



Alex Haley: And the Books That Changed a Nation

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It is difficult to think of two twentieth century books by one author that have had as much influence on American culture when they were published as Alex Haley's monumental bestsellers, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), and *Roots* (1976). They changed the way white and black America viewed each other and the country's history. This first biography of Haley follows him from his childhood in relative privilege in deeply segregated small town Tennessee to fame and fortune in high powered New York City. It was in the Navy, that Haley discovered himself as a writer, which eventually led his rise as a star journalist in the heyday of magazine personality profiles. At Playboy Magazine, Haley profiled everyone from Martin Luther King and Miles Davis to Johnny Carson and Malcolm X, leading to their collaboration on *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. *Roots* was for Haley a deeper, more personal reach. The subsequent book and miniseries ignited an ongoing craze for family history, and made Haley one of the most famous writers in the country. *Roots* sold half a million copies in the first two months of publication, and the original television miniseries was viewed by 130 million people.

Haley died in 1992. This deeply researched and compelling book by Robert J. Norrell offers the perfect opportunity to revisit his authorship, his career as one of the first African American star journalists, as well as an especially dramatic time of change in American history.

Alex Haley: And the Books That Changed a Nation Details

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From Reader Review Alex Haley: And the Books That Changed a Nation for online ebook

Patricia Hilliard says

This biography by Robert J. Norrell about Alex Haley, the writer of the Autobiography of Malcom X and the author of Roots, corrected the mess of accusations of plagiarism toward Haley in his later life. Norrell explains what happened and gives back to Haley his good standing for accomplishments that any writer would wish to have. That is, Haley helped everyone on this earth to understand the anger of African-Americans, through the autobiography. Haley also helped everyone realize how African-American people were treated and what they did to survive, from an African-American point of view.

A few other writers had written similar books from an African-American point of view, but Haley made the right connections to get his work into the commercial media and thus out to the world. He carried the message so far out that he was able to change history. For this we thank him and give all due respect. As a writer, I know how difficult it is to succeed. Norrell's book shows all the troubles Haley dealt with: financial hardships and problems with publishers. He was not trained professionally in journalism nor literature. Consequently, those in academia became his worst critics. But he knew a good story and how to tell it, which is something that many people with a college degree sometimes just don't get. So there was professional jealousy creating grief in his life.

Of course, being a black man, a sort of "writing Kunta Kinte," himself, Haley had challenged the capitalist system. The system was bound to punish him. Roots caused many classes and cultures of people to look again at their family history. Many discovered the cold hard truth about how family members struggled as chattel slaves or wage slaves to survive in a world-wide ruthless system of exploitation. This enlightenment brought about more social change and challenges to global capitalism. More people began making demands of the corporations. They continue to this day, slowly pushing for an economic system that will do the greatest good for all the people, not just the top one percent. Thank you again, Alex Haley. Reviewed by Patricia Hilliard, author of Making Changes, a novel about union organizing.

Biblio Files (takingadayoff) says

Roots, the TV series, was one of those shows that practically everyone watched when it first aired in 1977. It was a first in many ways, and it was shown on eight consecutive nights, which was unheard of. It was the first binge miniseries, when home recording was still quite rare, so if you wanted to see it, you just had to be in front of your TV at 9:00.

Alex Haley and the Book That Changed a Nation tells about how Alex Haley grew up in Tennessee and joined the Coast Guard, served during World War II and went on to make a career of the military. After the war, he realized he wanted to write for a living and spent the rest of his military career trying to sell articles. He did a lot of networking and eventually was able to get interviews with many celebrities and by the time he retired after twenty years in the Coast Guard on a small pension, he was able to supplement it with sales to magazines such as Reader's Digest and Playboy.

Roots was a pet project that took over twelve years to complete. Haley's money troubles, marriage difficulties, wanderlust, and procrastination made it a headache for his agent, publisher, and everyone else connected with the project. Haley's reputation after having written Malcolm X's story (with Malcolm X) was

such that everyone was willing to put up with all that. And he tantalized the nation by giving dozens of lectures every year that drew on what would become the Roots saga. People couldn't wait for the book. But they had to wait.

What was most interesting to me was the story of the problems Haley had afterward, trying to convince people that the story was true, that it was history (as the publishers had marketed it), and not a myth built on some brittle bones of truth. Haley admitted as much many times, saying "I was just trying to give my people a myth to live by."

