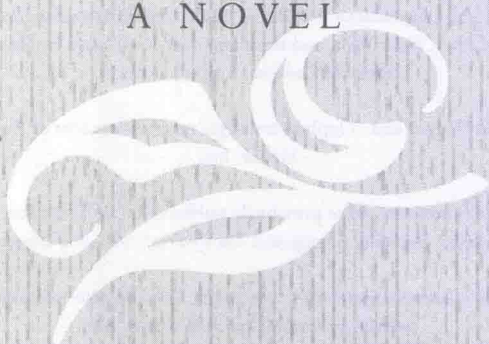


Juneteenth

A NOVEL



RALPH ELLISON

Edited by John F. Callahan



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

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Also by Ralph Ellison

Invisible Man

Shadow and Act

Going to the Territory

The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison

Flying Home and Other Stories

Juneteenth

To That Vanished Tribe into Which I Was Born:

The American Negroes

This is the use of memory:
For liberation—not less of love but expanding
Of love beyond desire, and so liberation
From the future as well as the past. Thus, love of a country
Begins as attachment to our own field of action
And comes to find that action of little importance
Though never indifferent. History may be servitude,
History may be freedom. See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.

T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding"

INTRODUCTION

In his later years, after hours, if he had put in a good day at his desk, Ralph Ellison was known to chuckle at the parallel between the “crazy country” he loved and contended with and what in 1969 he called his “novel-in-progress (*very* long in progress).” Ellison’s projected second novel was a glint in his eye as early as June of 1951, when he wrote Albert Murray that he was “trying to get going on my next book before this one [*Invisible Man*] is finished . . .” In April 1953 he told Murray of his “plan to scout the Southwest. I’ve got to get real mad again, and talk with the old folks a bit. I’ve got *one* Okla. book in me I do believe.” By 1954 Ellison had begun to put pen to paper, and in April of 1955 he sent Murray a “working draft” of an episode. From then on, even as he wrote numerous essays, taught at half a dozen colleges, held the Albert Schweitzer Professorship in the Humanities at New York University, and, in the name of citizenship, did more than his duty on national boards and commissions, the second novel remained Ellison’s hound of heaven (and

hell) pursuing him “down the arches of the years,” pursuing him “down the labyrinthine ways / Of [his] own mind” until the end of his life in 1994.

From 1955 to 1957 Ellison was at work on the second novel as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. “It was in Rome during 1956,” he told John Hersey, that he “conceived the basic situation, which had to do with a political assassination.” Not too long afterward, in June of 1959, Ellison wrote Murray that “Bellow [with whom Ellison was sharing a house in Tivoli, New York, close to Bard College, where both men taught] has read book two and is to publish about fifty pages in a new mag which he is editing—THE NOBLE SAVAGE—of all things.” Telling David Remnick of *The New Yorker* in 1994 that Ellison had “let me read a considerable portion of it—a couple of hundred pages, at least,” Bellow remembered vividly that “all of it was marvelous stuff, easily on a level with *Invisible Man*.” In a later reminiscence Bellow wrote, “In what he did, Ralph had no rivals. What he did no one else could do—a glorious piece of good fortune for a writer.”

During the next five or six years Ellison published three more excerpts in literary quarterlies. Meanwhile, the contract for the book, dated August 17, 1965, stipulated delivery on September 1, 1967. In his own mind Ellison was moving toward completion in the summer and fall of 1967 as he revised the novel at his summer home outside Plainfield, a village in the Berkshires. Then, in the late afternoon of November 29, 1967, Ellison and his wife, Fanny, returned from shopping to find the house in flames. With regret in her voice, Mrs. Ellison recalled being restrained from approaching the burning house by volunteer firemen who had arrived too late. “I wish I’d been able to break the window and pull out Ralph’s manuscript,” she told me years later. “I knew right where it was.”

