



# Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous With American History

*Yunte Huang*

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**“An ingenious and absorbing book...It will permanently change the way we tell this troubled yet gripping story.” —Jonathan Spence**

Hailed as “irrepressibly spirited and entertaining” (Pico Iyer, *Time*) and “a fascinating cultural survey” (Paul Devlin, *Daily Beast*), this provocative first biography of Charlie Chan presents American history in a way that it has never been told before. Yunte Huang ingeniously traces Charlie Chan from his real beginnings as a bullwhip-wielding detective in territorial Hawaii to his reinvention as a literary sleuth and Hollywood film icon. Huang finally resurrects the “honorable detective” from the graveyard of detested postmodern symbols and reclaims him as the embodiment of America’s rich cultural diversity. The result is one of the most critically acclaimed books of the year and a “deeply personal . . . voyage into racial stereotyping and the humanizing force of story telling” (Donna Seaman, *Los Angeles Times*).

Shortlisted for the 2010 National Book Critics Circle Award in Biography and the 2011 Edgar Award for Best Critical/Biographical Book.

## Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous With American History Details

Date : Published August 30th 2010 by W. W. Norton Company (first published 2010)

ISBN : 9780393069624

Author : Yunte Huang

Format : Hardcover 354 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Biography, Mystery, Culture, Film, Crime

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# From Reader Review Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous With American History for online ebook

## The Library Lady says

This is immensely readable and the material is fascinating. I knew about Chang Apana because he appeared in a novel I'd read last year--Honolulu, I think--but Huang fleshed him out more fully, and the material about Biggers and about the movies was terrific.

The problem with this--and the reason I am giving it 3 rather than 4 (think about 3.75) is that in his eagerness to fully cover his multiple topics, Huang meanders over everything from his relationship with his own child to conditions in 19th century China and it becomes distracting. Still, a fascinating piece of work with a lot to think about in terms of the Asian American experience, and a portrait of a man whose life was even more interesting than the character he inspired.

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## Erik says

p.296 ...his name in Chinese, (Zheng Ping in Mandarin or Chang Pung in the Cantonese pronunciation). For a long time, I had wondered what kind of name "Apana" was. Now I can be certain that "Apana" is a Polynesian variation of the Cantonese "Pung." The first A derives from the Chinese custom of adding "Ah" to a given name as a casual way of addressing someone. The last A is a Polynesian addition, because in that language, as Herman Melville reminded us in his first book, Typee, all words end with a vowel. ...In Chinese, Ping means "peace, equilibrium,"

Visiting the library, as I could not fathom this book under APANA, I asked the desk for help, "I didn't see this book on the shelf." She did. The title is bold and red. Not quite a misdirect for Yunte Huang does write of Chan and aphorisms and Earl Derr Biggers and Warner Oland as method actor and Hawaii's history. Nothing in the description nor the jacket indicates **Chang Apana**, a paniolo, a cook, first Humane Society officer and HPD detective. "Action speak louder than French." (Charlie Chan at Monte Carlo) And here Yunte Huang (or Publisher) advertises Charlie Chan, because it is the best bait. With a semi-colon title this long, I would add "and Chang Apana." Also, Charlie Chan and Warner Oland Rendezvous With China.

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## Kay says

Boy, am I ever fatigued by publishing hype. Granted, an examination of the Charlie Chan phenomenon certainly sounded like a great concept, and it's buttressed by an attractive book cover and catchy subtitle, "The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History." Who can resist a "rendezvous with American history?" Well, not me.

Alas, from the first pages, I detected the whiff of a reworked doctoral thesis -- and, in fact, at the end of the book the author reveals that a chapter of his doctoral dissertation was devoted to Charlie Chan. It figures.

