



The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

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Originally published in 1912, this novel was one of the first to present a frank picture of being black in America

Masked in the tradition of the literary confession practiced by such writers as St. Augustine and Rousseau, this "autobiography" purports to be a candid account of its narrator's private views and feelings as well as an acknowledgement of the central secret of his life: that though he lives as a white man, he is, by heritage and experience, an African-American. Written by the first black executive secretary of the NAACP, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, in its depiction of turn-of-the-century New York, anticipates the social realism of the Harlem Renaissance writers. In its unprecedented analysis of the social causes of a black man's denial of the best within himself, it is perhaps James Weldon Johnson's greatest service to his race.

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The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man Details

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From Reader Review The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man for online ebook

Roisin says

This short, yet mighty, thought provoking, (published in 1912), fictionalised account of a black man, who eventually passes for white, due to his light complexion and looks will stay with any reader. Loosely based on James Weldon Johnson's life, the 'Ex-Colored Man' gives us his heart, his thought and fears and exposes what it is his to be a black person in America.

With a woman being recently placed in detention while trying to remonstrate with authorities that she owned her car, this book still shines a light on racism and the treatment of black people that still sadly exists and resonates with modern times. Our narrator, a mixed-race man who decides eventually due to humiliation and shame by his own country, to pass for white, takes us on a journey from his youth, his talents and abilities, his love of literature, his discovery of his racial heritage, his experiences as a musician, worker in a cigar factory, to his marriage. He crosses continents sometimes living a decadent life style.

Despite being fiction, Johnson explores no less eloquently than those writing non-fictional tracts why the subjugation of black people isn't logical, and why the idealised superiority of the Anglo-Saxon is senseless. Johnson writes in such a way that it seems so realistic. He shows us a world in the southern states of America that should bring shame. A year before this book was published, was the murder of Laura D Nelson and her son, by a lynch mob and pictures of her and her son hanging from a bridge were in circulation. You believe in our narrator, trying to be a person in his own right, in a dangerous world, hoping to be accepted as just human.

At times in the book the narrator makes quite stereotyped comments about other blacks, a hangover from racism, which sowed the seeds of difference among black communities, which can also be found in James Baldwin's 'Go Tell It On The Mountain'. With some shocking incidents, there are also some beautifully written passages with insightful thoughts. A powerful, unforgettable read.

Monica says

Fascinating classic. While reading this book, I couldn't help but be mesmerized by it. This is a time capsule. A deep look at the world through the eyes of a nameless narrator. The book was written in 1912. This book is a genuine exploration of color through the eyes of a man who seems to be able to successfully transition and adapt almost seamlessly between two worlds (Negro and White). As the narrator moves between worlds he makes observations about Negroes and White people. I think he does a pretty admirable job of characterizing without stereotyping. Amazing how much these observations are still prevalent today some 100 years later.

This is a slice of life story where the narrator kind of stumbles through life. He has lots of adventure and intrigue and frankly some of his experiences are horrifying; however that doesn't always come through in the writing. It felt like the book had a significant emotional detachment to it. I'm unsure whether that is the author or common to the times the book was written. (view spoiler) All of these incidents are encountered with the same emotional energy...which is to say not much energy. For me it was strange.

This same detachment is observed in the narrator's interactions with humans of all races. I suppose that is a natural progression if the main characteristic of the narrator is his emotional detachment. Frankly, he connects with no one. All of his interactions seem superficial. (view spoiler) I'm unsure if this awkwardness in human interaction is meant to be a dimension of the main character or if this is just a characteristic of the time the book was written.

Lastly, the ending did not have the emotional impact it was supposed to in my view. (view spoiler) In the end, he was lamenting his loss of privilege and maybe that is why I'm not quite as sympathetic as I expected to be.

This is a book where a lot of things happen one right after the other and yet it didn't strike me as episodic. It flowed very naturally. Overall, I'm very happy to have read this classic and would recommend highly to everyone. The curiosity and amusement which led to my picking up the book was anthropological in nature but I also ended up just enjoying a very good and interesting story. This really is an outstanding book.