The Plainfield fire has taken on the proportions of myth to such

an extent that it is useful to revisit what Ellison had to say about it over the years. Ten days after the event, he wrote Charles Valentine that “the loss was particularly severe for me, as a section of my work-in-progress was destroyed with it.” Later in the same letter Ellison outlined the task he saw before him: “Fortunately, much of my summer’s work on the new novel is still in my mind and if my imagination can feed it I’ll be all right, but I must work quickly.” According to James Alan McPherson, Ellison told him in 1969 that the fire “destroyed a year’s worth of revisions,” but that “he is presently in the process of revising it again.” In 1980 Ellison told a reporter from the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, “I guess I’ve been able to put most of it back together.” To David Remnick, just before his eightieth birthday in 1994, Ellison made perhaps his fullest public comment on the fire: “There was, of course, a traumatic event involved with the book. We lost a summer house and, with it, a good part of the novel. It wasn’t the entire manuscript, but it was over three hundred and sixty pages. There was no copy.”

By the time of McPherson’s account, done with Ellison’s blessing and collaboration in 1970, the second novel had begun to loom larger than a novel or a work-in-progress. “He has enough typed manuscripts to publish three novels,” McPherson wrote, “but is worried over how the work will hold up as a total structure. He does not want to publish three separate books, but then he does not want to compromise on anything essential. ‘If I find that it is better to make it a three-section book, to issue it in three volumes, I would do that as long as I thought that each volume had a compelling interest in itself,’ ” Ellison told McPherson. On and off for the rest of his life, Ellison continued to work on his mythic saga of race and identity, language and kinship in the American experience. Sometimes revising, sometimes reconceiving, sometimes writing entirely new passages into an oft-reworked scene, he accumulated

some two thousand pages of typescripts and printouts by the time of his death. His last published excerpt from the novel, an offshoot from the main text titled “Backwacking: A Plea to the Senator,” appeared in 1977. Although he continued to write and revise until a fatal illness struck him at the end of March 1994, just four weeks after his eightieth birthday, Ralph Ellison did not live to finish his forty-year work-in-progress.

Ellison left no instructions about his work except the wish, expressed to Mrs. Ellison and to me, that his books and papers be housed at the national library, the Library of Congress. A few days after his death, Mrs. Ellison walked me into his study, a room adjoining the living room still wreathed in a slight haze of cigar and pipe smoke. As if to protest his absence, the teeming bookshelves had erupted in chaos over his desk, chair, computer table, and copying machine, finally covering the floor like a blizzard of ash. Anyone else might have given up, but Fanny Ellison persevered in her effort to do the right thing by what her husband had left behind. She whetted my appetite by showing me stacks of printouts, scraps of notes, jottings on old newspapers and magazine subscription cards, and several neat boxes of computer disks. At her direction I removed several thick black binders of typescript going back to the early 1970s from the first of two long, rectangular black steel filing cabinets next to his desk. The other cabinet, I was to discover, contained folder after folder of earlier drafts painstakingly labeled according to character or episode.

“Beginning, middle, and end,” Mrs. Ellison mused. “Does it have a beginning, middle, and end?”

The question can’t be put any better than that, I thought. Many times I followed the twists and turns of Ellison’s plot, and his characters’ movements through space and time; traced and retraced their steps as they moved from Washington, D.C., south to Georgia and

Alabama, southwest to Oklahoma, back again to the nation's capital, and reached back with them from the novel's present moment of the mid-fifties to spots of time in the twenties and thirties and even farther to the first decade of the new century when the Oklahoma Territory emerged as a state. And always, Mrs. Ellison's question pursued me and brought me back to the task at hand, for it was always clear that at the center of Ellison's saga was the story of Reverend Hickman and Senator Sunraider, from the Senator's birth as Bliss to his death. To use an architectural metaphor, this was the true center of Ellison's great, unfinished house of fiction. And although he did not complete the wings of the edifice, their absence does not significantly mar the organic unity of the book we do have, *Juneteenth*.

Of all that Ellison wrote on his saga of a novel, *Juneteenth* is the narrative that best stands alone as a single, self-contained volume. Like a great river, perhaps the Mississippi, for Ellison "the great highway around which the integration of values and styles was taking place," *Juneteenth* draws from many uniquely African American (and American) tributaries: sermons, folktales, the blues, the dozens, the swing and velocity of jazz. Its form borrows from the antiphonal call-and-response pattern of the black church and the riffs and bass lines of jazz. Through its pages flow the influences of literary antecedents and ancestors, among them Twain and Faulkner, who, like Ellison, were men of the territory; above all, perhaps, in this novel Ellison converses with Faulkner. *Juneteenth* realizes Ellison's dream, articulated in "Brave Words for a Startling Occasion," his acceptance speech when he received the National Book Award for *Invisible Man* in 1953, of putting into a novel "the rich babel of idiomatic expression around me, a language full of imagery and rhetorical canniness."

