

Alex Haley and the Books that Changed a Nation

Alex Haley wrote the two most influential books on African-American history in the second half of the twentieth century. Each of his books sold about six million copies, and the films made from them were viewed by the masses of Americans. Haley sold more books than any other by an African-American author and all but a few white authors. He shaped the racial sensibilities of more Americans than any other writer, black or white. Although he was not himself a black nationalist, he produced works that gave more texture and substance to black nationalism than any other writing. Haley and his work deserve to be recognized as seminal influences on black identity and American thought about race, and for that reason I have written a biography of him.

My only previous attempt at biography was about Booker T. Washington, the black educator. There I was struck time and again by the Tuskegee man's preoccupation with shaping how whites thought about blacks. It struck me that Alex Haley had a big influence on that same matter—the black image in the white mind—in fact a greater influence on it than Washington.

I didn't realize it when I decided to write the biography, but Haley and I had some things in common. We each spent our adolescence near Huntsville, Alabama, Haley a generation before I came along. We both were born to a southern storytelling tradition, and each of us loved the act of spinning a yarn. We both felt most comfortable in the South even though each of us rejected much about it. Each of us was shaped by a maternal grandmother who had made it her responsibility to pass to her grandson the family history. I followed the advice to write about what I knew, which in my case was the turmoil of the South in the 1960s. Haley's entire writing life—in essence, all his articles and books—was an exploration of his autobiography, even when on the surface he was addressing some other life, even Malcolm X's.

But there were big differences. My books sold a few thousand, his in the millions. Indeed, *Roots* sold more books in one day than I have in thirty years of writing. I have never experienced celebrity, and he lived with it most of his adult life, with all its pleasures and its pitfalls. But I have enjoyed the

unconditional love of my mother to this day, and Haley did not have that from his, at least not for long. We each grew up in a white-supremacist society, but I was on the side that got all its benefits, he on the other, with all the demeaning experiences inherent there. I hope that readers of this book will decide I am an empathetic interpreter of Haley's life, because I should be.

The Autobiography of Malcolm X gave millions of Americans a look into the inner world of blacks in twentieth-century ghettos and especially the anger that life there engendered. The book made Malcolm into an icon of black manliness and resistance to oppression. Haley's rendering of Malcolm created an archetype that challenged the loving, nonviolent black male personified by Martin Luther King, Jr. After his assassination in 1965, Malcolm's influence in the popular imagination grew steadily, enabled always by the autobiography that Haley had created.

Roots recast American slavery and the black family in an entirely different light from what they were before he wrote. Haley retrieved the African past of black Americans for all people, making the experience of African-Americans complete in a way that it had never been before. He created memorable characters that live today in the minds of those who read *Roots* or who saw the television productions. He opened the eyes of millions of whites to the hard realities of black life over the generations. He spurred a national movement of Americans to seek their family origins. Along the way, Haley taught us that our family experience actually composed the nation's history.

Roots fell into a tradition of treatments of American race and slavery that worked together to form a "Popular Epic," a tradition that had gone unperceived among intellectuals until Haley's work appeared. The other books were Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Thomas Dixon's *The Leopard's Spots* (and its thematic echo, *The Clansman*), and Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. In 1979, the literary critic Leslie Fiedler explained this "Popular Epic" as "rooted in demonic dreams of race, sex and violence which have long haunted us Americans," and which determined the people's historical understandings of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, emancipation, and the Ku Klux Klan.

Each of the four books had clear didactic purposes: Stowe taught the evil of slavery, Dixon the mistake of emancipation and Reconstruction, and Mitchell the degradation of southerners in the Civil War. All four were success stories. Uncle Tom won a spiritual victory over his oppressors, and Dixon and Mitchell had seen to southern whites' successful recapture of their region from Carpetbaggers and evil blacks. Haley's family was "victorious over slavery," a complete revision of the myths inherent in the popular epic. Haley wanted blacks to have "a Garden of Eden and Innocence to look back upon," and he imagined one in the village of Juffure in The Gambia, the home of his ancestor Kunte Kinte. One scholar thought *Roots* provided a mythology of heroic blacks so compelling that it would be treated as a kind of "Black Family Bible." Another thought Haley's greatest contribution was Kunta Kinte: "an unreconstructed Noble African" but "less a portrait of Haley's first American ancestor, legendary or real, than of Malcolm X as Haley perceived him." By the time *Roots* appeared, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* had sold six million copies, and Malcolm was a heroic figure for many Americans.

To make Kunta so heroic, Haley had to depart from historical realism. He barely acknowledged the role of black Africans in the slave trade, leaving whites entirely responsible for its brutality. Fiedler scoffed at Haley's handling of the sexual aspects of the popular epic. Haley made no mention of Mandinka polygamy, and he kept Kunta a virgin until he was thirty-nine—both of which strained the credulity of his narrative—although it was another possible analogy to Malcolm, who claimed to have been celibate for twelve years.

