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## Myths That Changed America

Haley produced two of the top-selling books of the second half of the 20th century. Was he a flawed artist or a ruthless hustler?

By Edward Kosner  
Dec. 27, 2015 6:26 pm ET

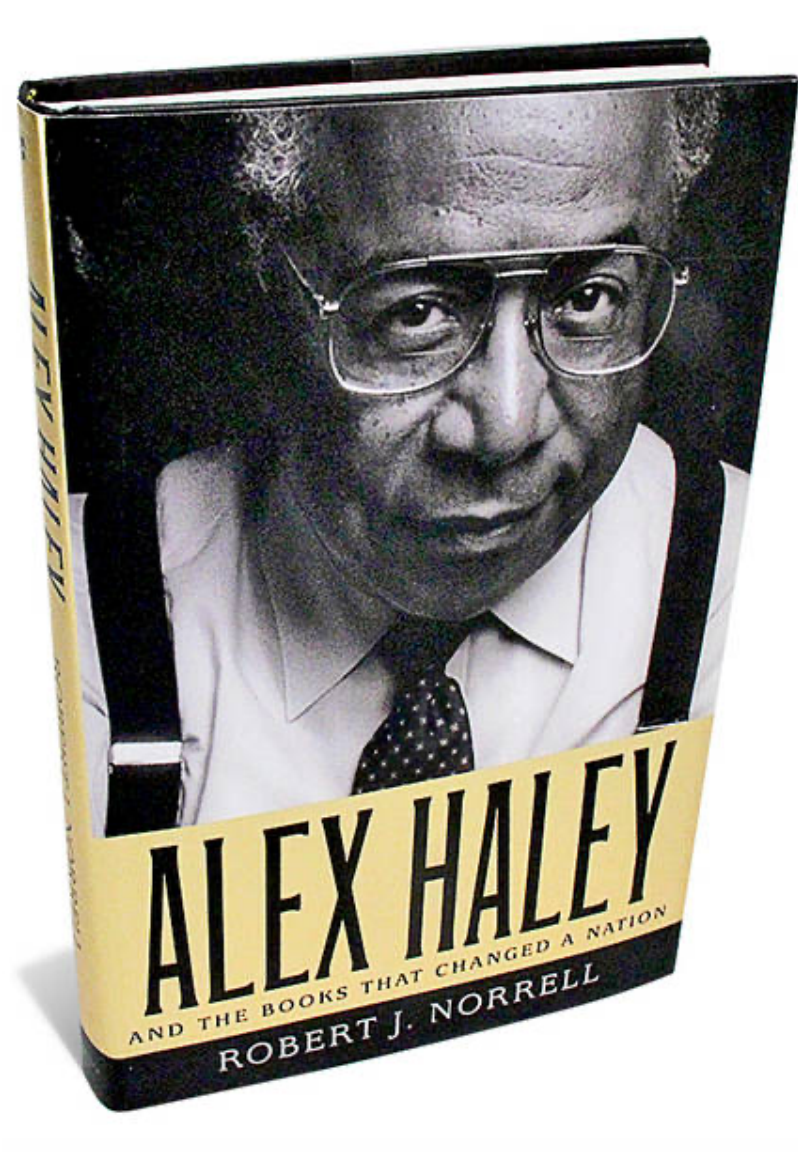
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Alex Haley was once a commanding figure in American popular culture, but his name is now in eclipse. He sold six million copies each of “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” and “Roots,” his epic of slavery and black survival in America. Eighty million people watched individual episodes of the 1977 TV miniseries of the book he called “a saga.” But his career ended in charges that “Roots” was both fraudulent and plagiarized—a neat trick—and his reputation never recovered.

More than two decades after his death at 70 in 1992, Haley is the subject of a sympathetic and mostly clear-eyed biography by Robert J. Norrell, a professor at the University of Tennessee. The book doesn’t dispel the cloud hanging over Haley, but it does portray him as an earnest, striving writer who overpaid his dues as an African-American freelancer desperate to break into the big time. In the darkest days, he papered a wall of his basement flat with rejection letters, the most encouraging a postcard from an editor that said: “Nice try.”

