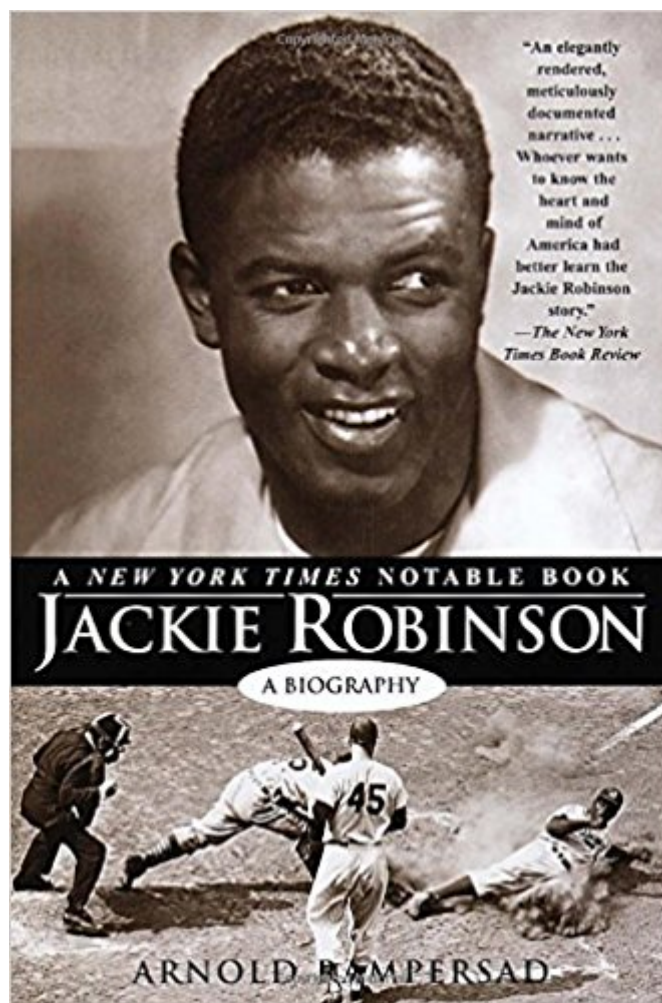


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Jackie Robinson: A Biography



Synopsis

The extraordinary life of Jackie Robinson is illuminated as never before in this full-scale biography by Arnold Rampersad, who was chosen by Jack's widow, Rachel, to tell her husband's story, and was given unprecedented access to his private papers. We are brought closer than we have ever been to the great ballplayer, a man of courage and quality who became a pivotal figure in the areas of race and civil rights. Born in the rural South, the son of a sharecropper, Robinson was reared in southern California. We see him blossom there as a student-athlete as he struggled against poverty and racism to uphold the beliefs instilled in him by his mother--faith in family, education, America, and God. We follow Robinson through World War II, when, in the first wave of racial integration in the armed forces, he was commissioned as an officer, then court-martialed after refusing to move to the back of a bus. After he plays in the Negro National League, we watch the opening of an all-American drama as, late in 1945, Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers recognized Jack as the right player to break baseball's color barrier--and the game was forever changed. Jack's never-before-published letters open up his relationship with his family, especially his wife, Rachel, whom he married just as his perilous venture of integrating baseball began. Her memories are a major resource of the narrative as we learn about the severe harassment Robinson endured from teammates and opponents alike; about death threats and exclusion; about joy and remarkable success. We watch his courageous response to abuse, first as a stoic endurer, then as a fighter who epitomized courage and defiance. We see his growing friendship with white players like Pee Wee Reese and the black teammates who followed in his footsteps, and his embrace by Brooklyn's fans. We follow his blazing career: 1947, Rookie of the Year; 1949, Most Valuable Player; six pennants in ten seasons, and 1962, induction into the Hall of Fame. But sports were merely one aspect of his life. We see his business ventures, his leading role in the community, his early support of Martin Luther King Jr., his commitment to the civil rights movement at a crucial stage in its evolution; his controversial associations with Eisenhower, Kennedy, Nixon, Humphrey, Goldwater, Nelson Rockefeller, and Malcolm X. Rampersad's magnificent biography leaves us with an indelible image of a principled man who was passionate in his loyalties and opinions: a baseball player who could focus a crowd's attention as no one before or since; an activist at the crossroads of his people's struggle; a dedicated family man whose last years were plagued by illness and tragedy, and who died prematurely at fifty-two. He was a pathfinder, an American hero, and he now has the biography he deserves. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

