of sequencing and pacing the story so that it is easy for the reader to understand the story as Ellison intended it.

The book also has resonance in the twenty-first century despite the fact that Ellison began writing it in the late 1950s. We can all relate to how our sense of identity and our circumstance can influence who we are and

who we could become. Sure, the twenty-first century American reader may take civil rights for granted nearly fifty years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964; however, this doesn't make the overarching themes of identity and circumstance any less relevant. This is still and enjoyable and enlightening read regardless of the many changes since it was written.

Jason Das says

If you like Ralph Ellison's writing and worldview as much as I do, you should definitely read this. It's a fever dream of the USA in the first half of the 20th Century, reveling in explorations of sexuality, politics, race, religion, pop culture, childhood, identity, memory, and nature. It veers between extreme naturalism and allegorical farce. (I think it might be what they call "modernism" (DH Lawrence, James Joyce, WG Sebold) but I never studied literature that way so I dunno?)

Like some other work of Ellison's it vividly demonstrates the ridiculousness of powerful institutions and traditions, but also their value and utility; that it's all bullshit but it's also all so important. And like *Invisible Man*, it's as much the story of some messed-up individuals' identity journeys as it is about "race" or "America".

But be prepared for a very bumpy ride. It took me 8 months to read, and it's not a very long book; nor am I a particularly slow reader. (Big thanks to the Brooklyn Public Library for their liberal renewal policy.)

Some of the slowness was fine and good. There's some deeply polished writing here, with a lot to savor in each phrase. And quite a lot of the book is speech (whether inner or outer) and seems almost made to be read aloud. I often had to slow down my reading to speaking speed. I even read some of it aloud (at home, alone), and that really worked. If I "read" it again, I might try the audiobook.

While it's often unclear exactly what's happening in the narrative, the telling is beautiful and powerful. At a certain point, I stopped trying to make all the pieces add up and just let it wash over me. Clarity may be possible here, but it's perhaps not worth the labor. It doesn't feel quite right to call it stream of consciousness though, because each sentence seems so carefully constructed.

The big problem is that, as a novel, it's a disaster. The whole is significantly less than the sum of the parts. I have trouble believing that this is the best book that could be decocted from the raw materials. (Though I haven't tried to read *Three Days Before the Shooting* yet.) Nearly all the parts are good, and many are jaw-droppingly amazing. But the assemblage is a mess. Disjointed, uneven, poorly sectioned and distributed, and just a burden to wade through. *I really wish it wasn't half in italics*, that quote marks were deployed more often, that chapter and section breaks were more frequent. Maybe even invasively signpost it bit (e.g. "at this point, we assume the author intended a lengthy story about X, which takes us from what you just read to the next part"). Basically the editing is abysmal, and makes this book a burden and a chore.

Ben says

I don't listen to country music so forgive my inability to properly reference this song; a song I abhor. I have seen the music video though. The guitar-slinging singer hops out of his Chevy pickup wearing a baseball cap and mechanics shirt singing about all the characteristics of a "real" American. As I watched this video, as a

man whose head remains too large for donning baseball caps and drives a small sedan, I felt entirely un-American. And enraged. His depiction undoubtedly represents *some* Americans but not nearly all of them. His arrogance infuriated me. Yet there he sang, describing an easy-to-swallow, why-would-you-want-to-be-anything-different, if-you're-not-like-me-then-leave but *grotesquely inaccurate* American identity - "a gaudy illusion".

As Ralph Ellison, again, blew my mind I embraced what I read as his master theme. He chose a passage from T.S. Eliot as his epigraph which dictates a theoretical function of memory; how it weaves itself into the construction of identity. As opposed to American Values and American Aspirations, the American Identity does not comfortably snuggle into one mold.

At times stylistically reminiscent of Hemingway, but with an expanded vocabulary, and Joyce, but with effective rule-breaking, Ellison constructed a text, though partial, resounding with a grandeur equal to the message he conveys. While reading I felt a sense of nostalgia even though no event or semantic frequency made direct reference to any personal experience of mine. The text itself seemed to touch something universally interlaced through the human psyche; a buried consciousness and Ellison alone knew the language. By telling the story through jazz, sermons, revivals, conversations, speeches, and films, Ellison maps a plot of the mind; each event a memory layered by perspectives from both Hickman and Bliss.

As opposed to Bliss, Hickman embraces his past. He wrestles with it, of course, continuously questioning how it could have led to the realization of a good man. But Bliss ignores his on the grounds of his unknown origin. He experiences a moment which annihilates his innocence but instead of embracing the event as a catalyst for his growth and betterment, he runs away to make himself the way he envisions rather than evolving with the circumstances of his history under grace and integrity. Hickman needed humbling, yet he allowed it because of his decency. Bliss seems to erase his character in order to make space for a new one. I don't blame Bliss. Perhaps living a life ignorant of one's origins excuses such desperate groping for identity. However, regardless of blame, consequences persist. Perhaps Bliss ought to have embraced his upbringing and allowed his character to process that past appropriately. Yet the question still remains: without a history, what kind of confidence can one have in their character? Is it truly *their* character? As America chooses to selectively remember its history - looking forward to the identity it can create autonomous of history - how can we be sure of who we are?

Some might commend our ability to reinvent ourselves, to look forward to shaping our national identity. But if we always look forward, are we ever doing it? If we don't remember what shaped us, will we ever be there? And if we do not shape or remember shaping our identity, will we ever have character?

Ellison called Emancipation a gaudy illusion. Of course, it legally abolished slavery but as a nation we still haven't tasted true liberty. Our petty differences, our defiance against our actual character, leave us clinging to the gates of our cells. If we don't allow the successes and mistakes of our past to shape us, we will always run from them. They will always control and dictate our running like a treadmill in a jail cell. Our choices will never originate with liberty and one unified ambition but with a dictatorial order from our fear and hatred.

