

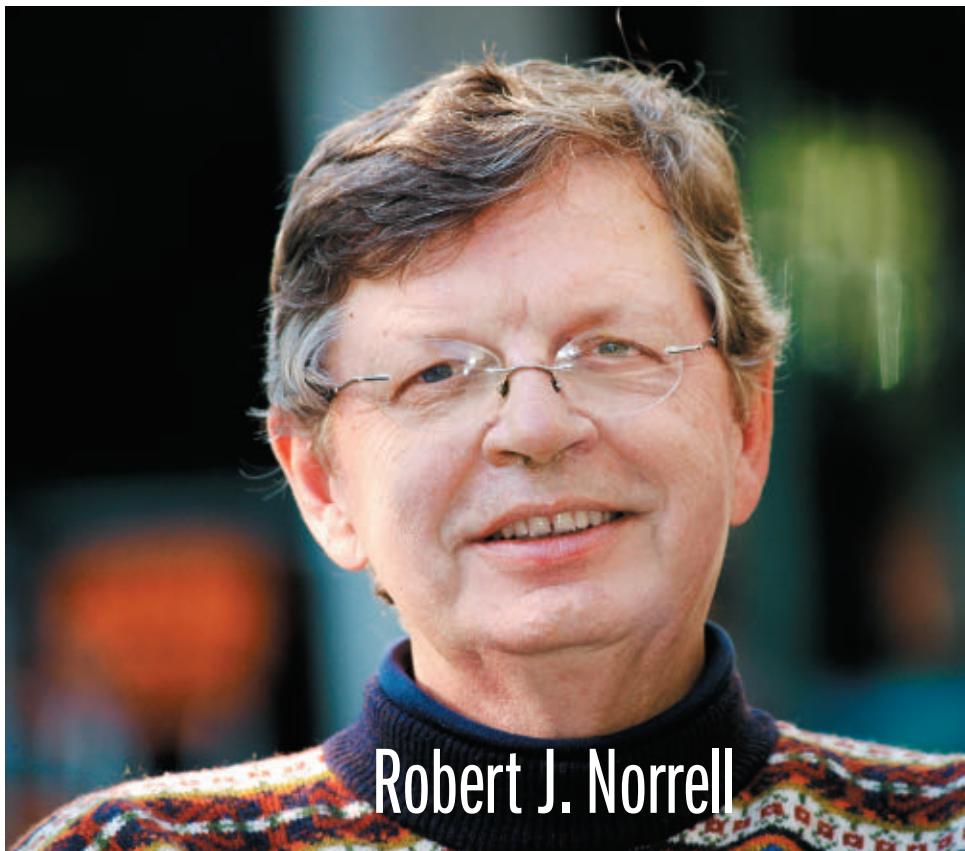
THE TANGLED ROOTS OF 'ROOTS'

By EUGENE HOLLEY JR.

If you were asked to name the most prominent African-American writers of the 1960s and '70s, James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison would easily come to mind. But in his new biography, *Alex Haley and the Books That Changed a Nation* (St. Martin's, Nov.), historian Robert J. Norrell posits that Haley should be included in that pantheon.

"Haley wrote the two most influential books in African-American history in the second half of the 20th century," Norrell notes, referring to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965) and *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976). "Each of his books sold at least six million copies, and the films made from them were viewed and appreciated by the masses of America. Haley sold more books than any other African-American author and all but a few white ones." But the glow of Haley's success was dimmed by charges of copyright infringement and historical fraud, along with his turbulent personal life

Norrell, a 63-year-old professor of American history at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, has written a number of books about the intrigues and intricacies of race, including *The House I Live In: Race in the American Century*—a narrative history of race in America that includes an early appraisal of Malcolm X—and the biography *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington*, an examination of Washington's controversial policies and methods of African-



Robert J. Norrell

American uplift. Norrell's studies of the impact that Washington and Malcolm X had on black life led him to Alex Haley.

"*The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, more than any other writing in American history, shaped the idea of Black Nationalism and made it a much more broad-based movement in American life," Norrell says by phone from his home in Asheville, N.C. "And *Roots* was the most important work in reshaping America's understanding of our slave history, and the African background." Norrell conducted research on Haley at the Schomburg Center for Black Culture, the Library of Congress, and at the University of Tennessee, which houses the papers of Haley and of Anne Romaine, a folksinger who was Haley's official biographer. "She interviewed dozens and dozens of Haley's friends and associates," Norrell says. "And she had Haley's full cooperation. But she died at the age of 55 [in 1995]."

Norrell paints a well-rounded picture of Haley's family life in Haley's home-

town, Henning, Tenn., with his father, Simon, a graduate of Alabama A&M University; his mother, Bertha, a musician and homemaker; and his brother, George, a lawyer and diplomat who served in the Kansas state Senate as a Republican in 1964. His grandmother's stirring stories of his ancestors—including Chicken George, Kizzy, Tom Murray, and Kunta Kinte—would later form the basis for *Roots*.

In the book, Norrell recounts Haley's departure from college before graduation (much to his father's chagrin), and his 20-year enlistment in the Coast Guard, where he served as a cook and became a writer, penning love letters to the girlfriends of his semiliterate fellow seamen. Norrell chronicles Haley's early struggles and triumphs as a writer, including published work in *Reader's Digest* and the *Saturday Evening Review*, as well as *Playboy* (compiled in *Alex Haley: The Playboy Interviews*), which featured his first interview with Malcolm X. That interview was expanded to form the 1965 autobi-

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ography, which Haley cowrote. “The book gave millions of Americans a look into the world of blacks in 20th-century ghettos, and especially the anger that life engendered,” Norrell writes. “The book made Malcolm into an icon of black manliness and resistance to oppression.”