Perhaps picking up where he left off in *Invisible Man*, Ellison is

deliberately, provocatively approximate about historical time in *Juneteenth*. In both novels his strategy is one of connotation and infiltration as he seeks to open up associations and create symbolic significance for events in the narrative. Even as his writerly time extended far beyond the fifties, Ellison continued to locate the story “circa 1955.” From the “time present” of the immediate action, he said, “the story goes back into earlier experiences too, even to some of the childhood experiences of Hickman, who is an elderly man in time present.” From beginning to end, *Juneteenth*, like *Invisible Man*, tests Ellison’s conviction that time’s burden—its blessing and curse—is “a matter of the past being active in the present—or of the characters becoming aware of the manner in which the past acts on their present lives.”

In the wake of *Invisible Man*, Ellison also dreamed of a fiction whose theme was the indivisibility of American experience and the American language as tested by two equal protagonists. In *Juneteenth* the two principals are the Reverend Alonzo Hickman, jazzman turned black Baptist minister, and Senator Adam Sunraider, a self-named, race-baiting politician, formerly Bliss, in Ellison’s words, “a little boy of indefinite race who looks white and who, through a series of circumstances, comes to be reared by the Negro minister.” In different ways expressive of radically different values and purposes, each possesses an “intellectual depth,” complexity and eloquence *visible* from the inside out, and, therefore, heard on the lower frequencies Ellison had identified with democratic equality in *Invisible Man*. With a level of fidelity that is stunning, Ellison conveys the intricate inner rhythms of consciousness felt by Hickman and Bliss, alone and in profound relation to each other. “Sometimes,” he explained in an introductory note to “Night-Talk,” an excerpt published in 1969, the two men “actually converse, sometimes the dialogue is illusory and occurs in the isolation of their individual

minds, but through it all it is antiphonal in form and an anguished attempt to arrive at the true shape and substance of a sundered past and its meaning.”

The relationship between Hickman and Bliss revolves around mysteries of kinship and race. As a boy seeking his lost mother and unknown patrimony, Bliss runs away from Hickman and his black Baptist congregation, later reinvents himself in the guise of moviemaker and flimflam man, and ends up a race-baiting senator from a New England state. After decades of separation during which he keeps track of Bliss through a Negro American network of “chauffeurs and pullman porters and waiters, anybody who traveled in their work,” Hickman hears ominous tidings of danger. He arrives in Washington with members of his congregation to warn his prodigal son but is allowed nowhere near the Senator; the closest he and his followers get are seats in the Senate gallery for one of Senator Sunraider’s speeches. There, suddenly, Hickman’s worst fear comes true: a young black man rises up in the gallery and shoots the Senator. Reeling from the impact of several bullets, Senator Sunraider loses control. “ ‘Lord,’ he heard,” his standard idiom giving way to African American vernacular, “ ‘LAWD, WHY HAST THOU . . .’ ” To his astonishment, the Senator recognizes Hickman’s voice responding from above him: “*For Thou hast forsaken . . . me.*” At the hospital he calls for Hickman, and only Hickman, to be brought to his bedside.

Throughout the unexpectedly resumed relationship between the two men, in Ellison’s words, “time, conflicts of value, the desire of one to remember nothing and the tendency of the other to remember too much, have rendered communication between them difficult.” But as the novel progresses, Hickman’s will to remember and the Senator’s will to forget engender paradoxical shared and solitary acts of imagination. Hickman’s fatherly preacher’s presence

and the blues tones of his voice stir the embers of the dying Senator's soul. Ellison enlists the reader as witness to unspoken and spoken acts of memory that revive Bliss's childhood as the little boy who looks white, talks black, and is accepted and loved by Hickman and the others in his black Baptist congregation and community. In his delirium the Senator becomes Bliss once again and remembers Hickman initiating him, the precocious little boy, into a preacher's ritual of death and resurrection in his traveling ministry. Hickman, too, Ellison reminds us, is a trickster; in his calling as preacher he sometimes sees himself as "God's own straight man." A master of religious performance, he is willing to let congregations of believers and potential believers think that Bliss, a white-skinned young apprentice preacher, rises from the dead in a closed coffin covered in white satin outfitted with a concealed breathing tube.

