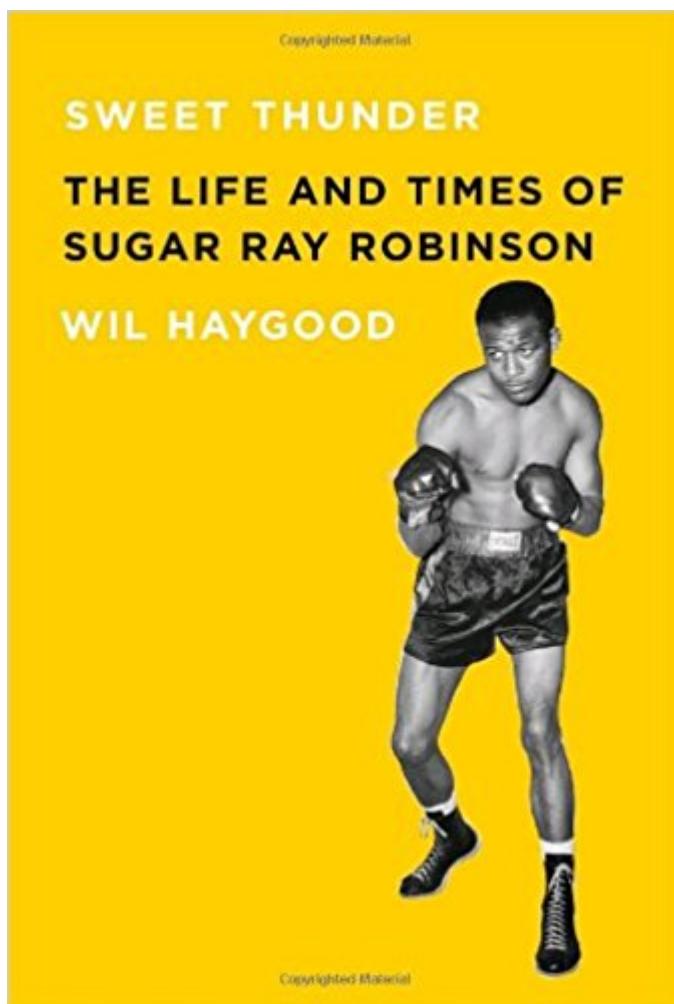


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# Sweet Thunder: The Life And Times Of Sugar Ray Robinson (Borzoi Books)



