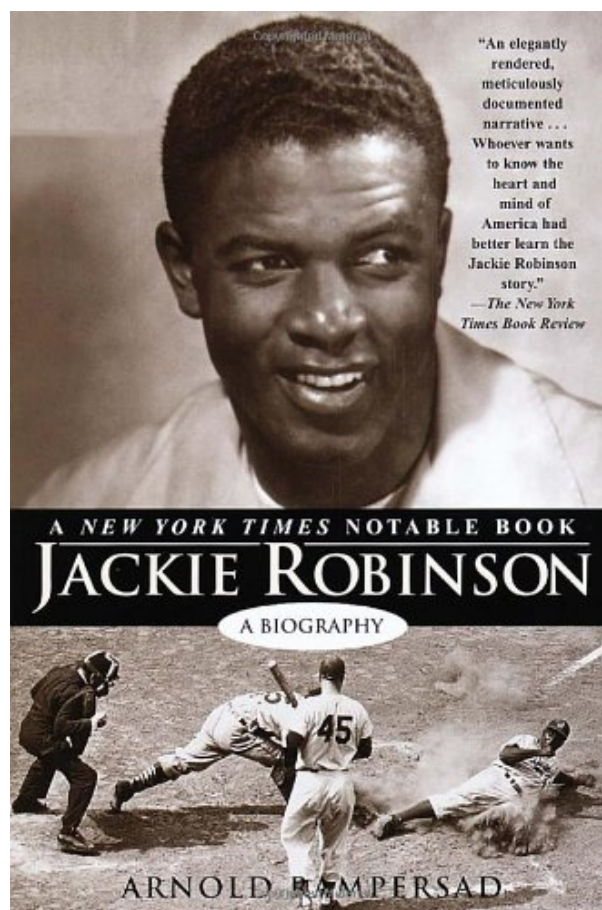
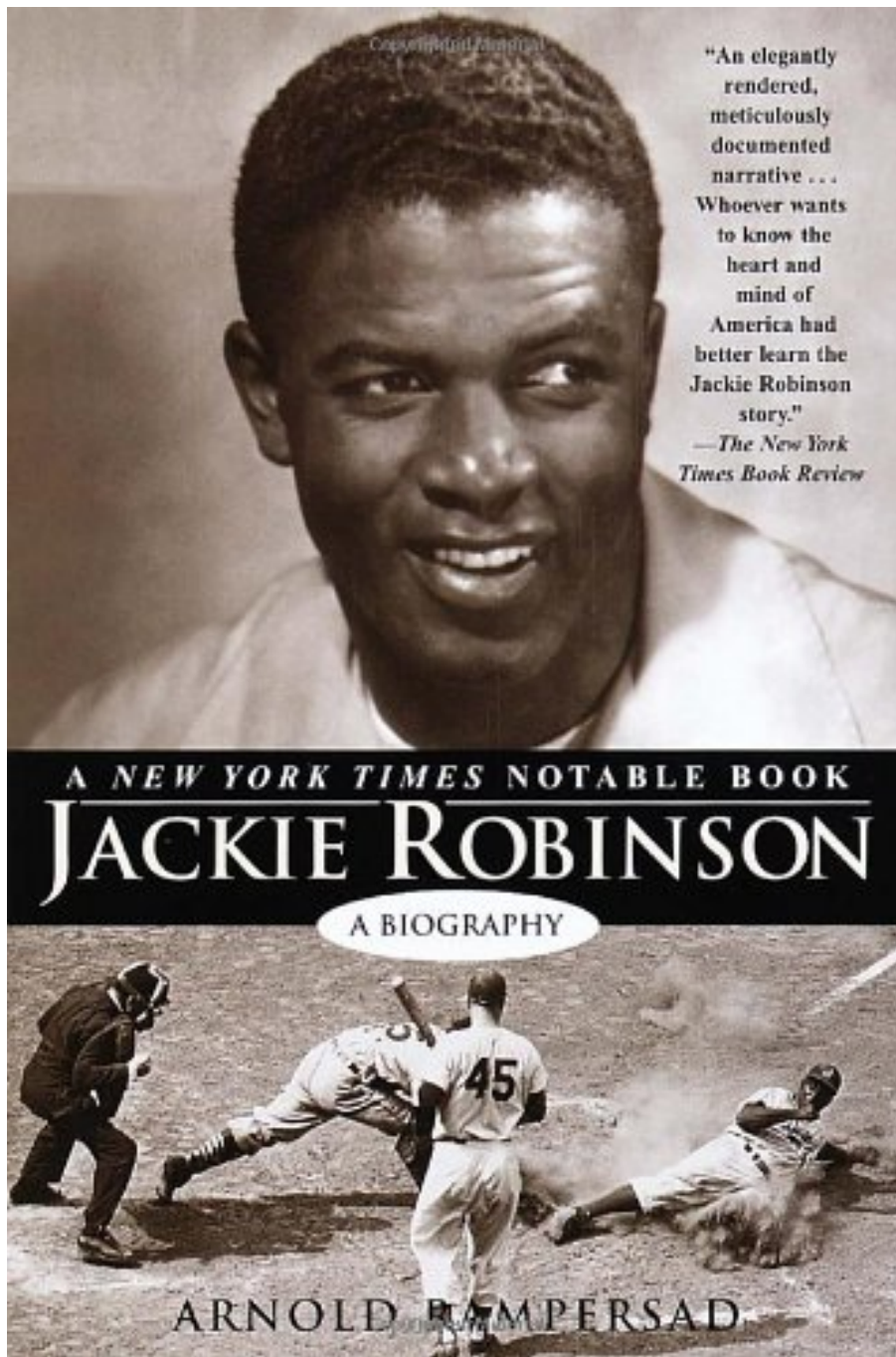