4 Stars and honestly one of the most interesting books I've read in quite a while

Alannah Clarke says

Very interesting book, it's such a shame that I probably would not have read this if it weren't for my book group. I haven't read any bi-racial accounts before this, I believe Johnson was born to a black mother and a white father. Because I had also been watching a series about being black in Britain, I found it interesting that a lot of the issues that were spoken about in this book seemed to pop up in the television series proving that very little may have changed throughout time and other countries. I thought this was very well written, despite its short length there seemed to be so much content packed into it.

Renee says

There are times when I wish Goodreads would hand out a limited number of very special extra six star reads. Rarely does a book deserve more than "It was awesome!". And, here is that rare breed of book - the beyond five-star read.

The awakening of this journey I am on, to discover new and old, the books that ask and contemplate the race question continues. Each new book is another layer, where I think it can't get any better.. and, then it does. I read another piece that touches me more than the last, and I wonder how I could have traversed my life before, having not read these things?

There is so much within the pages of The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, that it scares me to think of doing a review that can even remotely give justice to it. I have highlighted passages that I read over and over, because I didn't know someone could say something so profound. Although, to use the word profound, may in itself be cliche. I don't have my book with me, so I will add in the review later some of the special passages.

Some passages that were deeply effecting:

In the life of everyone there is a limited number of unhappy experiences which are not written upon the memory, but stamped there with a die; and in long years after, they can be called up in detail, and every emotion that was stirred by them can be lived through anew; these are the tragedies of life"

"Anyone who without shedding tears can listed to Negroes sing 'Nobody knows de trouble I see, Nobody knows but Jesus' must indeed have a heart of stone"

I think it will be hard to find something worthy of following this book.

Diane S ? says

A well written book about the life of a black man, a man who is light enough to pass as white. He takes us through his life, moving from North to South and back again. As a young boy he believed himself to be white until an episode at school will confront him with the truth. His job in a cigar factory, promotion to a reader, something I had never heard of before. Gambling, the Harlem Renaissance, the views held by whites toward blacks and the opposite as well. Views he is well able to describe having lived as both.

My problem with this book is that while I found it interesting, it was missing heart, emotions. The matter of fact prose, reads like a biography, related facts but not the emotions behind them. Details are given, of cigar making, gambling, music, some that went on too long in my opinion but details are not given that would lead me to the emotional center of this man. If missed that, it would have pulled this story together for me, I missed that connection in my reading and it kept me from rating this any higher.

Courtney says

After discussing the difference between what is considered a "good" novel and what is considered an "interesting" novel*, I have made the decision that this one is most certainly interesting, but not very good. Johnson presents race issues ranging from double-consciousness to passing (crossing the color line) to the struggle for identity as his unnamed narrator explores the dark tunnels connecting whiteness and blackness during Reconstruction. In this novel the reader (and the narrator) becomes privy to conversations usually held in the privacy of homogeneity, that is to say, that the conversations the narrator observes are usually reserved for people of the same color, but he is able to pass for both white and black allowing him and the reader a new, more complete, perspective of popular ideas held within post Civil War America. All of this is very interesting, but I think where Johnson loses me (makes me feel that it is not a "good" book) is in his dry narrative style, the way a plot seems to escape this novel, and in his narrator, who most of the time seems to be an observer rather than a participant which leads to a description of the goings-on of cities, but does not allow for the reader to invest in the character emotionally or otherwise. The ideas for contemplation presented in this book make it worth the read, however, if you are looking for a "good" book to snuggle up with, then I'd suggest choosing something else from the shelf.

*Good novel: one read for enjoyment, Interesting novel: One read for educational purposes, may not be 'good,' but may offer ideas, perspectives, issues, in such a way that can be useful to growth in one's studies (or living)

aPriL does feral sometimes says

I recommend reading this fascinating novel.