Huang's defense of Charlie Chan would have made an interesting and spirited essay, and in fact I found his last chapter, which is the most germane, to contain some ideas I very much enjoyed reading and completely agree with:

"...it is certainly true that there are stereotypical aspects of Charlie Chan that smack of racial parody and mockery. After all, he is a product of his time, born in the nativist era of the 1920s and rising to stardom before the civil rights movement attempted to raise America's consciousness. But *if every time we smelled the odor of racism in arts and literature we went out and rallied in the street, then we probably would have killed off everything from jazz to hip-hop, from George Carlin to Jerry Seinfeld*. Out of the crucible we call art, there is rarely if ever what might be described as good clean fun." [emphasis mine]

Hear, hear!

Unfortunately, as so many with book contracts under their belts seem to do these days, Huang takes an idea, spins it out and pads it until – voilà! – it's a book. No subject however peripheral to Charlie Chan/Chang Apana goes unexamined. Reading, for example, that Charlie Chan author Earl Derr Biggers checks into the Royal Hawaiian Hotel on his visit to Honolulu, I brace myself. Sure enough, the author launches into a digression about the hotel and its history. A few pages later on, the reader is treated to a similar description of movie palaces, most notably Grauman's Chinese Theater. If this in any way advanced the ideas of the book, I wouldn't mind, but in most cases it seems to be whatever caught Huang's magpie attention.

In short, this book is all over the place. It can't, alas, simultaneously be a biography of Chang Apana, Earl Derr Biggers, and all the various actors that played Charlie Chan *and* an examination of American racial attitudes, particularly towards Chinese *and* an examination of popular culture *and* -- what the heck – an account of the author's personal odyssey. But boy does it ever try, throwing just about everything into the pot.

I read along gamely, though, as I'm interested in Hawaii and the idea of super detectives, among other things. I had mentally given this book three stars until I hit the chapter entitled "The Fu Manchurian Candidate," which conflates Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan, the film "The Manchurian Candidate" and all sorts of "yellow peril" alarmist ideas that sprang out of the 50's and 60's.

This chapter stretched the whole silly notion of "C" (for Chinese) words and other peripheral references to anything Chinese into an inflated notion of oriental menace. The idea of brain-washing, in particular, is noted as a central feature of this menace.

However, as even a casual reader of pulp fiction is well aware, this is a stock feature not just of 1950's American paranoia, but harkens back to 19th century sensational writers. Glancing over at my shelves, I spy several novels featuring the insidious Dr. Nikola written by Australian author Guy Boothby in the late 19th century. The evil and hypnosis-inducing doctor seeks occult secrets of immortality in China and plots world domination. Sound familiar? What of Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* or another Boothby novel *Pharos the Egyptian*? Here the oriental menaces are of a distinctly ancient Egyptian cast. Or, heck, why not cast the net further and draw in Count Dracula? Surely Transylvania is close enough to Russia to be tainted with Orientalism, and the archetypal vampire's repertoire also includes the ability to hypnotically bend humans to his will.

My point here is that with this sort of analysis, there is virtually limitless scope. Take a concept. Any concept. Start to pull in things that remind you of other things. String it all together. Is this a meaningful analysis? I don't think so.

Two and a half stars, then – three for the concept and two for the execution.

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### **Lisa Lieberman says**

Well-written and wide-ranging discussion of all things Charlie Chan. I especially appreciated the author's sense of humor, and his willingness to allow his audience to enjoy the Chan character's wit without denying the racism behind his creation.

When some people complain about Charlie Chan's deferential docility, especially in the presence of white men, they have simply underestimated the real strength of his character. Chan is a peculiar American brand of trickster prevalent in ethnic literature and incarnated by Mark Twain's Huck Finn and Herman Melville's Confidence Man (curiously named China Aster). It is a brand that also included Jim Crow, the Bunker brothers, Al Jolson's Jazz Singer, and Stepin Fetchit and his numerous step-chillun. All these characters are indeed rooted in the toxic soil of racism but racism has made their tongues only sharper, their art more lethally potent. Whether it's a jazzy tune coming from the lips of a blackface Jew or a yellow lie told by a ventriloquist Swede [i.e., Werner Oland, the Swedish actor who played Chan in the best-known films], the resilient artistic flower has blossomed in spite of as well as because of racism. This undeniable fact, insulting and sobering, has uniquely defined America.