Kate says

Alex Haley was the writer of two books that were important in providing insight into the black experience in America: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley* and *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. The first, published after Malcolm X's death, told of the sense of disenfranchisement that led to the Nation of Islam movement. The second book, *Roots*, told the story of some of his ancestors, going back to their origins in Africa. Made into a very popular miniseries in the 70s, it made real to the general public the abuses of slavery in a way that hadn't been seen since the 1850s popularity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was also a factor in the rise of black studies during this period.

This book tells the story of Haley, whose parents were black college professors, an unusual circumstance for a Southern black child in the 1920s and 30s. He loved listening to stories of his older relatives, who remembered back several generations to their grandparents, who lived in slavery. These stories would eventually serve as the basis for his search for his origins.

The author focuses on two elements: Alex Haley's biography, and the impact of his two key books on American culture. I found cultural impact far more interesting than the biography, in part because Haley led a fairly chaotic life. I became somewhat bored with his constant procrastination as a writer, and his unpleasant relationships with women. On the other hand I had no idea before reading this book how strong an impact these books had on people's perceptions of being black in America.

The author does describe the issues later raised about the book, *Roots*. As is true of many amateur genealogists, Haley probably jumped to some conclusions about his family history that involved some wishful thinking. He made some unprovable assumptions, and relied on unreliable sources. *Roots* is something of a generalized story - he used the elements of his family history as a skeleton to create an experience that may have been true for a number of black people.

I wavered between a 3 star and a 4 - I wasn't deeply compelled by the biography, but was interested when focusing on the social issues that Haley personally experienced, and his work's impact society. I decided to go to 4 stars, recognizing that others might be more interested in the bio than I was.

I read this in a pre-release review copy.

Suzanne Mundy says

The book dragged a lot in its process. There was criticism of Haley and his ability to write. I long to read a positive account of Alex Haley.

Jewell says

I have to say the Robert J. Morrell has won me over as a biographer. I enjoyed reading his findings about Alex Haley and believe that his treatment of the man was fair and completely without bias. I had no idea that Mr. Haley had been sued for plagiarism. Mr. Norrell discussed these issues without judgement, presenting all sides of legal arguments equally. I look forward to reading more works by Mr. Norrell in addition to locating many of the articles written by Haley that were cited in this book.

Nancy says

Alex Haley's life has been well covered, both in his books and in the press. I've read Haley's books which are biographical and seen the shows based on them. I was expecting more out of a biography written 23 years after his death. Norell tries to add to this record through court records, information unpaid taxes, and squabbles after his death over his estate but it is a thin soup which did not satisfy me.

(One interesting part to me was the mention of World of Our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made which came out at the same time and covers the history of America's Eastern European Jews. I don't recall ever hearing of that book until last month. I guess I am doing some catch up reading with it.)

Nancy says

My favorite thing about biographies is that you get to learn not only about a specific person, but about a certain time as well. And, when the subject of the biography is himself a biographer, it is an additional bonus as you get insight into not only the subject's life, influences and times but those of the people he profiled. Growing up, I remember the mini series Roots and the great impact it had on our views and conversations. Reading the background of the many decisions that went into crafting the show was enlightening. I hadn't realized that it was one of the first serious TV events featuring black actors in roles other than broad comedies. Hearing how they included additional white roles and recruited well known and "safe/familiar" white actors shows how much of a risk it was at the time. Though some of the historical references have been debunked since, it can never take away from the positive and culturally significant impact the series had. This, however, is only one chapter in the book. The biography also does a wonderful job of bringing to life society and the limitations it placed on Alex Haley as a young man when such domestic assignments as cooking and cleaning were the only options open to servicemen of color. Learning how his vistas broaden reflect the changes going on during Haley's lifetime and lay the groundwork for a greater understanding of the advances brought on by the struggles of the Civil Rights Movement. Not knowing much beyond the perhaps unjustified (at least in his latter years) violent reputation of Malcolm X, the information retold through the authorship of his biography was also very interesting. When one thinks of Alex Haley, Roots and

its success immediately springs to mind. What this book does so well is explore the many struggles it took to bring that work to light as well as the consequences, both positive and negative, that stemmed from that epic while placing it in the sociological context of the time.

Thank you to the publisher for providing a free copy of this book. This in no way impacted my review.