'The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man' is not a real memoir or non-fiction. It is a fictionalized autobiography written in 1912. Despite that it is fiction, it has a strong feel of true authenticity. What is truly wondrous and sad about the book is how the questions, disputes and agonies over race in 1912 have little changed since this novel was written.

The narrator's story is a coming-of-age one. He experiences unusual adventures because although his mother was a light-skinned black, he himself looks completely white. He describes his birth, education and travels throughout America and Europe. Sometimes he lives like a wealthy white man with wealthy white men, and sometimes he endures the poverty and discrimination of Southern American blacks. He also lived for a time amongst the criminal elements of New York City. His white skin allows him to move freely wherever he chooses, depending on what identity he wants to explore. He is fortunate to be a musical prodigy and he easily learns languages.

The crisis begins when he falls in love with a white woman...

Thomas says

3.5 stars

A story about an "Ex-Colored Man" who decides to pass as white after witnessing the lynching of a fellow black man. James Weldon Johnson details the unnamed Ex-Colored Man's coming of age, ranging from when he realizes his skin color matters, to when he plays ragtime music for a rich white gentleman, to when he decides to erase his race, a key component of himself. So sad to see how this story remains relevant in 2014 after the tragic deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner. Would recommend to those interested in music, reading the perspective of a bi-racial narrator, or American classics in general.

RYCJ says

From start to finish I was drawn to the storytelling which is not just great, but grand. The merits of 'Ragtime' music, and the cake-walk, were revealing. The differences described between London and Paris titillating. And on top of the plethora of 'race' discussions between the ex-colored man and aristocrats like himself, I was bowled over by the premise and the decision he faced... and ultimately made... and why!

The story encouraged me to look into books such as 'Monte Cristo', 'The Three Guardsmen', and 'Uncle Remus's Stories'; possibly to add to my reading list. It also had me looking up the 'Wedding March' tune, which yes, I had heard it, but now can associate the classic classical calypso with this reading.

I must say it again. What an empowering novel! Highly Recommended!

Jacqueline says

I really liked reading The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man. It's a book about a bi-racial man who struggles to choose between Black and White. Born from a black mother and a white father, his light skin enables him to pass as a Caucasian person, yet he still has his mother's blood in him. As a child, he referred to himself as a white boy and even grew up marrying a white woman. However, he never felt "complete".

This book and the issues and ideas raised in the story helped me to see how a person's race can take a big part in defining who they are. In his book, Johnson shows how people can be uncertain about themselves and who they are if they don't know exactly *what* they are, especially in a society that used to be, and in some cases, is still, racially segregated.

Eugenie says

Beautifully written butI may write a full review sometime.

Lawyer says

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man: James Weldon Johnson's novel of race and identity

"You are young, gifted, and Black. We must begin to tell our young, There's a world waiting for you, Yours is the quest that's just begun.--James Weldon Johnson

James Weldon Johnson

Johnson lived an extraordinary life as a writer, musician, educator, lawyer, and diplomat. Born in Jacksonville, Florida, in 1871, the son of teacher Helen Dulett and James Johnson, the head waiter at St. James Hotel, one of the early resort hotels in Jacksonville. Johnson developed his love of music and literature from his mother. His confidence to pursue a professional position was inspired by his father.

Atlanta University

Johnson entered Atlanta University at age 16 and received his degree in 1894. Along with his brother, Rosamond, Johnson wrote numerous songs which were incorporated into Broadway hits of the day. Working with the Theodore Roosevelt campaign, as a Republican, Johnson composed campaign songs for Roosevelt. Upon his election Roosevelt appointed Johnson as American Consul to Puerto Rico and Venezuela. The election of Woodrow Wilson, a Virginia Democrat, ended Johnson's diplomatic career. No longer bound by the requirements of circumspection in the political world, Johnson became a civil rights activist and a founder of the NAACP.

Johnson was killed in a collision with a train at an unmarked crossing, headed for a speaking engagement. His death at the age of sixty seven brought a premature end to an extraordinary life.

