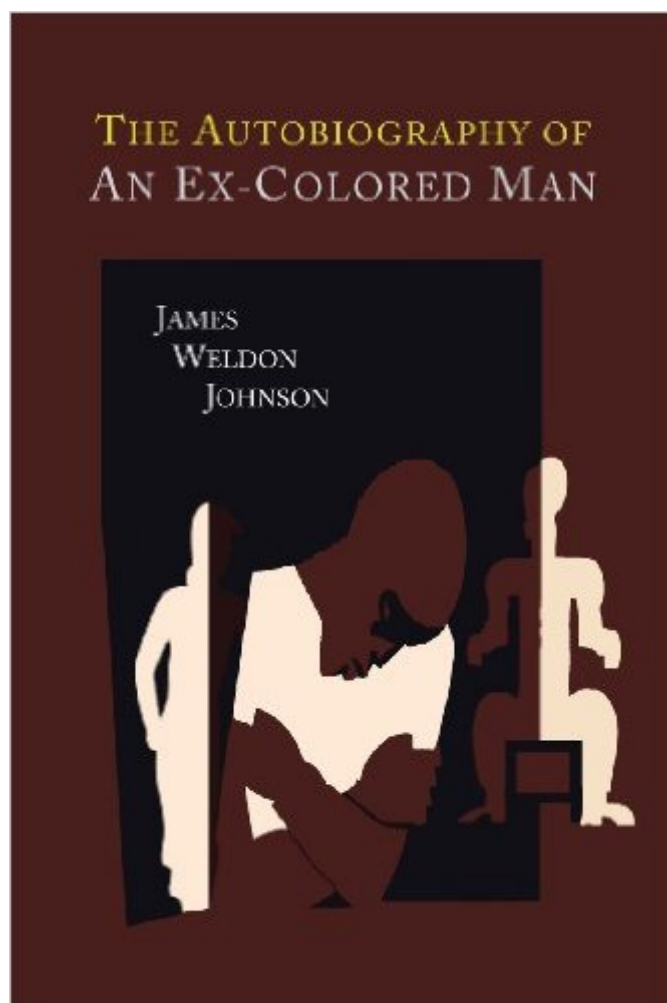


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The Autobiography Of An Ex-Colored Man



Synopsis

2013 Reprint of 1912 Edition. Full facsimile of the original text, not reproduced with Optical Recognition Software. "The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man" by James Weldon Johnson is the fictional telling of the story of a young biracial man, referred to only as the "Ex-Colored Man", living in post Reconstruction era America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Ex-Colored Man was forced to choose between embracing his black heritage and culture by expressing himself through the African-American musical genre ragtime, or by "passing" and living obscurely as a mediocre middle-class white man. Though the title suggests otherwise, the book is not an autobiography but a novel. However, the book is based on the lives of people Johnson knew and from events in his own life. Johnson's text is an example of a "roman à clef."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Perhaps best known for writing the Black National Anthem, Lift Every Voice and Sing, James Weldon Johnson wrote one of the first novels to probe the ambiguities of race, the novel The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man. As a boy, the fictional title character is sent North with his Mother to be raised in Connecticut. He does extremely well in school and is even something of a musical prodigy. But, he is stunned when one day in school a teacher asks the white students to stand, and scolds him when he joins them. He confronts his fair skinned mother and she reveals that she is indeed black and his father is a white Southern gentleman. His father later comes to visit, and even buys him a piano, but the child is unable to approach and deal with him. As a young man, the death of his mother & sale of their house leaves him with a small stake & he determines to

attend college. Though qualified, he rules out Harvard for financial reasons & heads back down South to attend Atlanta University. However, his stake is stolen from his boarding house room before he can register & he ends up with a job in a cigar factory. When the factory closes, he heads North again, this time to New York City and discovers Ragtime music and shooting craps, excelling at the one & nearing ruin in the other. A white gentleman who has heard him play enters into an exclusive agreement to have him play at parties & subsequently takes him along on a tour of Europe. Inevitably, he is drawn back to America and to music. He tours the South collecting musical knowledge so that he will be able to compose a uniquely American and Black music. But his idyll is shattered when he sees a white lynch mob burn a black man. In the wake of this experience, he decides to "pass" for white--not due to fear or discouragement, but due to "Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals." Abandoning his musical ambitions, he takes a job as a clerk, does well investing in real estate & meets a white woman who he wishes to marry. After examining his conscience he decides to tell her that he is black. After taking some time to confront this fact, she consents to marriage. As the novel closes, the "ex-colored man" tells us: "My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am, and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought, that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage." And the reader can't help but feel profoundly ashamed of a system of racial oppression that forced a man to make these choices--a wonderful novel. GRADE: B+

I purchased this book several years back, as part of the research for my second book. I cannot recommend any book more highly. Anyone interested at all in African American life from the 1880s to the 1930s (particularly as it was lived in New York City from about 1899 to the Harlem Renaissance) should buy it. There is not a more fascinating autobiography in print anywhere! And the life of this man! He was the founder of the first high school for African Americans in the state of Florida, located in Jacksonville (the high school my own mother would attend); the first African American to pass the bar exam in the state of Florida; part of the first successful African American Broadway composing team (after he left Jacksonville and moved to New York City); composer of the lyrics to, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the song long considered the African American national anthem (his brother Rosamond composed the music); a consulate in Nicaragua and Venezuela; the first executive secretary of the NAACP, in which capacity he pioneered anti-lynching legislation

(though he was unsuccessful in seeing it pass, the effort is described in the book, and is a fascinating lesson in the machinations of Congressional politics in the 1920s); author of groundbreaking fiction such as, "The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man"; author of the nonfiction classic, "Black Manhattan." The list goes on... His accomplishments, his dignity and intelligence were stunning, simply awe inspiring. And it is a real shame, an indication of how troubled our culture is, that Hollywood has never made a movie about his life, and he is barely mentioned as a key figure who shaped American culture (notice I didn't say African American culture, I said AMERICAN CULTURE). To everyone reading this review, BUY THIS BOOK. You are in for an experience so delicious it will shame you if you never before knew it existed. It will make you want to call for the resignation of all college professors who do not have "Along This Way" as REQUIRED READING for any course designed to examine the history of American culture.

This is not the type of book that will grab you from the beginning and hold you until the end. This is the kind of book that when you sit down to think about it, you'll find that you are, in some instances, like the Ex-Coloured Man. I had to read this piece for a class. Upon cracking the binding, I was not impressed. But, as I got deeper into the story, I was captivated. This is the type of work that makes you look at your life and wonder how you would respond in the same situations (and how you had responded in the past). While Johnson didn't give you dramatic build up that writers of today give, he gave an opportunity for individual soul exploration. I believe that was the point he was trying to make. "Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man" was not the greatest work ever written, but it was one of the most thought-provoking and challenging.

Johnson's novel travels through various African-American societies (New England, Jacksonville, New York City, the Black Belt) in a story of a mulatto caught between two opposing racial identities. The novel is an epic journey (emotionally and physically) of this African-American, who is light enough to "pass" into the white American dominating the turn-of-the century. The Ex-Coloured Man's personal struggles to reconcile his true private self with his public self in a divided and prejudiced society makes this novel an emotional and enlightening read. Johnson takes up the issue of WEB DuBois's double-consciousness, and gives it life in the form of this ambivalent protagonist.

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