

BOOK REVIEWS

Ralph Ellison: A Biography. By Arnold Rampersad. New York: Knopf, 2007. 657 pages. \$44.00.

I am sure I am not the first person to notice that the generic problem built into the art of biography is nearly identical to that built into the art of photography. Especially with photographic portraits of the famous, the subject can easily distract one's attention from the craft of the composition. More to the point, one must be interested in the subject before one is likely even to give oneself a chance at becoming engaged by the composition. Arnold Rampersad's work in general has, for me at least, has been an example of such distraction. The 1993 book he wrote with the American tennis player Arthur Ashe, *Days of Grace*, is not only informative but also a delight to read. That said, I have always been interested in Ashe's life, his career, and his significance to the American sports landscape, so my enjoyment of the book was, in a way, predestined. By contrast, to my shame I still have a copy of Rampersad's 1998, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography*, which I have started twice and still not finished. And while I recognize that calling Jackie Robinson a baseball player is like calling Martin Luther King a preacher or Miles Davis a trumpet player, the fact that Robinson's cultural significance is still framed by his involvement in a sport that has never really compelled my interest has resulted in my going to other books on my shelves instead of Rampersad's, no doubt excellent, portrait of Robinson.

One of the books that has recently supplanted Rampersad's biography of Jackie Robinson for me is his long-anticipated biography of Ralph Ellison, published last year. Since Ellison's death in 1994, those interested in Ellison have waited for this biography. While Lawrence Jackson's 2002 study, *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, helped hold this thirst at bay somewhat, it was not able to overcome the knowledge that he had not had access to the entire treasure trove of Ellison's papers, left to the Library of Congress. Jackson even admits in an interview in *Black Issues in Higher Education* that he came into conflict with Ellison's estate during the writing of his book, a conflict that ended with him removing about 3000 words from the manuscript. While important for being the first biography of Ellison, then, Jackson's book nevertheless leaves the impression that there is something still missing.

That something missing was Rampersad's extraordinary *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. Rampersad had unfettered access to Ellison's papers and the exhaustive character of his work rewards the choice of Rampersad by Ellison's literary executor, John F. Callahan, an English professor at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon, who has edited a posthumously collection of Ellison's short stories, entitled *Flying Home*, as well as assembling *Juneteenth*, the posthumous novel published in 1999 and hewn out of the thousands of pages Ellison wrote on the way to what was supposed to be his second novel. This second novel is worth a special mention because it plays the role of a disembodied character, whose spectral presence threatens to overshadow Ellison's accomplishments, whether his magisterial *Invisible Man*, or his exceptional collection of essays, *Shadow and Act*, published

in 1964. Rampersad cites a symposium Ellison attended in 1955, three years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, in which the subject of the second novel arose, as it often did. Ellison says that “the fluidity of [American] society” poses substantial problems for the writer, since reality “changes fast, and if you don’t keep up with it, you are apt to fall into writing the same book” (315). Albert Erskine, then an editor at Random House, attended the same symposium and reflected on the “‘bal-lyhoo’ of the flashy first success and the ensuing absence of a second act, in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s requiem for his own career. ‘I think that is a thing,’ Erskine observed somberly, ‘which frequently destroys people.’ Ralph was even more specific, and more pessimistic: ‘Your integrity is destroyed’” (315). The anxiety of the second novel is registered in the structure of the biography itself, since the “novel-in progress” entry is one of the longest in the book’s extensive index.

Without lapsing into the role of cheerleader or, for that matter, executioner, Rampersad lays out the evidence from his exhaustive research and leaves the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. What emerges is an Ellison who is complex, ambitious, and talented, but also angry, and by turns ungenerous and needy. The torment of the second act, however, does lead to some of the most poignant moments in the book. Rampersad understands, or certainly seems to understand, the pressure Ellison felt to follow up *Invisible Man*, and how this pressure might have manifested itself on the writer’s at times very insecure psyche. The biographer balances the relative achievements of Ellison and his friend, Saul Bellow, upon the announcement of Bellow’s winning the 1976 Nobel Prize for Literature, managing to be fair to, and illuminating of, both writers:

Ralph must have been pained by the sad difference between his own record and that of someone whose breakthrough as a writer had come after *Invisible Man*. Bellow had mined, or plundered, the lives of several of his friends for the sake of his stories. The result had been an extraordinarily complex multi-novel exposition of modern American life. If Ralph, comparing himself with Saul, took any satisfaction in the idea that (as at least two major polls had asserted) Bellow had created no single work as powerful as *Invisible Man*, he must have also known that this was so mainly because *Invisible Man* engages probably the most harrowing element in American culture: the specter of race as embodied in black life. But while Bellow fed aesthetically on the world he lived in, Ralph seemed unable to use *his* life in the same way. Instead, he seemed trapped in the vines and tendrils of the past and by the unwieldy power of Oklahoma and African-American folklore and folkways, classical myths, and often awkward comedy. (512, original emphasis)

Rampersad’s style, as evidenced here, is unobstrusive and understated, and yet elegant. At times, it can also be mischievous. In a moment that resembles Alfred Hitchcock’s appearances in his own films and Ellison’s half-appearance in *Invisible Man* as the “ginger-colored” object of a character’s bile early in the novel, Rampersad makes a veiled appearance in his own book when, as he tells the story, in April 1983, “a professor from California” gains entry to Ellison’s New York City

apartment to conduct an interview about Langston Hughes, “whose biography the professor was writing” (541). Rampersad published *The Life of Langston Hughes* in two volumes, in 1986 and 1988. The biographer completes his cameo by including this detail: “Many years later, the professor was amused to discover that the Ellisons, who had offered him no refreshments, reported to the IRS an expense of \$25 to entertain him” (541). As if there were any doubt about the identity of the professor from California, this figure is described as “the Stanford professor” on the following page, when he receives a charitable letter from Ellison about the Hughes biography. Rampersad’s cameo in the book bespeaks again an engaged style that does justice to the work and life of an immaculate prose stylist.

Ralph Ellison: A Biography is an exciting and crucial addition to our understanding of an important and often misunderstood American writer, whose “integrationist but race-proud vision” (423) has contributed to confusions about both Ellison’s politics and his aesthetics. Rampersad shines a light into some of the more unflattering corners of Ellison’s life and reveals how difficult and sometimes confounding it was to occupy the insider-outsider position Ellison inherited but also cultivated after winning the inaugural National Book Award in 1953.

This insider-outsider role takes on perhaps its most perverse but telling expression in a controversy Rampersad details involving a pure-bred dog that Ellison buys in 1961 while living with Bellow. Ellison’s dog relieves itself repeatedly in or around the house, and Ellison refuses to discipline the dog. The dispute finds its way to John Cheever, whom both men knew: “Cheever, who loved Bellow as Bellow loved Cheever, perhaps noted the irony of a black man complaining to a WASP that their friend, a Jew, did not appreciate purity of blood—in a dog” (377). Here, Ellison’s well-connected social network meshes with his idiosyncratic worldview and sometimes eccentric behaviour. Rampersad obviously enjoys such ostensibly minor moments and they add greatly to the texture of a biography that has been worth the wait. Whether one is a fan of Ellison’s, an expert on his work, or just interested in the social networks formed by intellectuals in and around twentieth-century New York City, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* is a fascinating book.

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