Considering the quote from Johnson which serves as a preamble to this review, the subject matter of The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man concerns the life of a man from childhood through life with the knowledge that he is Black, but with the ability to pass as a white man. His conflicted opinion on whether to live safely as a white man as opposed to acknowledging his racial identity and acting to advance his own race is the theme that runs throughout Johnson's novel. The title of the book leaves no doubt as to the protagonist's final decision. It is a decision that is riddled with guilt.

The unnamed protagonist tells his story in the first person. He does not reveal the place of his birth as there are still people living there who would readily identify him. He is the product of the illicit union of a wealthy white man and his mother her served as his father's seamstress. As his father's marriage approaches, "Father" purchases tickets for our young boy and his mother for a train trip to Savannah. He has also provided steamship tickets for a one way ticket to New York. The young boy's mother establishes a career for herself as a professional seamstress and "Father" supplements the family income with monthly checks.

Johnson published the novel anonymously in 1912. The identity of the author remained secret until the dawn of the Harlem Renaissance and Weldon was revealed as its author in 1927. Prior to that, upon its initial publication debate over whether the work was in fact an autobiography or a novel was common. Johnson's realistic portrayal of the life of his protagonist undoubtedly led to the continuing debate.

As an elementary student, our young man attends an integrated school in New York. His race is imperceptible. His friends are white. He perceives the difference with which the black students are regarded by his friends and by the teachers, as well. However, a school administrator visits the class room one day, asking all the white scholars to stand. When the protagonist stands, the administrator tells him, "No, not you, sit down." From that moment, our young student's relationships with his white friends cease and he is taunted on the way home that afternoon, hearing for the first time "Nigger," and recognizes that his life in that school has been changed forever.

We follow our growing young man back to the South to attend Atlanta University. However, his funds are stolen from his trunk. His supposed friend, a railway porter, recommends that he go to Jacksonville, where he finds work in a cigar factory, first as a stripper, then a roller, and finally achieves the coveted position of "the reader" who not only keeps the cigar makers entertained with news and other reading material, but oversees and resolves disputes between workers.

A Cigar Reader, turn of the 20th Century

A sudden close of the cigar factory leads our protagonist back to New York. It is the age of Ragtime and our man has the gift of playing it. Whites, slumming on visits to the clubs, are there for the entertainment. A millionaire retains our hero to be his private entertainer, leading to travels through Europe. Yet, our young man is conflicted and yearns to return to America, polishing his skills as a musician. His benefactor explains to him that he could pass for a white man for the rest of his life and need not return to a life of nights in the black clubs of New York. Yet, he returns.

Scott Joplin, Master of Rag-Time

The turning point in the ex-coloured man's decision to pass as a white man is his love of a beautiful young white woman. I leave it to the reader to discover the outcome of that romance and the protagonist's final thoughts on the consequences of being an ex-coloured man.

Johnson's narrative is keen, precise and instantly engaging. He transports the reader from small town Georgia to New York, Jacksonville, London and Paris with ease. His precision in portraying the unnamed protagonist's conflicts between race and identity resonate, at times with the edge of satire, and at others with heartrending pathos.

Truly, Johnson's anonymous work is the dawning of the Harlem Renaissance. Read this book. It's a solid 4.5 star read. Selected writings of James Weldon Johnson are available in a Library of America edition. Get it. For you won't be satisfied to leave Johnson after this one novel.

Kati says

I loved the parts about his childhood, his mother, and his fascination with Shiny; his realizations about race--his races--are more powerful when he talks about how he understood (or didn't understand) them as a child.

Julie says

5/10

The writing is gracious, refined, much like the protagonist, but I couldn't get my mind around whether I liked this character or not.

Abandoned at page 87. Skimmed the rest. The only way that this novel could work for me was if it was written ironically. I can't be sure that it wasn't.

The author led a fascinating life but I'm not convinced of his standing as a fascinating writer.

The only thing that rang true was the very last sentence, set here with its telling preamble.

“It is difficult for me to analyze my feelings concerning my present position in the world. Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people.

