

Juneteenth
By Ralph Ellison

Book Review
By Larry Don Frost

When Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award in 1952, many hailed the novel as the best yet written by an African-American. Readers eagerly awaited a second novel on which Ellison was laboring. Because the first novel had taken him four years to complete, the public knew that their wait might be long. Before he died in 1994, at the age of eighty, he had published five excerpts in various journals—but never the entire work.

Ellison's editor, John F. Callahan, was left with a disorganized manuscript long enough for three books. In 1999 he compiled enough coherent chapters and fragments from the middle third of this manuscript to release a posthumous novel entitled *Juneteenth*, published by Random House and selling for \$25.

Set about 1955, the action begins in the District of Columbia with the attempt of an assembly of elderly black people from Mississippi to meet with Senator Adam Sunraider, a race-baiting politician from a New England State. Led by a huge, physically powerful minister named Alonzo Hickman, the group is spurned by the senator's secretary. A few days later the senator is gunned down at the podium in the senate chambers by a young black man firing from the balcony.

Alonzo Hickman sits beside the severely wounded Senator Sunraider's hospital bed and talks and meditates while the white man slips into and out of consciousness. From their conversation and the internal monologues of each man, the reader learns the history of their relationship.

The senator was raised by Hickman, back in Mississippi, after a white woman handed him over to the preacher without naming the baby's father. Hickman is a largely a charlatan evangelist who has used the little white boy time and again in a faked resurrection scheme during his sermons. The child, called "Bliss" by Hickman was taught to rise up out of his coffin, wearing his burial suit, as evidence of God's power to resurrect the dead.

Once he was old enough to leave Hickman and the ministry, Bliss became a traveling cameraman, shooting movie footage to sell to Hollywood. Later he hid all evidence of his upbringing, invented a new past, and rose in politics all the way to the U. S. Senate by pandering to the racial prejudices of his constituents.

The novel ends with Bliss still clinging to life. Readers who demand plot resolutions will be disappointed at this stage, but perhaps Callahan will piece together enough of Ellison's remaining manuscript to produce a sequel. Readers who admire the author's skill in creating vivid but fragmented scenes that rise and sink within the memories of the main characters would

like that.

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