

## From Gutenberg: Gutenberg and Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man

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When James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* was published (anonymously) in 1927, Carl van Vechten introduced it in 1927, he called it "the first book by any novelist to touch on such subjects as miscegenation, black uses of humor, facets of the black personality, black reactions to Jim Crow laws, color snobbery among blacks themselves, black rhetoric and ragtime."

If you haven't read the novel (not to be confused with Johnson's actual autobiography, though there are some similarities), you may access the whole thing on Gutenberg's link, but to save time now, let me share some of the important novel, so little read now.

It begins with an almost-Candide-type innocent optimist of a young man who is able to get on a train to go to a college in Atlanta. Born in Georgia and because of his pale skin, raised as a white person, he learns suddenly from a teacher in a Connecticut school, where his parents had moved, that he was, in fact, "a colored" person. Two other boys, one white ("Red") and one black ("Shiny") influence his thoughts, but his real initiation occurs at the college, where he was tricked and robbed and left to earn his way in the world.

Much of what follows are long accounts of various ways of life in both white and black communities – a kind of journey story, largely framed in ruminations on the conditions of both races in America and in Europe to which, after three years of work in a cigar factory in Jacksonville, Florida and some years in the glittering jazz and gambling life of NYC, he is taken by a wealthy benefactor. He becomes a citizen of the world, but decides to return, not just to the USA but to the south, where, on a research trip (he is a classical musician who is tracing the roots of black music), he comes upon a lynching, the key point in the novel, described in graphic detail but with great emotional restraint. He had taken his black identity on his return to the US, but witnessing the horrible event (it ends with a burning of the body of the lynched man), he is so overwhelmed with an identity that is treated as an animal, that he once again becomes a white man, falling in love as such and creating another crisis. This passage is the ambiguous way in which the novel ends:

Up to this time I had assumed and played my role as a white man with a certain degree of nonchalance, a carelessness as to the outcome, which made the whole thing more amusing to me than serious; but now I ceased to regard "being a white man" as a sort of practical joke. My acting had called for mere external effects. Now I began to doubt my ability to play the part. I watched her to see if she was scrutinizing me, to see if she was looking for anything in me which made me differ from the other men she knew. In place of an old inward feeling of superiority over many of my friends I began to doubt myself. I began even to wonder if I really was like the men I associated with; if there was not, after all, an indefinable something which marked a difference.

But, in spite of my doubts and timidity, my affair progressed, and I finally felt sufficiently encouraged to decide to ask her to marry me. Then began the hardest struggle of my life, whether to ask her to marry me under false colors or to tell her the

whole truth. My sense of what was exigent made me feel there was no necessity of saying anything; but my inborn sense of honor rebelled at even indirect deception in this case. But however much I moralized on the question, I found it more and more difficult to reach the point of confession. The dread that I might lose her took possession of me each time I sought to speak, and rendered it impossible for me to do so. That moral courage requires more than physical courage is no mere poetic fancy. I am sure I should have found it easier to take the place of a gladiator, no matter how fierce the Numidian lion, than to tell that slender girl that I had Negro blood in my veins. The fact which I had at times wished to cry out, I now wished to hide forever.

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**[Things progress; there is a semi-hot love scene as he plays "The Thirteenth Nocturne"; he tells her of his true race; she cries]. . .**

I reviewed the whole history of our acquaintance, recalled each smile she had given me, each word she had said to me that nourished my hope. I went over the scene we

had just gone through, trying to draw from it what was in my favor and what was against me. I was rewarded by feeling confident that she loved me, but I could not estimate what was the effect upon her of my confession. At last, nervous and unhappy, I wrote her a letter, which I dropped into the mail-box before going to bed, in which I said:

I understand, understand even better than you, and so I suffer even more than you. But why should either of us suffer for what neither of us is to blame for? If there is any blame, it belongs to me and I can only make the old, yet strongest plea that can be offered, I love you; and I know that my love, my great love, infinitely overbalances that blame and blots it out. What is it that stands in the way of our happiness? It is not what you feel or what I feel; it is not what you are or what I am. It is what others feel and are. But, oh! is that a fair price? In all the endeavors and struggles of life, in all our strivings and longings, there is only one thing worth seeking, only one thing worth winning, and that is love. It is not always found; but when it is, there is nothing in all the world for which it can be profitably exchanged.

The second morning after, I received a note from her which stated briefly that she was going up into New Hampshire to spend the summer with relatives there. She made no reference to what had passed between us; nor did she say exactly when she would leave the city. The note contained no single word that gave me any clue to her feelings. I could gather hope only from the fact that she had written at all.

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**[Later the girl comes back into the picture and SHE plays "The Thirteenth Nocturne." She marries him and they have two beautiful mixed-race children, and the reader wonders, "WHAT? This is the end of a famous "novel." But Johnson ends the novel this way, and one thinks of the alternative endings of "American Fiction"]:**

And this boy, with his mother's eyes and features, occupies an inner sanctuary of my heart; for it was for him that she gave all; and that is the second sacred sorrow of my life.

The few years of our married life were supremely happy, and perhaps she was even happier than I; for after our marriage, in spite of all the wealth of her love which she lavished upon me, there came a new dread to haunt me, a dread which I cannot explain and which was unfounded, but one that never left me. I was in constant fear that she would discover in me some shortcoming which she would unconsciously attribute to my blood rather than to a failing of human nature. But no cloud ever came to mar our life together; her loss to me is irreparable. My children need a mother's care, but I shall never marry again. It is to my children that I have devoted my life. I no longer have the

same fear for myself of my secret's being found out, for since my wife's death I have gradually dropped out of social life; but there is nothing I would not suffer to keep the brand from being placed upon them.

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.