Several years ago I attended a great meeting in the interest of Hampton Institute at Carnegie Hall. The Hampton students sang the old songs and awoke memories that left me sad. Among the speakers were R.C. Ogden, ex-Ambassador Choate, and Mark Twain; but the greatest interest of the audience was centered in Booker T. Washington, and not because he so much surpassed the others in eloquence, but because of what he represented with so much earnestness and faith. And it is this that all of that small but gallant band of colored men who are publicly fighting the cause of their race have behind them. Even those who oppose them know that these men have the eternal principles of right on their side, and they will be victors even though they should go down in defeat. Beside them I feel small and selfish. I am an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money. They are men who are making history and a race. I, too, might have

taken part in a work so glorious.

My love for my children makes me glad that I am what I am and keeps me from desiring to be otherwise; and yet, when I sometimes open a little box in which I still keep my fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent, I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage."

Gill says

I found this novel (it is fiction despite the title) interesting, but written in rather a matter of fact style.

I read it for a group read on GR, and the group discussion together with following up on the internet regarding the author and background to the book, really enhanced this for me. I now have a much better appreciation of the novel.

Guy Austin says

I liked it... It was a bit dry, yet it is precise in its telling of the "facts" of this persons life as they unfold before him.

I think it is important to keep in perspective the date it was written, 1912 is when it was first published. The writer was a founder of the NAACP, worked on T.R.'s Presidential campaign, wrote Broadway tunes, Poetry, was American Consul to Puerto Rico and Venezuela.

The "Autobiography" having been written anonymously until Johnson was credited in 1927 and the fact that it was so realistic in its telling caused debate as to weather it was fiction or Non during the 15 years between.

The writer is pinging back and forth over his life about just what to do with himself and where he fits. The guilt he feels over his ultimate decision. I am glad to have read it. I think it an honest telling of things as they were for the subject from the perspective of the writer.

Monique says

his is a really hard review for me to write there is just so much to say about the book and I have no idea where to start. And if I said all that I wanted to say, this review would end up a term paper instead of a simple review.

Simply stated The Autobiography of An Ex-Colored is about a mulatto man that can pass as white. But the story is much deeper and more complex then just skin colored. Set in the early 1900's Weldon touch on a lot of issues dealing with racial prejudice and cultural identity. It's very interesting to watch the the narrator try

to reconcile his racial background (black) with his appearance and upbringing. At one point in the story a "friend" of the narrator makes a comment that narrator was raised as a white man and should live his life as such, that it would be much easier for him to do so. There is a sense that the narrator never really fits in anywhere, partially because of the ambiguity of his appearance and also because he really has no family or close ties. He ends up drifting through life with nothing to hold him down to one place or tie him to one group (race, family, friends, etc).

Something that I find interesting about *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is that the issues presented in the book are still relevant today probably even more so, given the fact that the U.S. has a black (mixed) president. It is amazing how after 113 years very little has really changed in the regards to race and culture in the US.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is not a "light" read when it comes to subject matter. But Weldon was able to pull me in and make me want to flip to the next page. I was surprised by how expertly he dealt with each topic and situation in such a sort book. I think part of the reason is because that it is done in memoir form so the reader gets the feeling that they are listening to an old man reflecting on his journey through life and questioning some of the decisions that he made.

Evan says

OK, so maybe this isn't one of the great novels of the 20th century. The canon tells me that other books are, and because of that I'm starting to become less enamored of the canon and of those who insist on pushing it -- because such a focus on the limited offerings of elite taste makers and academics causes gems like this to fall by the wayside.

I do pay attention to the canon and use it as a guide and as a benchmark standard that fits within a larger context. The canon can't be ignored, and part of what makes it interesting is the socio-historical currents that created it. As long as we can keep that all in perspective, it's all good. Like anything that's part of this complete breakfast, it's best to take the canon with a proverbial grain of salt when confronting it -- not dismissively; that's a closed-minded approach -- and to move elsewhere as often as possible; to broaden one's reading horizons and create one's own canon.

