

Literary Hearsay



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JUNETEENTH
Ralph Ellison
Random House
384 pages; paper, \$25.00

Given the media blitz over the past three months that has centered on the publication of Ralph Ellison's posthumous second novel, followers of contemporary American fiction are perhaps already all too familiar with the sometimes strange, sometimes humorous, and sometimes heartbreaking genesis of the jazz narrative titled *Juneteenth*. No other American novel comes to mind that has generated as much anticipation, as much speculation, and perhaps as much hearsay as the long-awaited successor to *Invisible Man*, the 1952 novel that almost instantly turned a relatively unknown American writer into an internationally acclaimed man of letters. Revisiting some of the major themes of *Invisible Man* such as race, identity, nation, and religion, *Juneteenth* is a complex exploration of the relationship between a black minister named Alonzo Z. Hickman, a light-skinned child named Bliss who becomes the racist Senator Adam Sunraider, and an America still struggling to come to terms with what it is and what it stands for.

Magazines and newspapers including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times*, and *The Village Voice*, together with the BBC, NPR, and various television stations, have documented well Ellison's forty-plus-year struggle to live up to the reputation established by *Invisible Man*: hints by the author over the years that "something would be coming soon"; the bits and pieces of the manuscript excerpted in various venues that kept readers hungry for

more; the 1967 fire at Ellison's summer home in Plainfield, Massachusetts, which destroyed over three hundred and sixty pages of the manuscript; the years following the fire in which Ellison attempted to recover, by memory and the memories of friends, the lost words; the sixteen friends and associates who gathered on New York's East Side on March 1, 1994, to drink a toast to Ellison on his eightieth birthday and perhaps hear news about the massive work-in-progress; the approximately two-thousand pages of manuscripts and notes of the unfinished project that were left behind when Ellison died on April 16, 1994; and finally the daunting task that John F. Callahan faced when he agreed, upon Mrs. Fanny Ellison's urging, to edit and publish the manuscripts.

Readers of American fiction may also already be familiar—if not first-hand, then second- or third-hand—with some of the negative reviews of *Juneteenth* that immediately followed its publication by Random House this past June. Indeed, the murmurs of hearsay that have drifted forth over the publication of this novel have been stunning, not the least because of *where* they have been heard. At a recent summer conference in American Studies at an ivy-league institution, several people (who also happened to be big fans of *Invisible Man*) expressed skepticism to me about *Juneteenth* simply on the basis of having heard that a reviewer from *The New York Times* had panned the novel. None had read *Juneteenth* themselves (or, for that matter, the review), and a couple doubted that they would read it because of what they had heard. An artist friend of mine, only vaguely acquainted with Ellison's work, called shortly after *Juneteenth* was published to ask if I had heard the bad news from New York about the new novel. I assured him that I had, and I also

promised to send copies of anything I wrote about *Juneteenth* after eliciting a promise that he would read the damn thing himself.

Of the negative reviews of *Juneteenth*, the worst are absolutely scathing. Perhaps not surprising given the sheer importance of Ralph Ellison to American literature, the most intense criticism has been focused not on Ellison's words, but rather on Callahan's decisions in editing those words. Setting the tone for such criticism by titling a May 23 piece for *The New York Times Magazine* "Invisible Hand," Gregory Feeley referred to *Juneteenth* as a "radically pared version of the novel Ellison was writing, its sprawling narrative winnowed to a single narrative thread." Two days later in *The New York Times*, Michiko Kakutani echoed Feeley's assessment, claiming that Callahan's editing work "effectively changed the book's entire structure and modus operandi. Instead of the symphonic work Ellison envisioned, Callahan has given us a single, tentatively rendered melodic line. Instead of a vast modernist epic about the black experience in America, he has given us a flawed linear novel, focused around one man's emotional and political evolution." Strangely evocative of a literary mob action, yet a third piece associated with *The New York Times*—this one appearing in the June 20 *Book Review*—panned the novel simply and bluntly in its opening line: "This," claimed CUNY English Professor Louis Menand, "is not Ralph Ellison's second novel." Temporally lagging behind *The New York Times* pieces but surging far ahead in terms of its virulence, Greg Tate's review in the July 13 *Village Voice* declared "monstrously fraudulent" all claims that Callahan's edition represents "Ellison's last novel or even an Ellison novel at all." Granting that *Juneteenth* contains moments of lush, lyrical brilliance, Tate nevertheless found Callahan's decision to publish a 368-page version of the massive manuscript to be an "artless and inexcusable...hatchet job."

Given the extreme condemnation of such reviews and the high visibility of the publications in which they appeared, one might reasonably predict that *Juneteenth* was doomed from the start, rendered invisible by members

of a literati insistent on "what-ifs?" and unwilling to judge the text before them. That prediction, thankfully, would be wrong on two counts.

Juneteenth is not a book to be summarily rejected simply because a few critics got their hackles up over a scholar's decision to edit and publish an all-but-complete narrative.