Not only is Huang's book relevant to Charlie Hebdo debate, but it serves as an antidote to all the humorless readings of cultural symbols that are reductionist and literal-minded.

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### **Tommy Bat-Blog Brookshire says**

This extremely well researched & well written book was a total joy to read. I've always liked Charlie Chan movies but never really knew that much about the character. This book tells the story about Charlie Chan in a very unique way, from many different angles. First, there's "Charlie Chan" as he existed inside a Fictional Book. Then, the "Movie persona". There's a lot of information about him but also covers the real-life story of the Hawaiian Police Detective that inspired the Author. It also covers all the Actors who portrayed the most honorable Detective. Speaking of the Author ( of the Chan books ), there is also a Biography of him too, ha! I also liked the various stories about the many different Chinese Stereotypes that helped to define the Fictional Detective. There's a lot of American History here about the "Chinese-American Experience". I mean, you learn about this character from like 100 different angles...it's a great read! Oh yeah, there's also a little bit about the Author of this book blended inside that gives you an extra layer of meaning. Like, what the Chan character has meant to a real Chinese person.

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### **Mark Bruce says**

Written by a naturalized Chinese American, this fascinating book tells the story of the real Chinese detective who worked for the Honolulu Police--as well as the development of the famed detective created by Earl Derr Biggs. The surprising conclusion the author comes to--while giving all sides a fresh hearing--is that Charlie Chan is not the racist figure he's cracked up to be. Instead, he is a canny and wise man, often offended by the

racism of his times, who never lets the white man's world cloud his vision. Love or hate the Chan, you have to read this book.

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### **Lyndsey L. says**

Wow, it is not often that you can say the person who inspired a character is WAY more impressive than the character himself, but that is the case here. Chang Apana seems like a fictional character, with his bullwhip reminiscent of Indiana Jones, his integrity, and his frankly astonishing time on the police force it is difficult to believe that such a man existed. Yet, he did.

Okay, I really enjoy history but most history books are hard for me to read because there isn't much of a story. Yunte Huang made history interesting and relatable by directly connecting it to the life of the impressive Chinese-American detective. I learned about Chinese immigration, Hawaiian history, the early Hawaiian police force, and multiple elements of societal nuances of the time.

If anything, the biggest problem with the book is that Chang Apana is so impressive that the information about Charlie Chan was slightly uninteresting in comparison (I just kept wanting to go back to Chang Apana).

As for the part about Charlie Chan, I have a confession. While I enjoy 1930s and 40s radio shows, I've always shied away from Charlie Chan. I didn't think I would enjoy it because I was sure it would be inadvertently racist (despite the part of me that wanted to look at it for diversity's sake because it was one of the earliest examples of 'positive' representation in pop culture). After reading this book, I had to question, is Charlie Chan offensive or subversive? Really? I think the answer is both. The author just presents the facts, he himself clearly has a fondness for Charlie Chan but plainly presents the faults and problems with the character. I may give Charlie Chan a chance the next time I need an old radio show, with the knowledge I've gain from this book, maybe I'll be able to contextualize it better.

WHY HASN'T ANYONE MADE A CHANG APANA MOVIE?!

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### **Bernard Norcott-mahany says**

I thought this was an outstanding work of a personal quest and of the intersection of history, legend and pop culture. The author, himself Chinese, having escaped from China following the Tienanmen Square incident, worked hard to become part of America, where he now teaches literature in an American University, just as Chang Apana, the Hawaiian police officer who served as the inspiration for Charlie Chan, also worked hard as he rose from worker to cowboy to police officer in turn of the century Hawaii. But Earl Derr Biggers' Chan, though inspired by Chang, is quite a different character, and is himself the result of a lot of racial stereotyping in America in the 20s and later, the same typing that produced Fu Manchu. Very readable, this work shows a lot of hard work on Huang's part and good scholarship.

