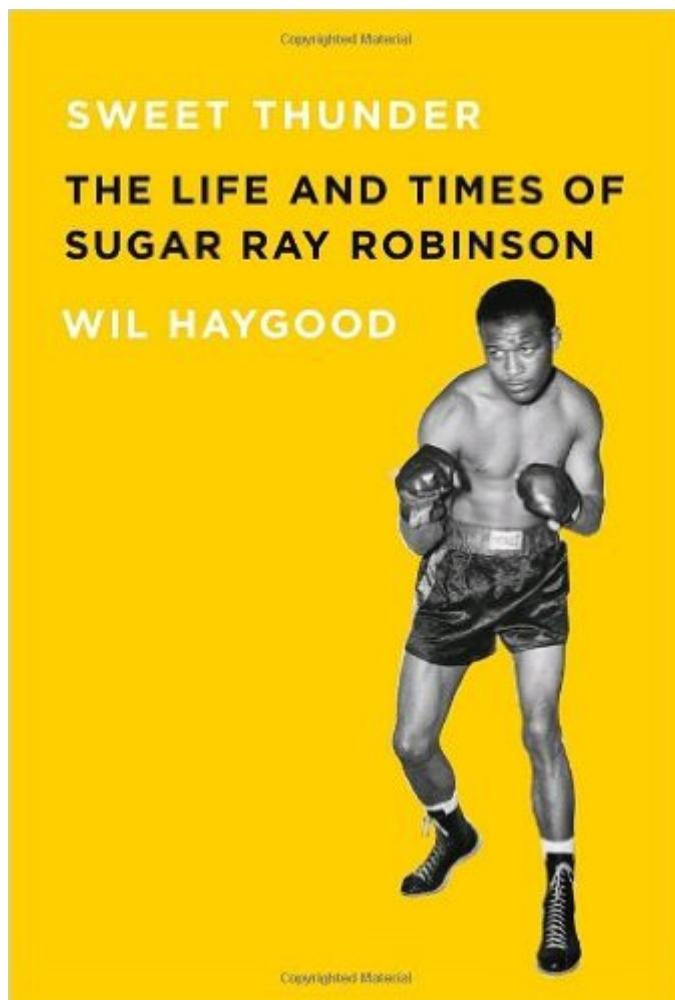


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Sweet Thunder: The Life And Times Of Sugar Ray Robinson (Borzoi Books)



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 "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

on the casque of thy adverse pernicious enemy" King Richard II, Act I Scene iiiTwo ancient bits of personal history came flooding back to me when I read Wil Haygood's "Sweet Thunder: The Life and Times of Sugar Ray Robinson".First, when I was growing up in the late 50s and early 60s a big group of kids in my neighborhood used to gather into one tiny apartment to watch the boxing on Friday nights. In between fights, we'd strap on big gloves and stage our own 1 round fights. That ended the night we watched Emile Griffith kill Benny "Kid" Paret during a bout.Second, I remember my father (a musician) talking about how so many of the performers he worked for loved fighters and the fight game. When asked why they seem to have such a close relationship with each other he said basically musicians and fighters (and other athletes) tended at that time to live on the margins or outside the margins of 'acceptable' society. They are admired by society even while society sometimes thinks of them as somewhat off. He also indicated that when you get into the ring or put a sax to your lips or put a violin on your shoulders you become judged by your peers solely on merit. In the internal world of boxing and music there was something approaching a meritocracy that society generally was far from adopting. He noted that the best fighters in the world could be viewed as the jazz artists of boxing; you could compare a Robinson fight to a Miles Davis performance if you looked closely enough. The great fighters and the great jazz musicians could respond with fluidity and grace to their environment even if that environment was changing during a fight or a performance.

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.

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