First, despite the criticism of his editorial decisions, John Callahan has been a tireless advocate in print, radio, and television interviews both for the narrative that is *Juneteenth* and against all the hearsay about what Ellison was *really* up to over the past forty years. During a conversation in Baltimore shortly after the novel was published, Callahan was blunt about all the suppositions endemic in the negative reviews:

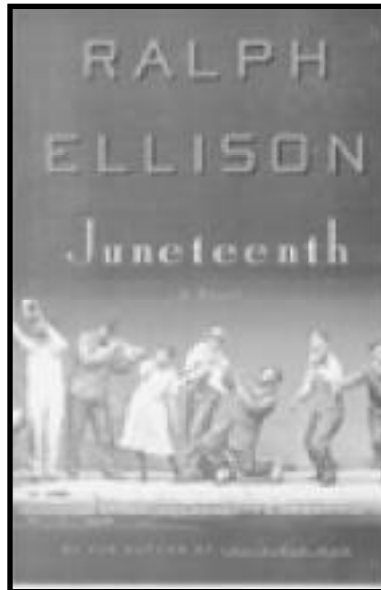
What would have happened had I said, "Well, by God, yes Ellison had all these pages, yes he published eight excerpts, and yes, folks, here, in his handwriting, in his papers, is a note saying, 'I was writing this huge, sprawling narrative, and it was going to be an epic novel along the lines of *War and Peace*, or three novels, or six novels along the lines of Faulkner, but now, I, Ralph Ellison, age eighty years old, as my last will and testament, give you my second novel. It's called *Juneteenth*, and here it is.'" I wonder what people would have said? Would they have said, "Ahhh, at the end of his life Ellison said, 'By God, within all that I've done, here is the novel that I wanted to go out with?'" You see, so much of this stuff is speculative. Who knows, really? But we have *Juneteenth*, and then we have all the outtakes.

Second, some of the most thoughtful analyses of and praise for *Juneteenth* have come from prominent scholars of African American literature whose studies of various aspects of Ellison's work are highly respected and considered standards in the field. "At its best,"

wrote Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in a June 1999 piece for *Time* magazine, “this book is a stunning achievement.” Referring to Callahan as “an extraordinarily gifted editor,” Gates hails the moments of “untutored eloquence” in *Juneteenth* while looking forward to the scholarly edition that will present the saga “as Ellison left it in all of its fragmented and riotous confusion.” Arguing in the July 1999 *Atlantic Monthly* that “*Juneteenth* is written with unmistakable Ellisonian zest, depth, and elegance, and that the work holds together as a complete, aesthetically satisfying, and at times thrilling whole,” Robert G. O’Meally echoed Gates’s anticipation of the full scholarly edition that will include the various outtakes of the novel. Still, he is frank in his high praise for the narrative that is *Juneteenth*: “Bravo Ellison, bravo Callahan.”

Many of the judgments about the new novel center on questions of form, and specifically on whether *Juneteenth* adequately represents the complex directions Ellison had been heading in terms of his development as a novelist. In a 1969 interview with James Alan McPherson, Ellison referred obliquely to the form of the new novel as a “realism extended beyond realism.” Five years later, he would tell John Hersey that “my sense of form, my basic sense of artistic form, is musical.” Critics insist that *Juneteenth* is too linear, too preoccupied with a single narrative thread, and that it fails to reflect the complex sense of form to which Ellison alluded in these early statements, arguments that Callahan finds puzzling. After a long discussion of the modernist techniques at work in the new novel, I asked him where he thought such critiques were coming from:

I suppose those comments come from the fact that the narrative begins with a specific event, the assassination, and then Sunraider



dies. And I should note that Ellison spirals out from and back to certain pivotal events, like the assassination and the attempted kidnapping of Bliss, during the course of the narrative. And we don’t discover the mystery of Bliss’s birth until the penultimate chapter. I always thought we called this technique flashback. In any case, the idea that *Juneteenth* is linear is a misnomer. I don’t want to judge these comments, but this is a hard book. It took me a long time to begin to get a true sense of its inner mechanics, its technical complexities. This is not a book that anybody is going to plumb in one reading. I think it is a compelling enough book that people will go back to it, and go back to it again. I hope the notes will help somewhat. Over time, I think those who haven’t connected with it in one reading, those on RST, or Reviewer Standard Time, will connect with the book.

Related to the issue of form is the complaint that *Juneteenth* has been gutted in terms of its story line; in the words of one reviewer, it’s a “368-page thing that is mostly about Senator Sunraider and Daddy Hickman.” One need merely turn to the many interviews Ellison granted throughout his writing career, however, to see that this critique is simply specious—the work-in-progress has *always* been about Senator Sunraider and Daddy Hickman. As early as 1972, Leon Forrest had read about five chapters of the book and summarized it as a novel involving “a Senator who is passing for white, who was raised by Black church people, and becomes something of the brutalized metaphor himself of what happened to the baby Democracy, tossed from hand to hand and born out of wedlock....” In 1974, Ellison would tell John Hersey that the work-in-progress involved two principle figures: “One of the characters is a Negro minister who was once a jazz musician, a jazz trombonist; and he underwent an experience which turned him from his wild life as a musician into a serious

minister, but one who also brought with him his experience as a showman....The other part of it has to do with a little boy of indefinite race who looks white and who, through a series of circumstances, comes to be reared by the Negro minister.”

As these excerpts from interviews with Ellison, reviews such as Gates’s and O’Meally’s, and Callahan’s own forthrightness about the editorial project make clear, *Juneteenth* is not a book to be summarily rejected simply because a few critics got their hackles up over a scholar’s decision to edit and publish an all-but-complete narrative which is part of a much larger saga that Ellison worked away at over the years but never finished. The projected scholarly edition of Ellison’s forty-year work-in-progress will indeed constitute an essential element of our understanding of this important writer. Until that edition comes out, however, what we have is *Juneteenth*, a novel of extraordinary beauty and complexity which, like its brilliant predecessor, will have a significant and lasting impact on African American, indeed American, literature.

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