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Passionate, enormously talented, and, at times, seemingly larger than life, Paul Robeson lived one of the great lives of the twentieth century. Martin Duberman's classic biography, reissued by The New Press, offers a monumental and powerfully affecting portrait of one of this century's most notable performers, political radicals, and champions of racial equality.

Paul Robeson Details

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From Reader Review Paul Robeson for online ebook

fleegan says

Spoiler alert: THIS BOOK IS SO GOOD.

I was kind of worried that the length of this book was going to get to me, but oh man, this book is so good. Paul Robeson's life was interesting for sure, never a dull moment, so any biography on him is going to be good. Add to that Martin Duberman's great writing, and you've got a book that is a total package of interesting AND entertaining.

If you look at this book and think it's probably too long or possibly boring, I encourage you to give it a shot. Paul Robeson's life is fascinating from start to finish. He's the son of a former slave/preacher, a sports star, a singer, a movie star, and an amazing civil rights activist. The HUAC ruined his career, but he still fought for his beliefs. He was incredible!

Do yourself a favor and read this book.

Richard says

Very detailed bio of Paul Robeson. Sometimes redundant. Hard to write an uninteresting biography about such a fascinating subject. I can now appreciate how things have changed and how some things are reverting to the bad ol' days.

Alex Rogers says

Not as interesting as it sounded - too personal a history, or search for a history - I'd have preferred a more conventional biography of a fascinating man

Naeem says

It can seem daunting to open this book of 550 pages of text and 200 pages of notes. But it goes quickly because of Duberman's pacing. And because Robeson is the greatest man I never knew.

Duberman means to be exhaustive so the details are often overwhelming – the famous people who crossed his life, the ideas he negotiated, the political turmoil that he surveyed and in which he often intervened, his athletic, musical, and acting life, his travels around the world, his linguistic skills, the changes in his singing life, his numerous romantic and sexual affairs, his commitment to black people across the diaspora, to Thirdworlders of all stripes, and to socialist principles – all there in every chapter. You can take what you need from the details.

Reading the book made me angry. It's an old anger – one that emerges from not knowing history, and from the distinct feeling of being denied a proper understanding of it. Why is it that I am well into my adulthood before reading Stravrianos' Global Rift to learn about the Haitian Revolution? Why do I have to read C.L.R. James' Black Jacobins to learn of the simultaneity of the Haitian and French Revolutions? Why do I have to read Michel-Rolph Trouillot's Silencing the Past to learn that the blind spots in my history are systematic?

Of course they are. Of course, I never knew of Robeson. Robeson's life is systematically denied to us. That stands as a bald assertion. But this book makes it a truth that stands out like a three-story statue at the end of a wide boulevard. You can't miss it.

Anger of a different type also suffuses me. Robeson was systematically destroyed by the U.S. government (and U.S. culture) who did all it could: attempts to harm him physically, constant surveillance, smear campaigns, denial of his passport, and the very successful effort to brand him a communist – a claim he never denied but one he could not affirm without being damaged. If Robeson were a country, the US did to him what it did to Guatemala, or Chile, or Iran, or the Congo, or Panama, or Cuba, or...all of them.

His wife, Essie, is a remarkable character in her own right. As soon as she met him, she recognized Robeson's skills in moving people. She made it her mission to protect his life, his work, and his reputation. She had her own life as well, as a scholar, a novelist, and a linguist.

On a personal note, if you asked me which Black USian most shaped my childhood and our family life, it would not be MLK or Malcolm X. These two were abstractions, names that during my adolescence stood in for vague ideas. But Muhammad Ali, he seemed real. Our entire family would get up at any hour to watch him fight, no matter where he or we were traveling in the world. He seemed to fight for us.

Today, I think the heretical thought, "Ali seems small next to Robeson." An assertion that I don't know I dare believe. The comparison may not be apt as the burdens on Robeson were far greater. "Far greater?" you might exclaim. Indeed. Read the book. Then we can argue.

