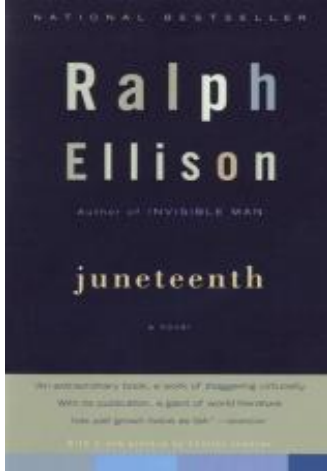


# Juneteenth

by Ralph Ellison

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## About the Book

From Ralph Ellison--author of the classic novel of African-American experience, *Invisible Man*--the long-awaited second novel. Here is the master of American vernacular--the rhythms of jazz and gospel and ordinary speech--at the height of his powers, telling a powerful, evocative tale of a prodigal of the twentieth century.

"Tell me what happened while there's still time," demands the dying Senator Adam Sunraider to the itinerate Negro preacher whom he calls Daddy Hickman. As a young man, Sunraider was Bliss, an orphan taken in by Hickman and raised to be a preacher like himself. Bliss's history encompasses the joys of young southern boyhood; bucolic days as a filmmaker, lovemaking in a field in the Oklahoma sun. And behind it all lies a mystery: how did this chosen child become the man who would deny everything to achieve his goals? Brilliantly crafted, moving, wise, *Juneteenth* is the work of an American master.

## Discussion Guide

1. The first chapter, in which Hickman and his followers come to Washington, employs a fairly clear and traditional narrative style. Chapter Two, on the other hand, is experimental, even surreal, in its stream-of-consciousness presentation of events. It places the reader in the midst of things and causes a certain sense of bewilderment which is only laid to rest upon reading through the novel. What is the effect, as you read, of Ellison's presentation of his characters' shifting thoughts, and the movements from past to present in the consciousness of his characters?

2. During his speech in the Senate, we learn that the significance of Adam Sunraider's name is in the beliefs he holds about identity and its fluidity. He says, "Ours is the freedom and obligation to be ever the fearless creators of ourselves, the reconstructors of the world. We were created to be Adamic definers, namers and shapers of yet undiscovered secrets of the universe" [p. 23]! How is this idea particularly American? How are Sunraider's ideas about identity different from those held by Reverend Hickman?

3. What does Sunraider mean by saying that the main substance of American consumption consists of ideals [p. 16]? Can ideals be consumed, or are they supposed to be stable, unshifting? How does the seeming idealism of the senator's speech resound with his abrupt shift to joking about Cadillacs in Harlem [p. 23]? Are the ironies of this speech easier to grasp once the reader knows more about Sunraider's history?

4. What is the significance of **Juneteenth**, the day in 1865 on which Texas slaves found out--very belatedly--that they were free? Why does what happens on the commemoration of **Juneteenth** have such a shattering effect upon Bliss's life? Why does Ellison want to draw a parallel between that date in the history of American slavery, and this fateful day for Hickman and Bliss?

5. Why are the movie industry and Bliss's fascination with movie-making so central to the story? Is there a meaning in the sequence of Bliss's progression from itinerant revival preacher to movie-maker to politician? What is Ellison saying about the role of illusion in American culture and belief? Hickman says, as he prepares to take Bliss to the picture show for the first time, "The preacher's job, his main job, Bliss, is to help folks find themselves and to keep reminding them to remember who they are" [p. 223]. What is the role of illusion, or trickery, in Daddy Hickman's ministry? Is there a contradiction here?

6. Why does Ellison deliberately contrast the hard-won integrity and deep self-knowledge of Hickman with the bewilderment, the desperate grasping at various identities, of Bliss/Sunraider? Is black identity necessarily more clear-cut than white identity?

7. Ellison has written, "Despite his racial difference and social status, something indisputably American about Negroes not only raised doubts about the white man's value system but aroused the troubling suspicion that whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black." How does this statement apply to **Juneteenth**? What, for Ellison, is the role that black culture plays in the lives of white Americans? What is its role in American culture as a whole?

8. What do you think of Bliss's role in Hickman's show as the son who rises from the dead? Is this exploitative on Hickman's part, given that Bliss is so clearly afraid of being imprisoned in the coffin for this theatrical resurrection? Do you feel sympathetic toward Bliss in his need to break free of Daddy Hickman's control over his life?

9. What is the relationship between Sunraider's public references to black Americans as "those alien-minded groups who refuse the sacred obligations of becoming true Americans...these internal enemies" and one of his private thoughts that appears on the same page--"How here I reject them and out of my rejection rule them. They create their own darkness and in their embarrassment left all to chance my changed opportunity" [pp. 60-61]. How important is self-hatred in his transformation? We don't know, finally, whether Sunraider is white or of mixed race. Does it matter? Why should he desire so strongly to reject the people who raised him?

10. What is the relationship between preaching and music (gospel, jazz, and blues) in **Juneteenth**, particularly in

Hickman's description of the **Juneteenth** celebration in Chapter Seven? How do these musical rhythms affect Ellison's prose style?

**11.** One of the book's most important scenes takes place when Hickman and his followers go to pray at the Lincoln Memorial and feel a profound identification with "father Abraham" [p. 281]. Why does this sequence have such a strong emotional impact? Are Hickman and his followers the true inheritors of Lincoln's moral integrity?

**12.** With his adoption by Hickman, Bliss effectively becomes the child of an entire community, and Hickman speaks of the adoption in communal terms. "We took the child and tried to seek the end of the old brutal dispensation in the hope that a little gifted child would speak for our condition from inside the only acceptable mask. That he would embody our spirit in the councils of our enemies--but oh! what a foolish miscalculation" [p. 271]! What is the moral principle that Hickman and his followers have attempted to live by? Why are they faithful to Sunraider to the end?

**13.** What does Hickman mean when he says, "Little Bliss was father to the man and the man was also me" [p. 320]? How is Hickman, a gambler-musician turned preacher, changed by the presence of Bliss in his life? What happens during their long conversation in the hospital? Is there forgiveness and reconciliation between them?

**14.** The final chapter is a hallucinatory stream of memories and visions in the senator's mind. Filled with danger and escape, it seems to recapitulate in dreamlike form many of the scenes of Bliss's childhood--among them, the figure of his red-haired mother and the wealthy world of riding habits, ball gowns, and shooting jackets [see Chapter Ten], and a little boy in red pantaloons who might be an image of himself and who also seems to merge with the little clown in blackface on page 249. How does the final chapter change your perspective on Sunraider and his betrayal of Hickman? Is there a sense of justice here, since Sunraider is threatened with violence from blacks and whites alike?

**15.** How is your response to **Juneteenth** affected by the afterword, in which Ellison's literary executor, John Callahan, explains that he extracted the narrative he says "best stands alone as a single, self-contained volume" from over 2,000 pages of typescript that Ellison had worked on for over 40 years?

## Author Bio

## Critical Praise

"Juneteenth...threatens to come as close as any since Huckleberry Finn to grabbing the ring of the great American Novel."  
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**Publication Date:** June 13, 2000

**Paperback:** 400 pages

**Publisher:** Vintage

**ISBN-10:** 0375707549

**ISBN-13:** 9780375707544