## Synopsis

From the author of the critically acclaimed *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.*, comes another illuminating socio-historical narrative of the twentieth century, this one spun around one of the most iconic figures of the fight game, Sugar Ray Robinson. Continuing to set himself apart as one of our cannier cultural historians, Wil Haygood grounds the spectacular story of Robinson's rise to greatness within the context of the fighter's life and times. Born Walker Smith, Jr., in 1921, Robinson had an early childhood marked by the seething racial tensions and explosive race riots that infected the Midwest throughout the twenties and thirties. After his mother moved him and his sisters to the relative safety of Harlem, he came of age in the vibrant post-Renaissance years. It was there that he was encouraged to box by his mother, who wanted him off the streets. He soon became a rising star, cutting an electrifying, glamorous figure, riding around town in his famous pink Cadillac. Beyond the celebrity, though, Robinson would emerge as a powerful, often controversial black symbol in a rapidly changing America. Haygood also weaves in the stories of Langston Hughes, Lena Horne, and Miles Davis, whose lives not only intersected with Robinson's but also contribute richly to the scope and soul of the book. From Robinson's gruesome six-bout war with Jake "Raging Bull" LaMotta and his lethal meeting with Jimmy Doyle to his Harlem nightclub years and thwarted show-biz dreams, Haygood brings the champion's story, in the ring and out, powerfully to life against a vividly painted backdrop of the world he captivated.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Haygood's book is certainly one of the best biographies of a boxer ever written . . . an important contribution to both sports literature and African American studies."-Gerald Early, Washington Post . . . Thoroughly marvelous . . ."-Tim Rutten, Los Angeles Times . . . "Mr. Haygood captures his grace and power, at many disparate moments, as well as it's been captured . . . Mr. Haygood . . . is a biographer in his own prime." -Dwight Garner, New York Times . . . an ambitious portrait of an American legend."-Pete Hamill, Sunday Times . . . insightful, highly readable . . . A wonderful book that deserves a wide audience."-Kirkus Reviews . . . "Haygood's excellent account of Robinson's long, eventful life . . . is packed with anecdotes and lush, pertinent context."-Katherine Dunn, Bookforum . . . "Wil Haygood's new biography of Robinson . . . is about as fine a book about a boxer as you will find . . . Who is, pound for pound, the best fighter of all time? Robinson is always in that conversation. And should the topic ever pivot to the best writers about the sport, Haygood should be, too."-Henry C. Jackson, Associated Press . . . a compelling, often brilliant biography."-Rege Behe, Pittsburgh Tribune . . . "Haygood was born to the task . . . a portrayal that resonates with the guts, glitter and gravitas that his subject merits."-Bijan C. Bayne, The Bay State Banner . . . "This book is a wonderful mix of reporting and grace, inspired by the thunder and speed of a much forgotten champion. Deeply researched, superbly written, thankfully devoid of dripping sentimentality, Wil Haygood takes an old broom to Harlem history and sweeps out the corners. This is the boxer we never knew."-James McBride, author of *The Color of Water*"The best is always fragile, Sugar Ray Robinson once said, and it took a writer of Wil Haygood's magnificence to appreciate what this meant in bringing the great boxer back to life. Sweet Thunder is a jewel from beginning to end."-David Maraniss, author of *When Pride Still Mattered* and *Rome 1960*"Finally, a biography worthy of a great athlete and social force, Sugar Ray Robinson." -Larry Merchant, HBO World Championship Boxing

Wil Haygood is a prizewinning staff writer for The Washington Post and an acclaimed biographer. His *In Black and White* was internationally praised. Among his honors are the ASCAP Deems Taylor Award, the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, and the Nonfiction Book of the Year Award from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association.

I hate to be somewhat less than adoring among all these excellent reviews, but there was something I found lacking in this otherwise very interesting biography. I understand and applaud the contextualizing of Sugar Ray and his place in the evolution and emergence of African-American

culture and independence in the post-WWII era. I found the relationship between Ray and Miles or Hughes to be fascinating, his many business ventures and efforts outside the ring to be worthy of discussion, and even liked the jazzbo style of the author. However, there were times when -- if not a "monotonous linear narrative" as one reviewer calls it -- how about at least some sense of the chronological arc of his fighting career? You just don't get many details and are left wondering exactly when did he win the belt, who was he fighting at the time etc. I personally would have liked more of that, though I agree Haygood covers The Raging Bull matches well. In sum, there were parts of this book I really liked, and parts of this book that I wished were in there so I could have liked them too.

Haygood's work is an ambitious effort to place the career of one of the greatest -- if not the greatest -- boxers ever in a social context. To that end, he interweaves the stories of three of Robinson's contemporaries, Lena Horne, Langston Hughes, and Miles Davis, into the narrative of the life of Walker Smith, Jr., the Detroit-raised youth who would become Sugar Ray Robinson. He chooses these three as examples of African-American artists who made powerful individual marks and achieved success in a culture still badly stained by racism. Haygood sees Robinson connected to them through his artistry in the ring. They improvised with pen, voice, and trumpet; he did so with feet and fists. Moreover, Robinson blended his interest in art and show business with his paid profession. He owned his own nightclub that was a fixture for the sporting and entertainment elite of the '40s and '50s. There is nothing wrong with the approach, although I understand the frustration of those who were expecting more about Robinson's boxing. If you're looking for a book predominantly about his boxing career, I'd skip this one. Personally, however, I have no problem at all with writers who strive to place sports figures in a social context. Charles Einstein's "Willie's Time," for example, brilliantly evokes the era in which Willie Mays came of age and matured while maintaining a deep appreciation of and describing well Mays's brilliance as a baseball player. In my view, however, Haygood falls short of his goal. First, the writing is a bit clunky throughout. He strives for lyricism in his attempts to capture the ferment of Harlem and Parisian nightlife through which Robinson and the others moved, but frequently produces riffs that are superficially flashy but forgettable. I'll give him credit for trying on that score, but a more serious flaw is the sections on Hughes, Horne and Davis aren't smoothly integrated into the flow of the narrative and therefore come off as grafted on. Horne gets the most attention, and the sections on her success and influence are very interesting, but too often I was left wondering what Haygood's strategy was in connecting the dots. Too often I felt I was left hanging. A great jazz improvisation needs more than a series of runs and scales. It needs an arc