In baseball and beyond, 1997 has been the year of Jackie Robinson, the 50th anniversary of his obliteration of the game's color line, and a time to reflect on a marvelous man whose heroism and decency cut far beyond the foul lines. Arnold Rampersad, a Princeton professor who's edited the poetry of Langston Hughes and the essays of Richard Wright, and collaborated with tennis great Arthur Ashe on his powerful memoir *Days of Grace*, steps up to the plate here with the first truly comprehensive Robinson biography. It's an important accomplishment, ripe with historical and social insight without losing sight of the human being at its core. Thoroughly researched--Rachel Robinson gave the author access to her husband's personal papers--and filled with fascinating new detail, the book, like its subject, consistently takes the extra base, thrilling with its overall skill, depth, and perspective.

The details of an extraordinary life in 20th-century America are brought to life in LeVar Burton's memorable reading of Rampersad's lauded biography (LJ 10/1/97). Robinson was skilled enough, reliable enough, and tough enough mentally and physically to shatter the color barrier in major league baseball. His is the story of all African Americans?to be acceptable by white-controlled society. With the sponsorship of Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson became the trailblazer for people of color in formerly white-dominated professional baseball. This work includes Robinson's acceptance speech on his induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Essential for all audio collections. ?Cliff Glaviano, Bowling Green State Univ. Libs., Ohio Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Back when people listened to baseball games on radio, I was one of two people in my school whose favorite baseball team was the Brooklyn Dodgers. The other person was my best friend Marie, who was Italian, and she didn't listen to broadcasts of the games. I did. In my memory, they are visual. I see Jackie Robinson sliding into third base and the Giants' third baseman (It was always the Giants) and the baseline coach stomping the grass with rage at the call. Robinson gets up, dusts himself off, grins. Red Barber, the announcer, laughs. From the time I was in the third grade until the Dodgers left Brooklyn, I was faithful to them. They were my team. Looking back, I realize my attachment began as a political affair of the heart, an assertion of independence. I lived in Louisiana, and in Louisiana everybody was first of all devoted to the St. Louis Cardinals, then the closest thing we had to a Southern team, and to the New York Yankees. Squeaky-clean teams filled with dull Anglo Saxons, I thought. Winners. That was what drew the boys in my classes to the Yankees. A blond, somewhat round little Anglo girl myself, I wanted nothing to do with that. I loved underdogs, folks who came from behind to squeak out a win. Boys who were discovered in some Sunday afternoon cowfield in Oklahoma and went on to glory. I'd read all those John Tunis books, and that was my style---underdogs. Also diversity, though that was not the name for it then. A team with Italians, Jews, blacks, mixed in with white southerners, preferably. I was also a democrat. I was explaining this to my husband one day. "Italians, the Dodgers had Italians, like Campanello...." He interrupted me to tell me that in Campy I had a double-winner: he was both Italian and black. Vince Scully had not mentioned that, and it would have gladdened my heart if he had. If you love underdogs and you're into democracy and you're a girl, Jackie Robinson is the perfect player. And he and Pee Wee Reese, who was kind to Robinson and collaborated with him on double plays, became my heroes. Especially Robinson. I hated the people who were unkind to him, remembered him and his family in my nightly prayers. I spoke up on his behalf when the boys made cruel racial comments. So as an adult, I was a little afraid to read a biography of Robinson. After all, everybody has flaws in real life. I wanted to keep the childhood memory pure. But I also really wanted to know about Robinson's life. I'd seen the PBS "Baseball" series that gave his career considerable attention, but a film is not a book. It can't tell you things a book can tell you. That's how I came to order this book. I wanted to read a good biography of a man who had been a childhood hero. And I'm glad I found this one, which is really a well-written book. With someone like Robinson, who took so much abuse when he entered lily-white baseball, it would be easy to sentimentalize your subject, to lapse into pity from time to time. Rampersad doesn't do that. He tells a straight story, and while he obviously likes his subject, he did the kind of deep research that places Robinson in a large context. Whereas once I

