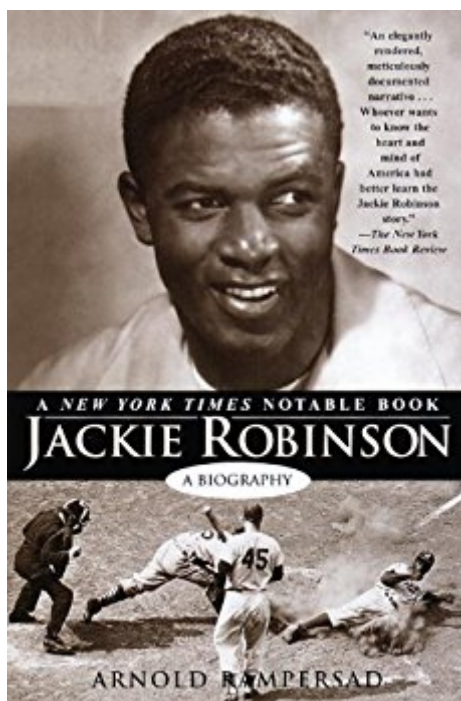


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Jackie Robinson: A Biography



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

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.

Professor's Rampersad's biography of Jackie Robinson is a book that's needed now. It's incredibly informative about the man behind the legend. (I think Roger Angell's blurb sums it up: "[the] book arrives just in time to save the man from his own legend.") However, Rampersad doesn't focus much on Robinson's baseball life, and he seems to be holding back judgment on Robinson despite the opportunities to do so. Before digging in the dirt, I want to say that this book is crisply written and chock full o' facts about Robinson's life. Rampersad obviously had the full support of Robinson's widow, Rachel, and her views are constantly felt throughout the book. It's almost told from her point of view, in fact, and thus feels like a intimate, loving homage to the man. But there are some issues and character flaws in Robinson that Rampersad shows or hints at, but never fully explores. For example, we never truly felt the force of the hatred leveled against Robinson during his efforts to integrate baseball. There are a few quick references to name-calling, a couple of pitches thrown his way, but what made Robinson so bitter, what filled him with the hatred that so obviously ate at him later in his career? It's implied, rather than shown, as if it were too terrible even to discuss. On the whole, the chapters on Robinson's baseball career are woefully thin. It's clear that Rampersad is not much of a baseball fan - including a few factual errors about the sport's rules and game play - and it's a shame, because baseball is as much about its stories as it is about its action. And then there's Robinson's role as Civil Rights' leader, which Rampersad describes, but withholds all judgment on.

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