Norrell’s assessment of Haley’s relationship with Malcolm X is contrary to the late Manning Marable’s assertion, in his biography *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*, that Haley was a moderate conservative “out to hustle” the former Nation of Islam spokesman by making him more amenable

Semitic, antiwhite stuff. Marable made Haley out to be far more politically conservative than he was.”

Haley’s literary and financial success after the publication of the *Autobiography* was marred by tax problems, failed marriages, and difficulties with his children. But during the black-pride era of ’70s, Haley took the stories of his ancestors and published *Roots* in 1976. The book that claims to trace his lineage back to West Africa, brought Kunta Kinte and his descendants to life, and was made into a pioneering TV miniseries that gripped the nation when it aired in 1977.

But some questioned the authenticity of *Roots*. There were two high-profile charges of copyright infringement. Novelist and educator Margaret Walker-Alexander sued Haley in 1988, claiming that he copied from her 1966 novel, *Jubilee*, which featured many of the same themes as *Roots* (the case was dismissed). Folklorist and novelist Harold Courlander sued Haley in 1978 and claimed that Haley had lifted dozens of passages from his 1967 novel *The African*. The case was eventually settled in Courlander’s favor. “It doesn’t make Haley look very good. But that doesn’t mean that *Roots* isn’t the most important book for shaping Americans’ understanding of slavery.”

Then there was a devastating piece in the *Village Voice*, “Uncovering Roots,” in 1993, one year after Haley, by journalist Philip Nobile. “Nobile exaggerates Haley’s misdeeds,” Norrell emphatically states. “[Nobile claims] that there were 80 or 90 instances of copying, when there were only three or four instances. And he wrote, ‘Haley hid the fact that somebody else wrote most of book,’ referring to Murray Fisher, Haley’s editor at *Playboy*. Well, I came across evidence that made it clear that some of the earlier parts of the book probably have more of the authorial voice of Fisher than Haley. But the truth is: we don’t really know.”

And where does Norrell weigh in on the controversy? “Haley had incorporated a lot of academic research without really citing it,” he says. “His work on

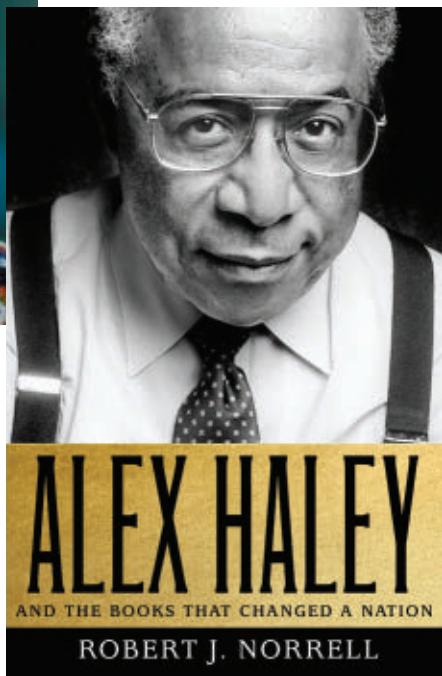
the treatment of American slavery is pretty accurate. Now, he misrepresented a lot of the African background. But the important thing about the book was that it said to American readers that African-American people have an African past that they don’t have to be ashamed of. I thought it was a very substantial contribution.”

Studying the political and social nuances of race in America has interested Norrell since his childhood. Born in Huntsville, Ala., he grew up in a family where such matters hit home. “My parents were on opposite sides of the civil rights movement,” he says. “My mother was pretty liberal, and my father was a segregationist. I leaned toward my mother. And I came out of high school in 1970, knowing that race was the biggest issue in society. The books that made the biggest influence on me were Dan Carter’s *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* and Ted Rosengarten’s *All God’s Dangers: The Life of Nat Shaw*, about an Alabama tenant farmer. All of those books brought a vivid picture of the past.”

Norrell earned his B.A. and Ph.D. in history at the University of Tennessee. His dissertation was published in 1985 as *Reaping the Whirlwind: The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee* and won the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award the following year. He’s authored and coedited more than 20 scholarly articles and 10 books. His last book, *Eden Rise*, is a novel about a white family living in the immediate aftermath of the famous Selma Civil Rights march of 1965.

The impact of *Malcolm X* and *Roots*, regardless of their flaws, can be seen in full force in the 20th and now in the 21st century, in Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s *Between The World And Me*, even in Henry Louis Gates’s PBS series, *Finding Our Roots*. Robert J. Norrell’s *Alex Haley* will provide insights into a complex writer and black historical figure, and will enlighten readers on his life as well as the craft of writing. ■

Eugene Holley Jr. contributes to Down Beat, Wax Poetics, and Hot House Jazz Guide.



to a fearful white population, framing him as a late convert to internationalism after his pilgrimage to Mecca, where he saw the diversity of races peacefully gathered together.

“I knew [Marable] at Tuskegee Institute, when I was there to do research on my dissertation,” Norrell recalls. “He’s a lovely, charming guy. But it was clear to me that Haley and Malcolm grew to really like each other. He wasn’t trying to exploit Malcolm in the way Marable suggested. Haley was very careful of how he presented Malcolm, so as to make him perhaps less objectionable, with the anti-