Here is a passage from page 543:

"As the days and years of being out of the public eye lengthened and world inexorably changed its shape, as Kennedy gave way to Johnson, then Nixon in the White House (and sectors of the white working class rallied to the banner of George Wallace, whose antiblack campaign amassed 10 million votes), as SNCC declined into warring sects and then disappeared, and the police brutality dispersed poor people encamped in protest of their plight on federal property, Robeson became a faded memory to one generation and an unknown name to another. People over forty wondered what had ever become of him (the rumor spread that he had gone into self-exile in Russia), and many people under forty had no idea he had ever existed."

Jeff says

Superb, opinionated biography of an extraordinarily complex and talented man. The book opened my eyes on a man and world I knew little about -- not to mention Robeson's equally extraordinary wife. I don't see Robeson's life as the tragedy that some do; I think his accomplishments and strivings are as powerful a

testament to human endeavor as his more famous contemporaries.

Drew says

There are two things that undermined this biography for me: The periodic swipes at Robeson's by-all-reports impressive wife Essie and the lack of enthusiasm for Robeson's contributions as an artist, except for the one chapter on "Othello." Complaints aside, here is a gripping tale of an important civil rights activist who was constantly under attack by the US government for simply telling the truth about American racism. I knew Robeson's name but not the breadth of his accomplishments and thank this book for making me a bit wiser on that front.

Creolecat says

More 4.5. I feel as if I climbed Mt. Everest, and sometimes without a rope. Anything you *ever* wanted to know about Robeson is here, and more. And sometimes, that's not a good thing. But I have to hand it to Martin Duberman; he did his research. The bio is 500+ pages, in addition, there's 200+ pages of acknowledgements, people who were interviewed, and copious notes. In bios like this, I sometimes take things with a grain of salt (oh who am I kidding, I always do!). But Duberman backed his stuff up. I also have to admit, I did not always agree with Robeson, but I respect what he tried to do and his convictions. Now Essie, his wife, she took me on a rollercoaster. To put it bluntly, she pissed me off from the get go. I had to tell myself, just give her a chance. Robeson did some crappy things to her, and I felt for her. But the fact is she really rubbed me the wrong way. She did do some good things, I won't dispute that, but someday I really do have to read her bio so I can maybe resolve my mixed feelings toward her.

John says

Amazing detail
amazing Life
in a land of intolerance
so much to overcome

John says

I can't think of a life more singularly suited for the large screen. But if the morass of pusillanimity otherwise known as Hollywood has anything to do about it, I'm not going to hold my breath. So for now we'll just have to make do with Duberman's biography. And lucky us. With this captivating and exhaustively researched piece of cultural restoration, Duberman has given us an accounting that is destined to become a classic. The notes – yes, the notes – are as engrossing as the text and I found myself following along and underlining. Robeson was one of the 20th century's most notable political progressives, performers and intellectuals – a titanic vessel of erudition and appetites. He was a lawyer (graduating with Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas), a holder of 15 varsity letters in four different sports, fluent in over 25 languages, played professional football while becoming valedictorian of his class, his run as Othello is the

longest running Shakespeare on Broadway and he maintained a concert career that sold out shows in Vienna, Amsterdam, Prague, Budapest, Nairobi, Berlin, Moscow, New York, Paris – to name a few. The title-holder for one of the largest FBI files on record, Robeson's friendships ranged from Sergei Eisenstein to Pete Seeger to Indira Gandhi to Linus Pauling to Harry Belafonte to Zero Mostel to Coretta Scott King to Leonard Bernstein to Ramsey Clark – to name a few. It's sizable (with notes and index it clocks in at about 800 pages) but this riveting narrative never loses its energy. This is jet-propelled history – and in Duberman's confident hands the voyage is as smooth as ever.

Kusaimamekirai says

“Every artist, every scientist, every writer must decide now where he stands. He has no alternative. There is no standing above the conflict on Olympian heights. There are no impartial observers. The battle front is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear. The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or for slavery. I have made my choice. I had no alternative.”