had admired the idea of Robinson the baseball player, as I read this book, I came to admire the character of the man. I have lived my entire life in the American South, and I thought I could imagine the indignities to which black people had been subjected in a segregated world, but I couldn't. Rampersad's description of Robinson's trip to Florida training camp with his wife, Rachel, whom he'd met at UCLA and who was a beautiful, refined woman, was something I could not have imagined. This biographer tells a story many either could not tell or would lack the skill to tell without editorializing. Far from being disappointed in Jackie Robinson, I was disappointed in myself, that my view of him had been so shallow. I recommend the book highly. Rampersad is a good writer. He knows how to tell a story. And what impressed me was how deeply he had researched his subject. His book fleshed out all those names from my radio-listening and sports-page-reading days, made me love Branch Ricky, taught me things about courage that all of us need to know, and satisfied curiosity I'd not known I had. A very good read and an uplifting life!

Arnold Rampersad's biography of Jackie Robinson was published in 1997, but the story is timeless and definitely worth reading today. The book explores Robinson's life, from his birth in Georgia in 1919 through his death in Connecticut in 1972. His years on the diamond are important, but are only a subset of the overall story. Robinson, of course, is best known for breaking Major League Baseball's color barrier in 1947. But the author's analysis goes well beyond Robinson's achievements as an athlete. The chronological exploration of Robinson's life offers thorough commentary on his exploits in college in Southern California, his political and social involvement throughout the 1960's, and his relationships with his family, the media, business people, and other contemporaries throughout his life. I heard the author speak earlier this year and he noted that Robinson's family was pleased with the first half of the book (Robinson's years as an athlete), but not so pleased with the second half (Robinson's years as a political activist and a businessman). This isn't surprising -- Rampersad is balanced in his analysis, providing both favorable and critical passages on Robinson's life. I've read many biographies and baseball books over the years and I believe "Jackie Robinson: A Biography" is among the best in both categories.

Rampersad's work is about much more than Jackie Robinson and the integration of baseball. It is a thoughtful social and historical commentary that places Robinson's life in the context of its times. Although not stated directly in an ideological way, this volume has a strong African American perspective. It is relieving not to see Robinson's story told yet again from a white liberal point of view. The book contains all the standard material about Robinson that is well known, but also

includes many details of his life inside and outside of baseball that are rarely discussed. This is neither a hero worship tract nor a critique of the man. It is a full-bodied discussion of his life, taken from Robinson's own perspective and from the views of those who knew him well, both friends and opponents. Here we see much about Robinson's civil rights work, as well as his political advocacy and his business ventures. We learn quite a lot about his family and how he carried out his private life while a public figure. We see both Robinson's naivety and his sophistication. Growing up in the Robinson era I had a difficult time grasping his support for the Republican party, although I could understand his support for Rockefeller, his early support for Richard Nixon was more difficult to grasp. It makes more sense understood in the context of Robinson's life story and his development as a person. Rampersad writes as an observer of Robinson and his contemporaries and rarely tells the reader what to think about them. More often he simply presents the story and lets the readers interpret it as they will. Nevertheless, one comes away convinced that Rampersad, as most everyone who knew Jackie Robinson, holds a great deal of respect for him. While not a book that is only for sports fans, being one adds an additional pleasure to reading it.

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