Abolish "the gaudy illusion" and allow our memories to shape our national identity; allow our character to venture through the purifying fires of history and grow stronger together. Look ahead from atop building blocks of the past, not from the survey lines on the ground. Embrace liberty by uniting and moving toward a future for our country rather than for a country-song idea void of any reality. Without blame, no fingers stabbing through the air, but with reason and insight into the heart of the void experienced by *all* Americans, Ellison compels us to forge ahead together with a shared American identity, to envision that better future for

who we *are* rather than who our prejudices and fears dictate us to be. With Juneteenth came the freedom to pursue freedom.

Remember that.

kerry says

Adore this book. I found that, despite its strange construction as a book, Juneteenth stands on its own as a masterpiece of American lit... and knowing Ellison's history and the toil that went into its writing only adds to the book's classicness.

Juneteenth is one small excerpt of Ellison's 2000+ manuscript after the Invisible Man. Ellison spent years on the follow-up story, enduring a '66 fire that burned the initial manuscript, and tearing through writing and re-writing Juneteenth for the rest of his life. Less than ten years after his death, a small excerpt of the long, disjointed manuscript was published here.

While the book may frustrate some as a mere piecemeal of what Ellison "intended" for the final novel, I think this book stands on its own. Its imagery and commentary on 20th century America and African-American culture, racial and religious symbolism, and southern history are breathtaking at times.

Rachel says

Wow.

One reading while breastfeeding is not going to cut it with this book. Talk about layers.

I feel the need to read lots of scholarship about this book, but not right now.

Does it bother you when you read a book that describes someone as a "great" something but gives no evidence of their being "great"? Well, this book delivers in that department. It's about a preacher and a politician and boy is it packed with prime examples of preaching and politicking (especially the former).

I wonder what the rest of this unfinished novel included (Ellison died before completing it after 40-some years of working on it). Maybe I'll have to pick up the academic version one of these days . . .

Djrmel says

How do you judge a book that was unfinished at the time it was taken over by the editor? A book that was 40 years in the making, likely to have been published as three books if the author had finished it before he passed away? Do you judge it as a work in progress, a sketch book piece from the creators of one of Western Literatures masterpieces? After all, Ellison never handed this book to his publisher and said "It is done". It seems unfair to judge it as a finished work bearing Ellison's name, but on the other hand, he's dead and probably doesn't care. The book IS published, it is promoted as a completed novel by the people who are making money from it (Ellison's estate as well as the publisher), so it should be held up to whatever

standards the reader uses to judge other, more traditionally published books. In that case, I say that *Juneteenth: A Novel*, while no where near the glory of *Invisible Man*, is not a bad book. As character driven stories go, it's got the makings of something truly fascinating. Sen. Adam Sunraider's origin story as Bliss, a boy raised to be a white preacher in the southern Black tradition by the charismatic Reverend Hickman, is not only a lesson in a history that could have been, it's good reading. However, as Bliss/Sunraider grows older, his trauma induced memories grow weaker. It's not that he stops remembering, he just doesn't remember things in a form that makes for good reading. Hickman disappears from the narrative for two long to explain why he was so important in the beginning. You can definitely spot that there were two books plotted at the time Ellison died, and Callahan's editing can't fill the holes between them.

Anna Groover says

In the notes at the end of *Juneteenth*, Ralph Ellison's editor includes this musing from Ellison: "Was it perversity, or was it that the structure of power *demanded* that anyone acting out the role would do so in essentially the same way?"

I think this is a great framing of the question at the heart of *Juneteenth*, a novel about a white boy raised by a black preacher to become a preacher as well who runs away from that life and becomes a race-baiting senator in the pre-Civil Rights Era period. Ellison asks hard questions of us about identity, race, America, and parenthood in searing ways. Infused with the rhythms, cadence, and imagery of black oral tradition, Ellison's prose is absolutely beautiful.

Although I'm not a huge fan of the way women are portrayed in this novel, I still felt that it necessitated five stars because of the beautifully tangled and complex relationship between Hickman and Bliss and the stunning prose.

GoldGato says

How does one follow up a masterpiece? Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* is, in my humble say-so, one of the greatest works of fiction ever written. Genius. Perhaps Ellison should have stopped there, but he spent decades trying to put together his second novel. When he died in 1994, this still-not-published work was found to be more than 2,000 pages long without any clear conclusion or pathway. In an effort to get something out there, editor John Callahan had *Juneteenth* published, although this novel is only a fraction of the total work that Ellison had written.

We seek out the warm seacoasts of leisure, the quiet cool caverns of forgetfulness...

Ellison could write. Words and paragraphs that seem to justify their grandness regardless of subject. The two main characters in this book are Senator Sunraider and Reverend Hickman (better known as "God's Trombone"). Sunraider is a racist baiter who gets shot at the beginning of the tale. Hickman is the African-American man who raised Sunraider from birth. How the Senator changed is supposed to be the rest of the tale, but sometimes I had a difficult time following the overall outline. The section where Hickman narrates the child's upbringing was the most absorbing part, as I couldn't turn the pages fast enough.

But there never seems to be a defined ending, so I never really learned about Sunraider as an adult. I get the

idea that the whole concept is supposed to be about America and betrayal, but it just became a bit jumbled. Hickman was more interesting anyway. Mind you, the editor did a smash-up job just getting it to publication, but maybe Ellison never really had a finish in mind (the entire work is now published as *Three Days Before the Shooting...*). An epic tale needled down to a more serviceable edition is the easiest way to describe this book.

Book Season = Summer (carnivals of memory)