Margaret Sankey says

In the 1970s, people were receptive to history in the form of epic, sweeping family sagas--I received this trend second-hand in the 1980s from paperbacks of Winston Graham's Poldark, John Jakes (trashy, I know), James Michener and others who appealed to a deep rooted connection of people to a place and its legacy. I admit to a jolt when I encountered Roots (as a book--I am so old that in the middle 80s, even VHS wasn't available for out of print miniseries you wanted to see, you had to wait for it to be on some obscure cable channel, which is how I captured Centennial on TBS), and saw, like the millions of people who read it and watched the network show, that African-Americans had the same deep roots, and that their history could be reconstructed in parallel to the elite written records I had encountered in my nascent historian research up to that point. Norrell doesn't shy away from the controversy that dogged the book at the end of Haley's life, and it remains that he should have, strictly speaking, presented it as "inspired by" family knowledge and his research, and not lifted passages from other books. However, despite its flaws, the shock, coming at a moment of American bicentennial nostalgia and historical receptivity, that American history included the family roots of people without powdered wigs, and whose histories had been deliberately obscured, names changed and descendants scattered, was powerful and made a lasting impression on me in a way that was buttressed by later, scholarly work.

Douglas Graney says

The author is skilled at making the reader as impatient as those at Doubleday for the completion of Malcolm X and Roots. Having read both I was eagerly anticipating reading about the reaction to both. As far as the controversy regarding Roots, those throwing petty complaints are clearly missing the point. It was interesting to read how Haley developed as a writer and how maddening his writing habits could be. But certainly worth the wait.

Riley says

I decided to read this biography of Alex Haley after finishing The Autobiography of Malcolm X. It is a shame that Haley is a largely forgotten author today considering that he wrote two of recent 20th century's most influential books on black being.

Roots came out before my time and I was unaware of the allegations of plagiarism and false history that dogged it. In retrospect, it seems surprising that Haley and its publisher insisted on calling it strictly nonfiction, or that its critics were as judgmental of the factual liberties the book took. Both seem to lose the forest from the trees given that the idea, as Haley said, was to establish an "Eden" under which blacks in America could view their heritage with pride and reverence.

From the biography:

"Being a best-selling author did not bring Alex Haley the peace and freedom he had imagined. He had worked hard, struggled against formidable odds, treated most people well, and thought he deserved success. He did not disdain the expertise of academics, but neither did he believe he should be held accountable to their standards of objectivity when he was aiming for a higher, symbolic truth. He believed that many critics simply wanted to deflate someone whose celebrity had grown large, and he was right about that. In some instances, the provocation for disparaging him was simply racial prejudice. But it was also true that he had made a fundamental mistake in proclaiming the historicity of *Roots* when he knew that the book was not, at least in some of its parts, strictly true. His account of the use of *The African* [whose author claimed plagiarism] was not plausible, in the view of many observers. Did the alleged misrepresentations warrant the onslaught of attacks he was enduring? Were they so grievous as to rightly undo the salutary effects of *Roots* on the American popular mind? No, they were not, but in the world of American celebrity, fair and correct judgments often do not prevail."

Marilynn says

Excellent biography that is an in depth study of the man who wrote what most critics agree are two of the most important books of the twentieth century. This seems an objective and very detailed account of how Haley researched the books, and the backlash from accusations of plagiarism associated with the *Roots* saga. About the man himself, you get a sense of a personality with many flaws, but with an ambition to create something lasting and meaningful. He was described as a very social, kind and generous soul, who always believed you should "Find the good and praise it." This book was received through the Goodreads giveaway.

SundayAtDusk says

This is a highly readable biography that left me with highly mixed feelings about Alex Haley. He wrote two outstanding books during a time when black history wasn't exactly mainstream knowledge. Reading about the first book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*, was most interesting to me, far more interesting than reading about *Roots*. Reading about Alex Haley's second book was a bit distressful because it appears he did not write a great deal of the book. Apparently, he was totally absorbed by the research, as well as other smaller projects, and had another man doing much of the writing. There was also constant excuses from Haley about why the book was not finished, most of the excuses raving about how successful the book was going to be after it was published. Fortunately for him, that proved to be true, especially since he kept asking for more advance money.

It's important to note Mr. Haley had huge financial problems at the time, which made him feel obligated to do smaller projects to get quick cash. The IRS was after him, and he made very bad marriages. That's another cause of my mixed feelings--he obviously had major problems with women, starting with his mother and stepmother, and appeared to spend little time with his children. He was always running off here or there, he said to research or write. The irony of this is that *Roots* to him was not only the incredibly important telling of the story of so many black families, but specifically the story of his family. Yet, he himself could not be seen as much of a family man, at least not where his wives or children were concerned.