Most of Haley's audience was white, and he affected millions of us. A professor at a northern college had assigned *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to students, and during the 1960s and early 1970s, black students dismissed the book. Some refused to turn in papers on it, and one woman threw the book at his feet and stomped from the class. Often black students refused to speak about it at all and at other times, discussions of the novel "reached near riot proportions." But under the influence of *Roots*, students became more understanding of Tom. "One must put the book in the context of its time,"

many students now said. “Those who talk of ‘Tomming’ have missed the point.”

Fiedler wrote that what distinguished all popular art from high art was its ability to move from one medium to another. Hundreds of “Uncle Tom” theatrical presentations toured the United States and the world for at least two generations after the novel appeared. Thomas Dixon saw a “Tom” play and resolved to challenge Stowe in “Birth of a Nation.” Even more Americans acquired a view of slavery and race from “Gone With the Wind.” But the biggest crowd yet would have theirs shaped by *Roots* on television. One hundred thirty million people watched “Roots” on television in 1977, and two years later one hundred ten million watched its sequel, “Roots the Next Generation,” which carried the story of Haley’s family, and by extension that of all African-Americans, through the 1960s.

Despite the publishing success and the celebrity that came with it, controversy enveloped Haley soon after the publication of *Roots* and bothered him the rest of his life. First came reports that Haley’s account of Kunta Kinte’s life was essentially made up—and Haley’s reports of how he learned about his ancestor also fabricated. Then two writers accused Haley of plagiarism, and Haley was indeed apparently guilty of copying from one book. Haley was castigated personally and accused of malfeasance as a writer. The controversy hurt Haley’s professional reputation and to some extent undermined the influence his works on American culture.

Roots was mostly supported by public opinion in the face of doubters about its authenticity. Haley was widely liked; he was a genial, generous man. He enjoyed great popularity locally in Knoxville after he moved here in 1986. But in the late 1980s and 1990s, the admiration for his writing dissipated as memories faded and both “Roots” miniseries went on the shelf. A few detractors kept after Haley after his death in early 1992. The opening of his papers at the University of Tennessee library probably was the prompt for an exposé written by the journalist Philip Nobile, published a year after Haley’s death. It was a full-scale assault on Haley’s career and character, drawing together a compendium of allegations of professional malfeasance—essentially all that had been made over the years and then some. Nobile

called *Roots* “a hoax, a literary painted mouse, a Piltdown of genealogy, a pyramid of bogus research,” and a fraud successful only because a “massive perjury” cover it up. Nobile called *Roots* “an elegant and complex make-it-up-as-you-go-along scam.” He repeated the charges about inaccuracy in Haley’s Gambian research, and he found a transcript of a recording made during Haley’s first visit to Juffure that contradicted Haley’s account of it in *Roots*. Nobile claimed that an editor had actually written much of ROOTS, and he implied that the same editor had written much of MALCOM X.

Nobile’s attack mattered in weighing the historical significance of Haley. Loud accusations of lying and theft have to be addressed before a more balanced assessment can emerge. Nobile’s article registered with academics. Few professors countenanced that Haley had misrepresented facts. In 1999 his friend Richard Marius wrote the entry on Haley for the *Tennessee Encyclopedia*. He called Nobile’s article “a devastating final shot” at Haley. It was easier to ignore Haley than to sort out the details of his alleged wrongs. Haley was left out of the canon of black American literature, the 1997 *Norton Anthology of African-American Literature*, a work of almost 3000 pages of literary excerpts but none from *Roots*. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the editor, thus excluded a work that sold more than any other work by an African American, that arguably touched the racial sensibilities of more Americans than any other, and that recast popular understanding of slavery more than any other. Gates said “most of us feel it’s highly unlikely that Alex actually found the village from which his ancestors sprang. *Roots* is a work of the imagination rather than strict historical scholarship.” That was an unintended justification for including it in the canon of, because all works in the anthology were, after all, works of imagination. Gates paid a silent tribute to Haley with a television series on the genealogy of celebrities, in which the lineage of black celebrities was traced. The show was so popular that Gates created another series, “Faces of America,” which traced the genealogy of white celebrities. It might have been Haley’s fate to do these show had he lived. They might not have emerged had Haley not done *Roots*.

But there were occasionally open tributes. One came from Haley's friend Lamar Alexander, who in 2013 at the second inauguration of Barack Obama complimented the peaceful reaffirmation of Obama's leadership, even as the senator knew that a large segment of whites in his home state expressed their hatred of the first black president. He said: "The late Alex Haley, the author of 'Roots,' lived his life by these six words: 'Find the good and praise it.'"