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### **Mary Ronan Drew says**

Yunte Huang was teaching in the English department at Harvard University when his new book was released

and he was scheduled to do a book signing at the Harvard book store. With a title like *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (yawn), it was a challenge to get a crowd to attend so the English department secretary made up a poster for the event and in an attempt to make it more appealing she included a photo of Charlie Chan.

Now some Chinese-Americans are a bit sensitive about Charlie Chan, seeing him as an Asian Uncle Tom figure, a stereotypical racist image of a Chinaman. So the author was a little disturbed about the poster.

Being polite (the Chinese he tells us are very polite, kind of like Charlie Chan), he thanked the woman for the poster and asked her why she had included Charlie Chan? "Oh," she replied, "I grew up watching Charlie Chan movies. He was so smart and wise and they called him in to solve the most difficult murders and he was always able to figure them out and he was witty and polite . . . He was my hero!"

This set Yunte Huang to thinking and eventually to investigating the Charlie Chan books and movies and this book is the result. The story is fascinating.

There really was a Charlie Chan, called Chan Apana, a detective with the Honolulu Police Department in the late 19th and early 20th century. He spent a decade in his youth as a cowboy (the second largest cattle ranch in the US is in Hawaii.) As a police officer he was delegated to keep Honolulu's Chinatown under some semblance of control (closing gambling dens, brothels, opium dens, etc.) Although he was only 5 ft tall and weighed 130 pounds at his heaviest, he carried only a bull whip and he routinely rounded up 40 bad guys single-handedly.

Enter Earl Derr Biggers, a Harvard graduate (from a town in Ohio very near Canton, interestingly) who needed to make some money when he graduated from college. He decided to write a book and the first Charlie Chan mystery, *The House Without a Key*, was the very popular result. Published in 1925 it was set in Hawaii and the exotic tropical setting, combined with the clever and witty Chinese detective, made it a best-seller. Biggers went on to write five more Charlie Chan books before his early death in 1933.

Yunte Huang's book takes off from the mystery, its author, and the man who was its inspiration to talk about the history of Hawaii and the story of Chinese in America, the figure of Charlie Chan in the movies and the various actors who played him, the two most famous being Scandinavians, Werner Oland and Sidney Toler. He describes the years when Chinese laborers were encouraged to come to the US to do the dangerous work on the trans-continental railroad, and the years when they were forbidden to immigrate to this country or to become citizens. Things were always a little better for various racial groups in Hawaii but when the islands became a US territory in 1898, the Chinese Exclusion Act applied there. (Hawaii became our 50th state in 1959.)

2011 No 92 Coming soon: *Son*, by Jack Olsen

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## **Orinoco Womble (tidy bag and all) says**

The author of this book is a professor of English, which is ironic; his text is badly in need of a good editor. I bet if one of his students put this much padding into a term paper, he'd fail them. The title suggests a biography of the fictional detective, and/or the real-life police officer who inspired the stories. Well, it is, and it isn't--but mostly it isn't. It's mostly about "ME and Charlie Chan"--the author's love affair with the books, the movies and the concept (especially the concept) of a strong, wise Asian American hero that goes one

better than the entire police force in every case. In that sense, I was strongly reminded of *The Little Girl Who Fought the Great Depression: Shirley Temple and 1930s America*, which purports to be about Shirley Temple and mostly isn't. Digressions abound; a good 100 pages could have been cut to the immeasurable improvement of the final product.

The author's much-discussed research seems to have let him down. How could a native speaker of Chinese, with a PhD in English, *not* acknowledge the immense semantic differences between the two languages, and the consequent difficulties an uneducated speaker would have learning one or the other? (I'm a translator myself, and I know fine and well Chinese is beyond me--I couldn't even manage Russian.) We are repeatedly told that Chang Apana was illiterate, in the sense of being unable to either read nor write in either Chinese or English--so how could he "autograph" Charlie Chan novels for the tourists? The author speaks of the Ku Klux Klan as being "long defunct" in 1915; this only goes to show how lopsided all that historical research was! If he truly believes that, he obviously didn't consult any African American sources, of which there are many. The author refers to one of the earliest Charlie Chan novels by the mistaken title "Behind the Curtain" on the page where the cover is reproduced. Anyone who gives the photo half a glance will see that the real title is *Behind That Curtain Ouch*. The author speaks of anyone born after 1964 as a member of Generation X, a term which wasn't even invented until the 90s and at that time referred to the children born in the 1980s. I remember when Charlie Chan and the Chan Clan came out in about 1972, and we certainly weren't GenXers then! *We won't even discuss the author's inclusion of one of his own poems (and a plug for the book it comes from), a propos of absolutely nothing.*