Americans are perhaps notorious for their selective amnesia when it comes to history. When notable Black Americans from its history are spoken of (still an increasingly rare occurrence) it is typically when they have either already passed on or are too infirm to be considered threatening to anyone's power. When they are spoken of, Muhammed Ali and Martin Luther King as the most glaring examples, it is rarely mentioned that they were reviled in their lifetimes. The racism, the ever present threat of lethal violence, is simply erased. Martin Luther King, a tireless worker for social justice for all Americans and an outspoken critic of American imperialism, years after his death was reduced to a man who was colorblind.

Muhammed Ali, also an outspoken critic of America's wars abroad and racism at home, even prosecuted for his beliefs, in his later years was crafted into a colorful character, a showman, a kind of large, smiling teddy bear. Down the rabbit hole went the more “uncomfortable” ideas of these men, to be replaced by a caricature of what they really stood for. They were not erased from history, but their lives were thoroughly scrubbed and repackaged for White consumption. Not all were so “lucky”.

Then there was Paul Robeson.

In many respects, Robeson (along with W.E.B. DuBois) were the preeminent Black voices of their generations, decades before King, Malcolm, Ali and others. While DuBois was well known in the Black community, he was less known in White America. Not Robeson.

From his days at Rutgers University as an All-American football player soon after WW1, to his acting career, to his concert engagements, all the way up to the 1950's, there were few men in America, White or Black, more well known or loved than Paul Robeson. Domestically and internationally he was mobbed at his concerts and filled the largest concert halls America had. And he was a supporter of the Soviet Union.

Seeing lynchings and the unrelenting and dehumanizing effects of life under Jim Crow, Robeson saw a system during his visits to the USSR where Black men and women were not second class citizens. They could perform, work, and go about their daily lives while trying to fulfill their natural potential.

Robeson's support for the Soviets in the 1930's and 40's where Russia was seen as the bulwark against Fascism, was hardly a controversial position to stake out. While some scattered criticism far the far right existed, it did not effect Robeson's life.

As the Cold War began however, new rules applied. Not only did Robeson continue to insist that friendship between the USSR and America was a desirable thing, he began to more forcefully assert that under communism, Black people had far more rights and were treated with more dignity than in America. While never saying he was personally a communist, (the author when looking at the historical record and speaking to acquaintances is emphatic that he never joined the party) he bristled at the assumption that it was

immaterial whether he was or wasn't and that he was under no obligation to share that information with anyone anymore than he needed to say whether he was a democrat or republican. In America, freedom meant freedom. Even the freedom to be a communist if one chooses. As Robeson famously remarked at a Council on African Affairs rally in New York. :

"This could happen to any American who believes in democracy and says so fearlessly. This is the heart of the issue. Whether I am or am not a Communist or Communist sympathizer, is irrelevant. The question is whether American citizens, regardless of their political beliefs or sympathies, may enjoy their constitutional rights. If the government is sincerely concerned about saving America from subversive forces, let our officials stop worrying about the Communists whom they suspect of subversive activities and start doing something about the fascists who are openly parading their disdain of civil rights and democratic procedures here in America today. I, however, am going to function exactly as I have tonight, at other times. I come from the people, and from the side of the people. I want nothing back but the kind of affection that comes to me tonight, the kind of feeling that you're there. That's what allows me to do what I do, because you are there! I want no political office of any kind, nor will I ever seek one."

Speaking in Paris in 1949, he would elaborate on his feelings about the USSR and how it compared to America for Black people.

"The wealth of America, he said, had been built on the backs of the white workers from Europe and on the backs of millions of blacks. And we are resolved to share it equally among our children. And we shall not put up with any hysterical raving that urges us to make war on anyone. Our will to fight for peace is strong. We shall not make war on anyone. We shall not make war on the Soviet Union."

While certainly forceful, there was little that in 1949 was particularly incendiary that would have created the firestorm that it spawned. Black leaders like A. Phillip Randolph had previously said that he could see why Black soldiers would be hesitant to go abroad and die for freedoms they lacked at home. Soon after hearing the speech, the Associated Press reprinted Robeson's remarks as:

"We colonial peoples have contributed to the building of the United States and are determined to share in its wealth. We denounce the policy of the United States government, which is similar to that of Hitler and Goebbels. It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country [the Soviet Union] which in one generation has raised our people to the full dignity of mankind."

