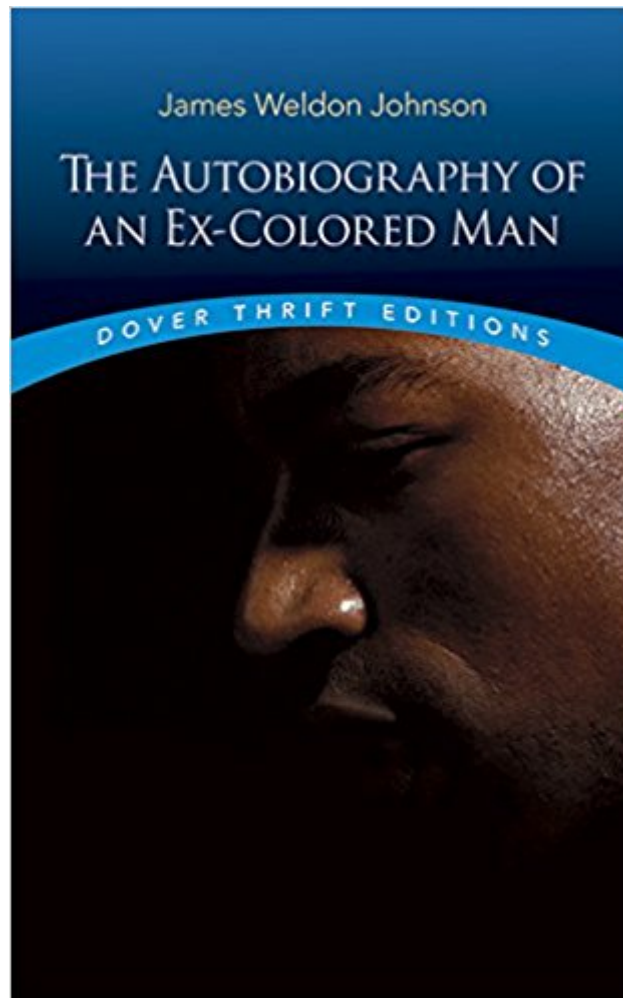




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The Autobiography Of An Ex-Colored Man (Dover Thrift Editions)



Synopsis

One of the most prominent African-Americans of his time, James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) was a successful lawyer, educator, social reformer, songwriter, and critic. But it was as a poet and novelist that he achieved lasting fame. Among his most famous works, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in many ways parallels Johnson's own remarkable life. First published in 1912, the novel relates, through an anonymous narrator, events in the life of an American of mixed ethnicity whose exceptional abilities and ambiguous appearance allow him unusual social mobility—from the rural South to the urban North and eventually to Europe. A radical departure from earlier books by black authors, this pioneering work not only probes the psychological aspects of "passing for white" but also examines the American caste and class system. The human drama is powerful and revealing—from the narrator's persistent battles with personal demons to his firsthand observations of a Southern lynching and the mingling of races in New York's bohemian atmosphere at the turn of the century. Revolutionary for its time, the *Autobiography* remains both an unrivaled example of black expression and a major contribution to American literature.

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Customer Reviews

With the possible exceptions of Dr. Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois, no African American excelled on as many different levels as James Weldon Johnson. *Along This Way*--the first autobiography by

a person of color to be reviewed in The New York Times--not only chronicles his life as an educator, lawyer, diplomat, newspaper editor, lyricist, poet, essayist, and political activist but also outlines the trials and triumphs of African Americans from post-Reconstruction to the rise and fall of the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Florida in 1871 to middle-class West Indian parents, Johnson recognized the challenges and absurdities of segregated America early on. But it was his experience as a tutor to rural blacks while a student at Atlanta University that was to alter the course of his life: "It was this period that marked the beginning of psychological change from boyhood to manhood," he writes. "It was this period that marked also the beginning of my knowledge of my own people as a race." With a rare blend of pride and humility, Johnson recounts how he, among other accomplishments, became Florida's first black lawyer in 1898, a diplomat in Venezuela and Nicaragua, and lyricist for his brother Rosamond Johnson's famous song, "Lift Every Voice and Sing." Johnson's commentary on his epochal novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, as well as writings on his works of poetry--*The Creation*, *God's Trombones*, and *Fifty Years and Other Poems*--is priceless. Equally important are the logical and even-tempered opinions on race that he wrote for *The New York Age*, which offered comprehensive critiques of Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey, along with his analysis of the racial climate while serving as head of the NAACP. This remarkable man left a mark on the 20th century that goes beyond the boundary of race. --Eugene Holley Jr.