JACKIE ROBINSON: A BIOGRAPHY BY ARNOLD RAMPERSAD



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In baseball and beyond, 1997 has been the year of Jackie Robinson, the 50th anniversary of his obliteration of the game's color line, and a time to reflect on a marvelous man whose heroism and decency cut far beyond the foul lines. Arnold Rampersad, a Princeton professor who's edited the poetry of Langston Hughes and the essays of Richard Wright, and collaborated with tennis great Arthur Ashe on his powerful memoir *Days of Grace*, steps up to the plate here with the first truly comprehensive Robinson biography. It's an important accomplishment, ripe with historical and social insight without losing sight of the human being at its core. Thoroughly researched--Rachel Robinson gave the author access to her husband's personal papers--and filled with fascinating new detail, the book, like its subject, consistently takes the extra base, thrilling with its overall skill, depth, and perspective.

From Library Journal

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From The New Yorker

This considerable book arrives just in time to save the man from his own legend: despite certain limitations, it is a sports story for adults.... Professor Rampersad never suggests that the accident of history which pushed this professional athlete into the forefront to national attention was particularly cruel or ironic, but his tone throughout the book remains so distantly calm and studious as to make us wonder whether he may not be concealing a judgement or a reservation about his subject.

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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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Most helpful customer reviews

23 of 24 people found the following review helpful.

Brings the Legend who was Jackie Robinson to life.

By Mike Powers

In his excellent biography of Brooklyn Dodgers infielder Jackie Robinson, author Arnold Rampersad has painted with a crisp and lively narrative an objective, balanced, and candid portrait of a legend. Here is seen the complex, driven man that was Jackie Robinson, "warts" and all. He was the proud and fiercely determined African American athlete, extraordinarily gifted in at least four sports; a sometimes overly

sensitive man who despised racism always fought against it, even in the pre-Civil Rights era of the 1930s and 1940s, and even at the risk of conviction by military court-martial. He used an unconquerable will and ambition to become a football, baseball, basketball and track star at Pasadena Junior College; one of the greatest football running backs in UCLA history, and ultimately, under the guidance of legendary Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey, the first African American professional baseball player of the modern era. Rampersad traces Robinson's struggle against racism during his early Dodger years; it is a poignant and compelling story.

The book also shows the more human side of Robinson: a quiet and sensitive man, and a political activist whose fight for racial equality was consistent throughout his life; a wonderfully loving husband but sometimes distant father; and a businessman of tremendous integrity. At Rampersad's hands, Jackie Robinson is a genuinely heroic and admirable person. This is a book which allows the reader to really get to know its subject. It is one of the finest biographies I've read in many years. Highly recommended!

35 of 46 people found the following review helpful.

Pulls its punch

By Jay Stevens

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. Why exactly did Robinson favor the Republican Party, even long after it was obvious that the GOP proved to be the party of segregation and white privilege? Also Rampersad only hints at the acrimony and in-fighting between Robinson and such organizations as the NAACP and SLCC.

Presented with the facts supplied by Rampersad, it seemed that Robinson was a vain, proud, and sensitive man, who was extremely susceptible to flattery, especially from powerful whites. It also seems that his success in baseball convinced him that he would be successful in other areas, especially politics. But it seemed that he was over his head in that area, always a tool of the professionals, Nixon and Rockefeller.

Notice I say "seem" a lot! That's because Rampersad never states any of this outright, he only hints at it - enough to acknowledge these characteristics, but fails to explore them. Rampersad never digs into Robinson's psychology, never explains or contemplates motivation, cause, or effect of any of Robinson's endeavors. It's so easy on Robinson that I suspect Rampersad wrote this book for Robinson's widow - or maybe her approval of the book was necessary as part of some deal for use of her letters. Or perhaps Rampersad was too aware of Robinson's near-saint-like stature in our nation's culture to find any fault with the man. In any case, he definitely pulls all punches, and the book, though informative, feels incomplete.

Yes, Robinson was a hero. Yes, he was courageous. But he was also a man, full of frailties and

inconsistencies, just like the rest of us. To withhold judgement does him as much disservice as it does us...

8 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

This book cooks!

By A Customer

I wasn't a huge baseball fan when I started this book, but I'd heard of Jackie Robinson. I used to think I knew who he was. Well, you don't anything until you read this book! The comforting text inches over every exciting aspect of Jackie Robinson's life. It was written using information that Jackie Robinson's wife provided for the first time. The topics range from rising above racism to sharing personal family experiences. If you love baseball, this book is absolutely for you. However, if you're not really into sports (like me), then you'll still adore this true-life story that seems almost unreal.

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