Now let us turn to the writing itself. Oh dear oh my. English is the author's second language; very good. But where were the proofreaders/editors? *Prophecy* is a noun. *Prophesy* is a verb. They are spelled differently, pronounced differently, and have different meanings. Neither the author nor his proofreaders seem to be aware of that. He says at one point that someone "was frank to admit" how he obtained a job. Whatever happened to the adverb "frankly"? Or even "openly"?

And then there are the similies. The text is larded with the most far-fetched, painful examples I've run into since I trudged through Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*. A gambling den is described as being "*as empty as a last-year's bird's nest.*" "*The last rays of the sun burned the edges of the clouds as hot as prairie fire. Over the western horizons the sun hung like a Chinese lantern about to be extinguished.*" (Oh really? My first question, as an English literature tutor, would be: "Does a Chinese lantern hang differently when it's about to be extinguished?") Even in the last chapter of the book we are not set free of horrendous similies. There, we are told in the search for Apana's grave that the number 8 was "*like a broken 8-ball that could tell no fortune.*" Now, I know the number 8 is auspicious to many Asian people, but I was unaware until now that it went around telling people's fortunes. In an attempt to contrast the Chan character with the accepted noir detective, he speaks of "apple pie and a spicy chop suey." Except that chop suey is not real Chinese food (being an adaptation of Chinese cuisine for the American masses) and both Charlie Chan and Chang Apana were Chinese; also, anyone who's ever eaten it knows that chop suey is not spicy!

I had picked this book up out of curiosity, but by the end I was struggling to finish it. Many would not bother, and I couldn't fault them. If the padding had been cut and the writing tightened up, it would have been a sure 4 stars. As it stands, it's a shaky 3.

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## John says

Thorough to a fault, this book will tell you everything you could ever want to know (and more) about the

honorable detective, Charlie Chan: his real-life origins, his literary adventures, his prolific success in Hollywood, the racial controversies he engendered, and the social context underpinning all of the above. Some people will find the extent of Yunte Huang's research rather excessive, but lovers of history are unlikely to mind all the various tangents and rabbit trails that the book explores. Thankfully, Huang is the kind of writer who can make just about any topic interesting, and the only parts of the book that I found dull were the two or three chapters in which he attempts to follow in the footsteps, geographically speaking, of Charlie Chan's creators.

This book casts a very wide net, and you couldn't ask for a more detailed or astute examination of a fictional character. It's so good, in fact, that you don't even need to know a thing about Charlie Chan in order to enjoy it (I speak from personal experience here). Yunte Huang also does an admirable job of discussing the reasons why some people see Mr. Chan as an offensive racial stereotype, and why the character's legacy has lost much of its luster in recent years. Yet, Mr. Huang also recognizes the positive impact Charlie Chan has had on American culture, and he admirably refuses to throw Chan under the bus simply to appease the god of political correctness.

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## **Sketchbook says**

Another "best-seller" that always verges on being Interesting.

The Chinese-b. author, now a US professor, comingles his personal odyssey with that of Chang Apana, the #1 Law & Order man (also Chinese) who tackled opium gangs, gambling dens and assorted thugs in Hawaii in the early 20thC. Costarring is Earl Derr Biggers, the American who created the iconic Charlie Chan. Biggers, who grew up in Ohio, began writing stories when weekly zines w fiction flooded the US. He visited Hawaii once, then allegedly read about Apana in a news clip at the NYPL. His first Chan mystery appeared in 1925. Chan's pidgen English and fortune cookie lingo made him an instant hit.