He ultimately triumphed, but the final judgment on Haley depends on how generous one wants to be. The charitable view is that he was a flawed artist—an industrious but scattered writer; a tax debtor and failed husband; a perpetual toothache for book editors and publishers—who somehow produced two of the most acclaimed and top-selling books of the second half of the 20th century. The contrary view is that he was a charlatan who invented much of the text of “Roots.” The incisive black critic Stanley Crouch damned Haley as “a ruthless hustler” and his book as “a hoax.” The press scourge Philip Nobile called him a “literary rogue.”

Alex Haley was an unlikely rogue, much less a best-selling writer. As Mr. Norrell notes, Haley’s own roots were atypical for Southern blacks in the early decades of the 20th century: His father, Simon Haley, and his mother, born Bertha Palmer, were both college graduates, and his father had a graduate degree in agriculture from Cornell. His grandfather, Will Palmer, was a prosperous lumber merchant in Henning, Tenn., where Alex was raised. There was miscegenation on both sides of the family. Alex’s paternal great-grandfather was a Confederate colonel named James Jackson. Family lore had it that his maternal great-great-grandmother, Kizzy, had been raped by her slave master.



ALEX HALEY

By Robert J. Norrell  
*St. Martin’s*, 251 pages, \$26.99

An indifferent high-school student, Haley joined the Coast Guard in 1939 as a mess attendant—the only rank available to black enlistees—and wound up two decades later as its first chief journalist, promoting the service with articles and dealing with the press on rescues and other Coast Guard actions. He left the service to become a magazine writer, eventually conducting long interviews for Playboy. One of his subjects was the charismatic black nationalist Malcolm X, who enlisted Haley to write his autobiography as he was breaking away from Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam. The book took years to finish. Foreshadowing the furor over “Roots,” the “Autobiography,” which finally appeared in September 1965, included a number of dubious details and outright fictions about Malcolm and soft-pedaled his anti-Semitism and dealings with neo-Nazis and the Ku Klux Klan. The “Autobiography,” Mr. Norrell observes gingerly at one point, must be “understood as the creation of its subject’s life, not a factual recounting of it.”

The book became a huge best seller, propelled by Malcolm X’s assassination by Black Muslims earlier in the year. This gave Haley standing to pursue a project he had been mulling for years—reconstructing the story of his family traced back to an ancestor known as “The African,” who had been brought in chains to America in the 18th century. Haley had heard the tale as a boy sitting on the front porch with his Palmer aunts in Henning. He determined not simply to flesh out the story as a folkloric novel but to report it as Truman Capote claimed to have done in “In Cold Blood.”

From snatches of West African language his aunts had used, Haley persuaded himself that “The African” had been named Kunta Kinte and that he had been seized by British slavers from his edenic village on the Gambia River. Book contract in hand, Haley in May 1968 steamed up the river to meet Kunta Kinte’s village historian—the griot—who confirmed the story that the writer had assembled and added all sorts of fascinating detail. This was “the money shot” in Haley’s decade of obsessive reporting and dilatory writing that would make him rich, famous and ultimately a literary outcast.

After excruciating delays and distractions (and substantial rewriting by one of his old Playboy editors), “Roots” was published as nonfiction in 1976. It caused a sensation that only grew the next year, when ABC televised its eight-part miniseries. The book and the TV shows, Mr. Norrell rightly observes, “shifted mass culture to a new understanding of slavery and the black family.”

Alas, “Roots” began to unravel almost at once. A Times of London writer ventured back up the river and reported that the griot had been prepped to tell Haley what he wanted to hear—and that he was an entertainer, not an authentic griot, anyway. Two authors sued Haley for plagiarism of their similar books, and he had to cough up more than \$2.5 million in today’s money to settle one case and pay the lawyers. Then the academics piled on—establishing that Haley’s vaunted documentary and genealogical research was riddled with errors and contradicted his claims.

Haley staged a dignified retreat. “I was just trying to give my people a myth to live by,” he took to saying. He could have avoided all the grief if he and his publishers had simply labeled the book what it was—a historical novel valid in its essential narrative but informed by the imagination. But then, of course, “Roots” would never have achieved the mythic stature it still enjoys today.

*Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.*

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