And when I say this I don't mean just creating a list of favorite bubblegum reads. Danielle Steel and Stephenie Meyer or the latest author of vampire/werewolf/name-any-nocturnal-supernatural-Casanova books do not belong on any canon. I'm talking about a canon that seeks alternative books that equal in literary or informational merit the ones that get on all the elite lists of the famous or acclaimed. My version of this, which is a work in progress, is a shelf of unjustly neglected or underrated books that I call Evan's Alternative 100.

James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* is one of these bafflingly neglected books that deserves more attention. Although published in 1912, a lot of what it says about the "race question" in the United States is still pertinent and timely. In some ways it seems to me to be a precursor to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, except that Johnson's light-skinned bi-racial protagonist finds invisibility in a different way, by ultimately choosing to pass for white; to enjoy the freedoms denied him whenever his true lineage is revealed.

I have to admit, for a good while I had no idea that this was a novel. It is so convincing as an "autobiography" that I believed this to be Johnson's own story. Some of it is, from what I glean off the back cover blurb. Whatever the case, it is a book that is immediately engrossing; a remarkably evocative time capsule that whiskers and immerses the reader into the world of early 20th-century America.

The first-person narrator of the book would have to be, admittedly, one of the more fortunate black/bi-racial men of his day. He is the spawn of a black mother and a well-to-do white father who, though distant and purposefully anonymous in his parentage due to the stigma of miscegenation, at least follows through on his responsibility of financial and occasional moral support. His musical talents and curiosity are nurtured, and thus he embarks on a life odyssey in which his options are more varied and flexible than would have been the case for his more unfortunate (and blacker and poorer) "colored" brethren.

In his observations, the narrator becomes almost like an anthropologist of his own people -- able to blend in and out of white and black society at will. What he reports in the book was probably news to a lot of white readers of the day, and a lot of it remains fascinating and enlightening even now from a historical and cultural perspective. The book gives the reader a taste of life as it was lived before 1912 in such diverse places as Atlanta and Macon, Georgia, and Jacksonville, Florida, and Connecticut and New York City and Paris and London. I found the man's various adventures as a ragtime pianist, cigar-roller, linguist, music anthropologist, urban gambler and erstwhile lover to be engaging -- putting me in places and situations I knew little or nothing about.

The book is a vibrant and fulsomely descriptive evocation of black American life in the early 20th century and is at the same time an exuberant celebration of black culture and of the often unremarked contributions to the world of black Americans and their ancestors.

The novel is honest, flavorful and lovingly rendered, and even with all that has come to pass it remains relevant.

I loved nearly every word of it.

(KR@Ky, with some amendments made in 2016)

Chris says

Johnson's fictional autobiography of a man who can pass and who, at first, doesn't realize he is black, undoubtedly draws from his own life. The literature student can see the forerunner of Baldwin and Wright in this work as well as comments on the America of his time. In many ways, Johnson gives voice to comments about race and racial relations that bear repeating today. In particular, he foregrounds the question of perspective and living as a minority in a white world.

Some of the most beautiful passages of the book concern ragtime music and the cake walk.

Lark Benobi says

What an extraordinary novel! It's difficult to believe such a short work can contain so much. First there is the story itself, which includes among other things a detailed and colorful explanation of the Cakewalk, the story of the rise of Ragtime, the beauty of the music of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, a rigorous defense of Gospel singing as culturally significant, an explanation of the inner workings of a cigar factory, a celebration of Uncle Remus stories before they were sullied by Walt Disney, and scenes describing gambling, fetishization of blacks by whites, and what it's like to travel overnight in the laundry closet of a Pullman car...amazing. Interlaced throughout the liveliness of the tale are ruminations about race that feel contemporary. By making his protagonist able to 'pass' for white Johnson creates a character who can move into and out of black or white culture at will. Johnson thus gives the character the perception and insight of an outsider, someone who observes and records without feeling compelled to judge. The ending is wrenching, when the protagonist realizes he has sacrificed his dreams and his ambitions and his talents, by choosing the safety and prosperity of living as a white man: "I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage."