Roots, too, brought on some lawsuits, which is not at all unusual for a highly successful book. One, involving

plagiarism, though, appeared to be legitimate, considering similar texts found in both *Roots* and Harold Courlander's *The African*. Another plagiarism case involved Margaret Walker Alexander's book *Jubilee*. I found it quite interesting to read about that case since I recently read *Song of My Life: A Biography of Margaret Walker*. She did not seem like the type of person to falsely accuse another author of plagiarism. In this biography, however, author Robert J. Norrell claims her charges were totally false, and were made strictly because of jealousy of the success of *Roots*. I don't know if that was a fair charge by Mr. Norrell or not, but he struck me in this book as trying very hard to be fair. Fair both to Alex Haley and to the readers of this book, by presenting an honest account of Mr. Haley's life, not a fan account; even though he has the highest regards for *Roots* and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*, and the tremendous impact both books had in the United States.

(Note: I received a free copy of this book from Amazon Vine in exchange for an honest review.)

Beth says

This was a competently written biography which includes understanding and insight about Alex Haley. He was lucky in childhood having educated parents. His start in a southern small town made him unaware of black/white stress. His style was a having so many ideas of what he could do that he seemed to be unable to focus in life. He took ages to write each book. He couldn't concentrate on his family for there were so many other attention grabbers of his time so three marriages and children that felt unloved became part of his failure. He did not finish college but off and on did teach in colleges. He got so interested in following up on research to the nth degree that he kept at it longer than he should and therefore missed deadline after deadline to finish the two books that made him famous: "Malcolm X" and "Roots". He was unable to manage his finances both when he was poor and when he became a celebrity. BUT!!! He changed the thinking of many Americans because by meeting many famous folks, his (probably unaware) meeting people and marketing propelled what he did accomplish into American consciousness. The end of the book where other authors sued him and fueled a controversy about whether his books and the film were historical fiction or non-fiction is interesting but shows how big accomplishments generate petty peoples anxiety and makes the adage "A prophet is not accepted in his own country" ring true.

Roberta says

Apparently some reviewers either did not read the entire book or prefer to make up stuff that wasn't in the book. First, there were 5 law suits against Alex Haley by people who accused him of using parts of their books in his book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. It is understandable that an author of a better, earlier book would be indignant at the greater success of the later book. In four of these law suits, Alex Haley was found **NOT GUILTY**. Let me repeat that: **NOT GUILTY**. In the 5th law suit brought by Harold Courlander, author of *The African* they settled out of court so it looks bad but there is no actual proof how things might have shaken down.

The 1960's and 70's aren't history that I have to do research about. I'm an old lady and I was there and Alex Haley wrote the two most important works on black culture in the twentieth century. There is no doubt, and this book goes into detail, about Alex Haley's flaws, which were many. He was unreliable, he couldn't meet a deadline to save his life, he had no common sense whatsoever when it came to money or women. But those two books, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* were different

than anything that came before them. Because I say so, that's why.

This book totally minimizes the impact that the book Roots had on genealogy. On page 171 "The number of letters of genealogical inquiry shot up at the National Archives." OMG! That is the understatement of all time! Back in the day, they will deny it but genealogy was a hobby reserved for blue-haired DAR ladies. I was doing genealogy before Roots and it was a struggle if you weren't snow-white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant-came-over-on-the-%#\$%&%# -Mayflower.

Then the book came out, the mini-series started running on TV and it felt like it was just the next day everything had changed. For one thing, I wasn't the only person in the research room. There was a LINE to use the microfilm reader. They had to start a sign-up sheet for the MICROFILM READER. The DAR ladies went totally insane because they knew NOTHING about how to do research if you weren't descended from a Pilgrim. The prevailing rule up to that point was that black people couldn't do genealogy, they had no past, no ancestors. But now people who had never done research before came in with expectations that they would be able to find their roots!! And it wasn't just African Americans. White people watched the mini-series, too. Lots of our favorite actors were in it: Henry Fonda, Lorne Greene, Doug McClure, Chuck Connors, Lloyd Bridges, Ralph Waite, Ed Asner, George Hamilton, Ian McShane. From that day books were published that never would have been published before, classes were held that never would have been held before, and Ancestry.com started building an EMPIRE. Gotta catch my breath...

This is not a reflection on Norrell, it is the publisher's fault, but the first two cover blurbs on the back cover are the worst EVER. The second and more disturbing was written by W. Fitzhugh Brundage and then the author thanks him in the Acknowledgements for "clarifying his thinking."

Aletha Pagett says

An excellent perusal of Alex Haley and his writing and his disappointing fall from the pedestal of greatness where he initially stood. For me, even though this book did expose many negative facets of his writing, it still was honoring of the massive impact of Haley's books. This book was received through Goodreads.