Memories of childhood alternate with the Senator's feverish, impressionistic recollections of life after his flight from Hickman—from *bliss*, he puts it in one of his reveries, with a mix of irony and remorse. Raised as something of a confidence man in the service of the Lord by Hickman, years later he puts the tricks of the trade to good use in his travels through the small towns of the Southwest, hoodwinking people by posing as a professional filmmaker. In the present moment of silent recollection with Hickman at his bedside, the Senator relives a brief, intense, love affair twenty-five or thirty years past with a lovely black and white and red young woman in an Oklahoma town. Their passionate interlude has mysterious, fateful, doubly fatal consequences that Bliss is only partially aware of, Hickman tries to puzzle out, and Ellison coaxes the reader to piece together.

At the climax of their interior journey, Hickman compels Bliss to confront more fully and honestly than he desires the long-buried memory of the Juneteenth night that sent him wandering the ends

of the earth like a biblical outcast. Under Hickman's prodding, he comes to realize, with a psychic pain as searing as the physical pain of his wounds, that he is tragically outcast from his true American self, which, whatever the unrevealed particulars of his genetic heritage, is "somehow black." In the end, as he sinks into delirium and the fever dream of approaching death, the Senator hallucinates a succession of frightening, unforgiving, and vengeful black American figures, and reaches feebly for the consolation now offered only by Hickman, the spokesman and elder of "that vanished tribe," the "American Negroes" to whom Ellison dedicates his book.

And Hickman, whom Ellison, as early as 1959, admitted was taking over the book, may be his finest creation. Hickman is a provincial, but he is anything but a hick. He clings, as the Senator does in occasional moments of lyrical lucidity that part the stormy waters of his cynicism, to that selfsame American faith—the democratic vernacular creed of experience and experiment, diversity and tolerance, compassion and resilience. It is a complex faith founded on the contradictory and compromised optimism of the founders, founded on the experimental attitude of Ellison's namesake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, found in the tragicomic lyricism of the blues, and in American geography founded on what Huck Finn called "the territory." Of "the territory" in *Huck Finn*, Ellison told Jervis Anderson two centuries after the Declaration of Independence: "Well, it is Oklahoma he is talking about. Oklahoma was a dream world. And after Reconstruction had been betrayed, people—black and white—came to the territory. Out of the territory came the state of Oklahoma." For Ellison the geography, history, and human diversity of Oklahoma embodied the actual and potential if oft-denied richness of the country. From tragedy—the Trail of Tears in the 1830s for the Five Indian Nations and the betrayal of Reconstruction for African Americans in the 1880s—followed migration to a territory

open to complex possibilities. Ellison's story of the territory is the story of ancestors who populated the small black towns of Oklahoma like that in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*, as well as ancestors like his parents, whose presence in at once segregated and integrated places like Oklahoma City gave the culture an original flavor of speech and music before, during, and after World War I.

Confirming Ellison's passion for history, Saul Bellow recalled Ellison emerging from the ballroom where he wrote in their shared, shabby mansion to mix "very strong martinis" in the kitchen and talk. "Ralph was much better at history than I could ever be, but it gradually became apparent that he was not merely talking about history but telling the story of his life, and tying it into American history." Bellow conveys the feel of Ellison satisfying personal and artistic urges as he paced off the familiar ground of his life: "He took pleasure in returning again and again to the story of his development not in order to revise or to gild it but to recover old feelings and also to consider and reconsider how he might find a way to write his story."

So it is with Ellison's novelistic chronicle, *Juneteenth*. In telling Hickman's story of the early days in Oklahoma, and Bliss's (a.k.a. Mister Movie-Man) sojourn there in the twenties, Ellison, as Bellow sensed, is imagining and telling his own story. In their different ways, Hickman and the Senator recapitulate the world Ellison grew up in and heard the old folks in Oklahoma tell about. As he remembers his former life as the young prodigy of Reverend "Daddy" Hickman, Bliss, now Senator Sunraider but still Bliss on the "lower frequencies," comes to grips with the fact that he is "also somehow black," as Ellison believed was the case for every single "true American." With Hickman at his bedside, Sunraider silently confesses: "Ah yes, yes; I loved him. Everyone did, deep down. Like a great, kindly, daddy bear along the streets, my hand lost in his huge paw."