



*Selected Letters of Langston Hughes* (New York: Knopf, pp. 423, ISBN: 0375413790) edited by Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel with Christa Fratantoro reviewed by Todd Steven Burroughs.

If he were alive today, Langston Hughes would have tried to write this book review as quickly as possible. He had bills to pay (and loans from friends to pay back), so he leapt into the plays, novels and short stories he had to write. Meanwhile, an ever-mounting pile of correspondence awaited him to sort and answer—which he did, often into the late night and early morning. Luckily for Hughes aficionados, that lifetime’s worth of letters were regularly shipped, from 1940 until his 1967 death at the age of 65, to Yale University’s James Weldon Johnson Collection. (The idea for the collection was Carl Van Vechten’s, the man history identifies as the white champion of the Harlem

Renaissance.) It’s from this massive Hughes output—thousands of letters that date back to 1921, letters that eventually filled 671 boxes—that the reader can see the artist at work.

It’s almost mostly just his work schedule—with a smattering of self-opining and sometimes-frank opinions of his fellow artists thrown in—that’s absorbed from this comprehensive survey. Hughes’s definitive biographer Arnold Rampersad and literature scholar David Roessel, with help from independent scholar Christa Fratantoro, chose the letters that give as much insight as the often-intangible Hughes chooses to reveal. His most frequent communications, according to this assemblage, were to his literary agent, Maxim Lieber, his publisher Blanche Knopf (the matron of the publishing house that is celebrating its centennial with this book and a re-issue of Hughes’ first-and-still-classic 1926 poetry collection *The Weary Blues*), his friend and quasi-patron Noel Sullivan, and his best pal and writing partner, Arna Bontemps. In this book, which mightily struggles to be more than a work ledger, Hughes is almost constantly at work, writing anything from quickie children’s books to newspaper columns to his two autobiographies, the 1940’s *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* and the 1956’s *I Wonder as I Wander: An Autobiographical Journey*. Sadly for the general reader but semi-happily for Hughes, the master poet had a near-obsession with writing a successful stage musical, which would have given him the financial security that eluded him his entire struggling-against-being-a-vagabond life. His attempts to fight being fleeced by racist white producers and playwrights are as tedious as they are outrageous.

Hughes kept everything that interested him. He followed Black newspapers and magazines with great care, and kept track what those periodicals were saying about Black artists, especially him. Periodicals were Hughes’ lifeblood: he sold many short stories, poems and essays to Black magazines such as *The Crisis* and *Phylon* and white magazines such as *Esquire*.

Irony abounds in Negro life: Hughes' *Chicago Defender* Op-Ed column hit book and stage musical pay dirt for with his creation of the character Jesse B. Semple ("Simple"), but *The Defender*, now having access to cheaper, white columnists, wanted to cut the little he made from it.

With the exception of the musical producers and, not insignificantly, the McCarthy witch-hunters who tried to destroy him in the 1950s, these collective letters display a man's need to be loved and needed by everyone. He is always attempting anthologies (especially for African writers) and is ceaselessly encouraging to fellow writers, especially younger ones that he proudly claims as his discoveries, like Margaret Walker Alexander and, later, a young Alice Walker ("She is really 'cute as a button' and real bright...Mine is her first important publication [and her first story in print], so I can claim her discovery, too, I reckon," he writes to Bontemps in 1966) (415). For the most part, he holds back his anger and his hurt, and tries to put a positive spin on almost everyone, even the younger, angrier writers—James Baldwin and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka)—who criticize him in his later years. The personal outlook matches the professional persona well, since Hughes had to depend on the largesse and kindness of many, many friends and associates in order to survive. The letters are his day-to-day-reality-as-performance, but his romantic life, his sexuality; his personal needs are permanently off-stage, not for even semi-public consumption.

Rampersad's high biographical standard continues to hold. The annotations alone—of people, places and events that populate Hughes' almost-countless adventures and misadventures around the world and around New York City—make it worth the time it takes to go through his life, one thought and one year at a time. The introductions to the chronological sections show the trio of writers at their concise, detailed best.

This book can be read on its own, but it is the perfect companion to either of Hughes' autobiographies, Rampersad's two-volume biographical magnum opus, or even just a collection of the artist's poetry. It's not too obvious to say it is a fantastic addition to the bookcases filled with Hughes' writing and Hughes scholarship. It is a must for those who want a peek behind the curtain of a Black artist, but don't need to see too much.

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