Robeson had said nothing about Hitler or Goebbels and in fact had said none of what he was quoted as saying.

What followed however were instant denunciations of him from all over the country. Black voices as varied as newspaper editors and the NAACP all rushed to stress their loyalty to America and say Robeson didn't speak for them. Similarly, he was abandoned, with a few exceptions, by most of his White liberal friends as well, who viewed him as toxic in the aftermath of the speech. The FBI also targeted Robeson more aggressively, and intensified their surveillance and harassment of him, labeling him as a "known communist". From America's treasure with the beautiful voice to pariah overnight, Robeson became for lack of a better word, a non person in America.

His concerts were protested, often violently. When protests were ineffective, pressure was applied to any venue that would host him. By the summer of 1950, Robeson, who once sold out the largest concert halls in America was persona non grata. Unable to work domestically, he decided to go abroad where he was still loved. The U.S. responded by confiscating his passport. Robeson would get his passport back years later but in many ways the damage was done. He was erased from the public conscious and would for all intents and

purposes remain so up until the present day.

It is shocking in retrospect to consider how easily and quickly someone can go from universally acclaimed to near total obscurity. That is in many ways the story Duberman tells here. However it is not the only story. While in the aftermath of Paris, Robeson's professional life evaporated and most likely led to serious mental illness which would plague him in his later years, this is also the story of a supremely courageous man. A man who in the face of the worst kind of harassment, denunciation, and persecution, never shied away from speaking truth to power, never allowing others to speak for him or dictate what he stood for:

"I want everybody in the range of my voice to hear, official or otherwise, that there is no force on earth that will make me go backward one-thousandth part of one little inch."

Rarely appreciated during the height of his powers and given little credit for laying the groundwork for the Civil Rights movement that would follow, this wonderful biography brings the man to light again for future generations to ensure that the injustices of the past do not become our future.

David says

This is simply the best biography of Paul Robeson, even better than his autobiography. The story of the son of a slave, who goes to an Ivy League College, faces prejudice, overcomes it with courage and dignity, only to face it again and again when he will not take the quiet path of privilege his celebrity affords but continues to seek equality for all people, irrespective of the colour of their skin or their creed. A true treasure.

Joe Stack says

Robeson's life is remarkable and he sacrificed a lot for his principles and his fight for equality.

Lisa says

This was a truly comprehensive biography and I learned so much about him that I didn't know. Very dense and difficult in places, so take your time. :)

Gwyn Bailey says

Fantastic book, although sad in the way that Robeson's life ended in pain and semi obscurity. But wonderful to read whilst listening to his music - he has a special place in my heart as he has with many Welsh people.

Walter says

An amazing biography of a complex and compelling man. Martin Duberman's treatment of Paul Robeson's

life is a wonder - thanks to his exhaustive research (i.e., the book is about 550 pages long and the notes are another 200 pages!), he paints an admiring yet fair picture of one of the giants of the last century. It is as if the reader walks through every year with Robeson, coming to know the triumphs and the travails as they unfold. The life story itself is amazing, but it is so well and carefully told that one gets the sense of knowing its subject. For example, you cannot help but feel Robeson's passionate commitment to speaking out on behalf of the oppressed, especially people of color in the U.S. and in then-colonial countries. And the price that he was willing to pay to "speak the truth to power" was truly steep - even though he managed to handle it for three quarters of his life, the concluding period was bleak indeed. The only theme in the book that could use additional amplification is why Robeson was able to "break through" to mainstream (read = at the time whites-only) activities and pursuits. As the book recounts, there are many incredibly talented African-Americans of his era, but he (almost alone) broke through whether in high school and college in New Jersey or later in the cinema and theatre. This being said, the voluminous and lively recounting of his journey is a true thing of beauty, as at its conclusion, it's virtually impossible not to be more impressed (while also being more aware) of this icon's unique gifts, contributions and struggles. A challenging book to read (given its density and length) but well worth the effort!
