Juneteenth: A Novel (review)

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Book Reviews

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Most readers are by now familiar with at least the broad outlines of the story surrounding the posthumous publication of Ralph Ellison's novel, *Juneteenth*. Begun even before Ellison had published *Invisible Man* in 1952, the second novel ballooned to over 2,000 manuscript pages, defying Ellison's efforts to give it coherent shape before he died of pancreatic cancer in 1994. Both sheer ambition and the monumental task of following one of the most revered novels of the twentieth century stood in the way of Ellison's writing this second book. Further confounding him was the now-famous fire in 1967 at his summer home in Plainfield, Massachusetts that reportedly destroyed over 360 pages of an almost finished text. Thus a novel that presumably was only a short hop from publication then had to be reconstructed almost from scratch.

Ellison had published excerpts from the work-in-progress, beginning with the segment "And Hickman Arrives," which appeared in Saul Bellow's *The Noble Savage* in 1960, and concluding in 1969 with "Nighttalk" in the *Quarterly Review of Literature*. It was partly on the promise of these segments, but mostly on the testimony of close friends and associates who had read, or heard Ellison read, other portions of the manuscript, that Ellison's fans were led to believe that we were soon to see a sequel worthy of *Invisible Man*. That Ellison died before completing the novel was one of the biggest literary disappointments of the past half century—a disappointment that has not been appreciably assuaged by the publication of *Juneteenth*.

The novel, much smaller than the voluminous text on which Ellison was working (the full text will appear in a subsequent scholarly edition) was pulled together by Ellison's literary executor John Callahan at the request of Ellison's widow. Callahan, who had previously brought out editions of Ellison's essays and short stories,

both of which have been useful in filling in Ellison's literary biography, faced a daunting task in editing the text down to something manageable. As Callahan writes in his "Afterword: A Note to Scholars," his chore was "uneasily procrustean," forcing him to chop off narrative "limbs" in order to fit some portion of the text onto the bed of a "single, coherent, continuous work" (365).

The result is a novel that does, at the least, display some sense of coherence. At its center are two men. The first is the Reverend Alonzo Hickman, a jazz trombone player turned Baptist preacher. The second is Senator Adam Sunraider, aka Bliss, a former child preacher of ambiguous racial background, whom Hickman has raised from infancy in hopes of making him a preacher. But the young Bliss, upon discovering that his mother might be white, ends up rejecting his past to become, first, an itinerant filmmaker and finally a race-baiting Senator from a northern state.

The novel itself commences with Hickman and a portion of his congregation arriving in Washington D.C. in an unsuccessful attempt to see Sunraider before he is shot on the floor of the Senate by a would-be assassin. Hearing Hickman's voice before he loses consciousness, Sunraider calls for the Reverend, who sits by his bedside after he is taken to the hospital. As the Senator drifts in and out of consciousness, the two, sometimes together and sometimes separately, engage in extended reminiscences in which they try to piece together their strange pasts. The reminiscences are windy, preachy, and surreal, sometimes going on without giving any heed to the setting, whether in the past or the present.

The plot that does emerge through this often clumsy retrospective structure is outlandishly Faulknerian, and it may not be a sin here to give away some of its details, not only because the narrative creates little in the way of tension or suspense but also because the novel's events appear to have been selected not so much for their storytelling possibilities as for their symbolic resonance. Referring to Sunraider, Hickman says at one point, "There lies the nation on its groaning bed"—just in case we've missed the fact that Ellison is writing a fable of the nation's racial history (316).

Hickman, like "the Negro," as Ellison collectively referred to black Americans, has played midwife to Bliss, both literally and spiritually. Bliss represents the Negro's spiritual charge. Born of a white woman whose false testimony against Hickman's brother led to the lynching of the latter, Bliss is given to Hickman by the woman in an act of atonement devolving onto Hickman an initially unwanted responsibility that becomes potentially redemptive. Can Hickman raise this at least half-white, possibly all-white, child to redeem the bloody past of violence and lies? Hickman gives up his life as a jazz musician and becomes a preacher in order to try to bring this about, only to have it apparently fail.

Not only has Bliss become a venomously racist politician, but along the way he has rejected religion and denied the son he fathered with a black woman who ultimately hunts his father down bent on killing him—shades of *Absalom, Absalom!* The twofold mystery that the novel worries over is how could Bliss so egregiously betray the black "family" that so lovingly nurtured him and how could Hickman, knowing of Bliss's base betrayal, still shed tears upon seeing the Senator gunned down?

For readers of Ellison's essays, the story sounds more than a little familiar. That the Senator denies his past even as his every gesture mimics Hickman clearly identifies him as the white "hypocrite" of whom Ellison wrote in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," the man "who boasts of a pure identity while standing with his humanity exposed to the world."[1] And Bliss's discovery during a Juneteenth Day service (the anniversary of the arrival in Texas of news—eighteen months overdue—of the Emancipation Proclamation; hence the name that Callahan selected for the novel) that his mother might be white and that the blacks around him are fearful of what the white woman who comes to claim him might represent, suggests the national pathology of scapegoating that Ellison returned to repeatedly in *Shadow and Act*.

The problem with these echoes from Ellison's social criticism is that the voice ventriloquized is not that of Ellison at his most probing, but rather at his most stentorian. Had he lived

longer, Ellison perhaps could have muted and shaded his text to make it embody rather than announce its truths. But there are reasons for doubt.

For as I read through the sermons and descriptions of sermons that make up the bulk of *Juneteenth,* I had a sense not only that this had been attempted elsewhere but also that it had actually been accomplished. And then I recalled the work of the late Leon Forrest, whose first novel, *There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden* (1973), combined the sermonic and the cinematic to construct a neo-Faulknerian world based in Chicago. None other than Ellison himself wrote the foreword to Forrest's first novel, marveling: "How furiously eloquent is this man Forrest's prose, how zestful his jazz-like invention, his parody, his reference to the classics and commonplaces of literature, folklore, tall-tale and slum-street jive!"[2]

These are words one would like to have written about *Juneteenth.* That one can't may indicate Ellison's awareness that the grail he sought had already been snatched by a writer who had successfully wrestled with the demons of America's racial history and then had gone on in an all-too-brief career to publish three more novels, even as we awaited *Invisible Man*'s elusive sequel.

Note

1. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), 109.

2. Ralph Ellison, forword to *There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden,* by Leon Forrest (Chicago: Another Chicago Press, 1973), n.p.