Giving this slight triangle weight is its history of Chinese immigration - once called America's "Chinese Problem" - along with accounts of ethnic violence and bias. Who knew that yonks ago Hawaii had a health issue: leprosy. (Think about that the next time you sniff a leis). Legal mouth Clarence Darrow stumped his last court drama there -- and lost in 1932. (the Thomas Massie case). Darrow was on the wrong side.

The author explores these digressions because, frankly, he has scant material on his "stars." So there's a lot of padding. His visits to the homes of Biggers & Apana are just blather. He juggles a plethora of facts and his researcher lets him down, kerplunk. He pulls in "The Manchurian Candidate" (for no reason), mentions the actors and leaves out Laurence Harvey who played IT. As Chan once said: "Wrong pew, perhaps, but maybe correct church."

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## Cheryl says

This book was eye-opening on many levels. Not only does it cover the Hawaiian and Chinese American history generally, it brings those strands together with early twentieth century American literature and popular culture. While some reviewers have criticized the book for being broken into sections, the final impression is one of amazing connections among all these aspects of the character "Charlie Chan," and how truth and fiction weave together. The life of Chang Apana, the Chinese detective, is truly amazing in and of itself, and Huang's biography of him blasts through all the naive ideas that I had long held about Hawaiian history, and made my understanding of it much richer as a result. The fact that Huang also connects Chang Apana's origins in Guangdong with the leaders of early Republican China, many of whom spent time in Hawaii while Chang was fighting crime there, highlights how small a world it was. Huang doesn't flinch from exploring all the ugly racist issues of that time in American history, particularly the bizarre prejudices that made yellowface in film "normal," but ultimately he contends that the character Charlie Chan is more than just a racist caricature. Werner Oland (a Swedish-American) as Charlie Chan was one of the most popular film characters in 1930s China, and Chang Apana himself loved watching Charlie Chan movies--the author himself discovered the detective when he bought some old books at a yard sale and became a great fan.

Being a fan of classic mysteries, I am inspired to read them for myself, because I only know Charlie Chan as a cultural reference. Ironically, it is difficult to find the original books to encounter Chan for oneself. Earl Biggers' Chan mysteries aren't available any more at the local public libraries (even in Pasadena, where Biggers wrote them!), and only the first one is available out of copyright through archive.org ... so I will file a later report on it.

The big question for all mystery fans that Yunte Huang's book forces is this: are we allowed to appropriate detective characters (who by the rules of the genre must be "others" in some fashion) and refashion them to suit our contemporary needs and cultural visions, even if their authors could only see them through the lens of their own place, time and (often) prejudice?

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## Kathryn says

I wasn't too sure I'd like a book about a B actor, but this book came highly recommended by Bookmarks. And I always enjoy the books they highly recommend! This book was much more than the story of the actor and the movies I remembered. This book looked at the Chinese who came to this country, why and how they came, and what affect they had on the history of the US. The character of Charlie Chan was based on a real detective in the early 20th century in Honolulu. The book examined this detective, the author who wrote the original Charlie Chan books, and the Hollywood productions that followed.

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## Taylor Ramirez says

This is another book I have to read for my history class, I'm not reading the entire book just sections of it. We've been learning about the prejudices towards people and the civil rights movements. Instead of looking at the typical racism that blacks suffered we're looking at what the Chinese went through.

“The winter of 1865-66 was particularly brutal, with a record forty-four snowstorms that piled snowdrifts more than sixty feet high. Avalanches, a constant threat on the job, buried camps and crews. Not until the following spring would the thawing corpses be found, standing upright, ‘their cold hands griping shoves and picks and their mouths twisted in frozen terror.’”—page 123

Jesus. That’s a horrible image.

All this racism is really uncomfortable.

The problem with this book is, when it’s not talking about the outrageous racism, it gets pretty boring. All the stuff about the actors past is beyond dull.

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