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Johnson's theme of moral cowardice sets his tragic story of a mulatto in the United States above other sentimental narratives. The unnamed narrator, the offspring of a black mother and white father, tells of his coming-of-age at the beginning of the 20th century. Light-skinned enough to pass for white but emotionally tied to his mother's heritage, he ends up a failure in his own eyes after he chooses to follow the easier path while witnessing a white mob set fire to a black man. Reader Allen Gilmore contributes a fine reading. Recommended, with hopes for an unabridged edition in the future. ?Sandy Glover, West Linn P.L., Ore. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

'*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...

To have the choice of choosing which "race" you'd rather be regardless of the neglected dna crying within to be recognized, to be respected comes easy for some while for others a difficult position to make that choice to fit in with what's convenient or to give honor to or the acknowledging of self hate. I wouldn't want to be in that position to save my life. I come from this history, I've heard the why it's important to pass or marry light damn-near-white and I've seen the arrogance and the fear of being found out that one is of the dna that would be frowned upon by the masses. He was born in the era where he literally saw the atrocities put upon the colored folks, the poverty and the classes, yet he made the decision to go the way he thought would bring some sense of satisfaction and to ease his conscience nevertheless beautifully written.

James Weldon Johnson first published this book anonymously in 1912, to avoid any controversy that might endanger his diplomatic career. And it is actually not an autobiography, but rather historical fiction. As he wrote this book anonymously, he created characters who were also anonymous. Of all the dozens of characters in the story there were only about four who had names, some of them nick-names. Even the young man who tells his story has no name. Much of the story draws from Johnson's personal life as a Civil Rights activist. But unlike Johnson who Attended Atlanta University, the protagonist in the story spent many years in a variety of jobs where he learned various trades and several foreign languages. Not until the "Ex-colored man" returns to the South knowing he could pass for white, did he begin to deal with the "race problem." But rather than involve himself in the issues of racism, Jim Crow, and the rights of black people, he spent much of his time learning the music and vernacular of the early 20th century. It is an easy book to read, probably moreso due to the anonymous characterizations which would not point to the identity of the author.

I liked the book. It was an introduction to the uninformed about the life of someone born to Black/White parents around a century ago. It is was extremely hard to face the racial discrimination

of those days, so it is no wonder that many who looked white chose to live white. A biography of W.E.B. DuBois mentions that many may who had counted themselves as "mulatto" on the 1910 census may have reported themselves as "white" on the 1920 census after stricter racial laws were passed in the country. I didn't agree with the character's assessment of the feelings of Southern rural Blacks. However, I discovered in research after reading the book that it was fact-based fiction, not a true auto-biography, so I'll overlook that. Apparently the author used composite experiences to write the book. So, overall it is at very least interesting history of how some people may have gotten by back then. One of my grandmothers could have easily been in similar situations of the title character's mother.

Nice "Auto-biography" narrative which ventured into many new domains..about the concepts related to slavery and racism. James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, depicts the fictional narration of a journey experienced by an "Ex-Colored" man, living in the late 19th Century in America. The multiracial young man, using the "eyes" as a tool to glean information of the world around him, narrates the various accounts of struggles and the psychological sufferings he endures and captures as he experiences his journey as an African American. The "Ex-Colored" Man thereafter feeling the need to disguise his racial identity adopts the "white" man identity.

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