and a feeling of completeness. On this, Haygood missed the mark. The litmus test for a biography, of course, is whether or not one comes away feeling that he knows a great deal more about the subject than he did at the outset. This, in my opinion, is another shortcoming of the book. Haygood does well in the sections on Robinson's boxing career. He captures his subject's ambivalence about the sport and does well in describing the physical and emotional toll it took on him, particularly in the long, slow decline in the years after he returned to the ring following a disastrous foray into entertainment. But we get very little of substance about his non-boxing life. In particular, I wondered about the conflict that must have pulled at him as he moved between the world of the ring and the world of the clubs. Each had its allure; each made its demands. Haygood doesn't shed much light on how Robinson saw that conflict and how he must have struggled with it. Haygood also gives relatively short shrift to Robinson's apparently sharp business acumen -- how difficult that must have been to maintain in that time -- and how that set him apart and at odds with not only the boxing establishment but also his own circle. Yes, by all accounts the man was notoriously opaque. Biographer Dave Anderson, for example, failed to get anything of substance out of Robinson when he asked him to explain the controversial injury that led to his discharge from the Army and return to the ring in 1944. Unfortunately, Haygood gives us nothing more on it. Most troubling, he barely mentions the allegations against Robinson of domestic abuse, this despite the claims being made by his first wife, Edna Mae, in an ESPN documentary. Whatever the veracity of the charges, they surely bear investigation by a conscientious biographer. Ultimately, I found "Sweet Thunder" worth reading, and it's obvious from some of the reviews that others found it compelling. For me, it came close in spots but didn't quite connect.

This is a very good book and one for people who don't like boxing. At first I wasn't sure about the weaving Sugar Ray's life into the lives of Lena Horne and Langston Hughes and Miles Davis, but Haygood can write and this is fascinating stuff. He does all this without robbing the fight side, giving LaMotta his due and such. My complaint comes with some loose ends, especially at the end. First, why didn't Randy Turpin get a third fight? I understand Robinson wanted Graziano, but Turpin deserved another shot. Haygood says nothing here. Finally, why did Robinson's financial empire collapse so suddenly. There is mention of mismanagement while he was on the road, but not why it all went south so quickly. Since he weaves so much else into this biography, why not spend some time on why so many great athletes, and seemingly so many boxers, end up broke at the end and owing so much in back taxes? Still, I recommend this book. It is well-written and a fascinating snapshot of Robinson and his time.

As a devout fan of Sugar Ray, Miles Davis, Lena Horne, and Langston Hughes you cannot imagine the joy of reading a Sports' book that had all of them in it and part of the life of the greatest professional boxer who ever lived! This book is unputdownable. I have read it twice, sent it to friends, and suggested my actor friend , Harvey Keitel , option it for a movie;.If you are not a boxing fan , not to worry, this book is so much more, It is the coming to granduer of a generation of great African-Americans centered around one of the most interesting of all sports' figures ever, the Great Sugar Ray Robinson.

A great story about the greatest pound for pound fighter who ever lived in my opinion! Sugar Ray was not only a super boxing talent but a good guy as well! You will enjoy every moment spent with this biography it is most enjoyable and exciting read. A must have for every Boxing fan!

Although it outlined all of his fights, I felt photos, especially of the lovely Edna Mae Robinson and a greater insight into their marriage was missing here. And, although it gave a glimpse into the history at the time, I felt it gave too much of information to people who were not boxers or people who many already knew about. I have books on Langston Hughes and Miles Davis. He should've stuck with Sugar Ray and his wife. Other wise it was okay.

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