

## NONFICTION

# Alex Haley Taught America About Race — and a Young Man How to Write

In 1968, the celebrated author of “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” arrived at Hamilton College to teach and work on his magnum opus, “Roots.” Now, on the centenary of his birth, a former student recalls Haley’s class.

By Michael Patrick Hearn

Dec. 17, 2021

In 1959, long before his books “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” and “Roots” made him famous, an aspiring writer named Alex Haley, fresh out of the Coast Guard, wrote to six prominent Black writers in Greenwich Village for pointers on how to break into publishing. Only James Baldwin replied, showing up at Haley’s place unannounced one afternoon and chatting with him. Haley was eternally grateful for such generous encouragement from the distinguished author.

Alex Haley, whose centenary we mark this year, was my James Baldwin. When I entered Hamilton College in the fall of 1968, I was determined to be a writer, so I signed up for Haley’s writing course, not knowing what to expect. I was already familiar with “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” his collaboration with the Black leader, which had become an instant best seller when it was published three years earlier; my sister had read it at Skidmore College and wrote to me about how powerful it was. (She signed her letter “Cindy X.”) The book blew me away, just as Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man” and Eldridge Cleaver’s “Soul on Ice” did later. Attending Haley’s class allowed me to observe him in action for nearly a year while he was working on his magnum opus, “Roots.”

The class was rather free-form — not exactly what Hamilton students were used to. Haley seemed to be making it up as we went along. Stylistically, he was old school, precise and a bit formal. He was always “Mr. Haley” to us; he called me “Hearn.” He enjoyed the conviviality of college life and had enormous faith in young people, but his class was not the place for moody poets or budding novelists. It was a no-nonsense course about the nuts and bolts of being a professional journalist — as Haley was at the time — and he often peppered his lectures with vivid anecdotes from his early days as a writer.

He proudly described how he started out in the Coast Guard during World War II, as the Black Cyrano de Bergerac of the South Pacific, writing letters for his lovesick shipmates to send to their sweethearts. He had dropped out of college to sign up as a mess boy and, after an article he wrote about his experiences aboard ship caught an admiral’s eye, was eventually promoted to the position — created just for him — of chief journalist for the service. He confessed that he was most productive writing at night at sea and often booked passage on freighters to meet deadlines. There were no distractions on a ship, in particular no telephones.

Discharged after 20 years, he resolved to become a writer and moved to the Village. He told us that discipline was far more important than mere talent. He liked to say that one needed to write a million words before one could be a writer. He spoke of his many early rejections, enough to paper his apartment, and said that we should expect as many too, but not be discouraged. Diligence pulled him through and would us as well. He told us how for years he ghostwrote a “Most Unforgettable Character I Ever Met” feature for Reader’s Digest. He also initiated the famous “Interview” series in Hugh Hefner’s Playboy. His first public appearance at then all-male Hamilton was in October 1966 on official Playboy business, when he escorted a Bunny around campus.

Haley had such an easygoing conversational style that he could speak with anyone. Born in Ithaca, N.Y., in August 1921, he grew up in the South — first in Tennessee, then in Alabama — and spoke in a melodious baritone, with a quiet, rhythmical, Southern drawl. He was the gentlest of gentlemen. I never heard him raise his voice or utter an unkind remark, and he made it a rule after speaking at a fancy dinner to talk with the kitchen staff; they were usually the only people of color at the affair.

His motto was “Find the good, and praise it.” Politically he was a moderate, philosophically more Martin than Malcolm. He lectured on “The Virus of Violence” at the height of the Black Power movement. “I don’t believe white people are an evil force,” he said at Williams College in 1969. “We’re all the same people. It’s only when individuals form into groups that prejudice emerges.” He believed we had to learn to communicate with one another before there could be unity among all people.

Some within the Black community resisted his message. Some did not want to be reminded of their enslaved past; Haley’s mother dismissed her mother’s tales of her African ancestry and the peculiar foreign words he and his two younger brothers called “Grandma’s noises.” Haley saw no shame in his forebears having been slaves. He liked to remind us the ancestors of Black Americans, unlike those of other immigrant groups, were brought here in chains. He wanted tangible evidence of their existence. A common assumption in academia at the time was that there were no reliable records of the lives of Black folk, so they had no history to speak of. Haley believed otherwise and sought his proof.

He was especially proud of securing one of the first in-depth interviews with the elusive jazz great Miles Davis. He told us he had to use a little subterfuge after he was flatly turned down by the musician's representative. He knew that Davis worked out in a boxing gym in Harlem so he joined it. One day Davis challenged him to spar and he accepted. From then on Davis was willing to discuss anything except his drug use. Hefner published their long rambling discussion almost exactly as written; it became the first Playboy "Interview." Along with Johnny Carson and Sammy Davis Jr., Haley interviewed Martin Luther King Jr. and Muhammad Ali. (Adam Clayton Powell Jr. refused him because he did not want to be associated with Playboy.)

He told us that his most unnerving subject was the American Nazi Party founder, George Lincoln Rockwell. During a phone call before Haley was due to arrive at Rockwell's headquarters in Arlington, Va., the white supremacist asked him if he was Jewish. Haley said no. Rockwell was furious when a Black man showed up. He kept a revolver on the armrest of his chair while they talked. Just to rile Haley, he used the worst name anyone could call a Black person, ad nauseam. There was much discussion in the Playboy office about whether to keep the epithet in the story, but the editors finally decided not to censor the bigot. Haley said it showed just how ignorant Rockwell was: Through its incessant repetition, the word lost its power to shock.

### **The Best Books of 2021**

Editors at The Times Book Review selected the best fiction and nonfiction titles of the year. Here are some of their picks:

- **'How Beautiful We Were':** Imbolo Mbue's second novel is a tale of a casually sociopathic corporation and the people whose lives it steamrolls.
- **'On Juneteenth':** Annette Gordon-Reed explores the racial and social complexities of Texas, her home state, weaving history and memoir.
- **'Intimacies':** Katie Kitamura's novel follows an interpreter at The Hague who is dealing with loss, an uncertain relationship and an insecure world.
- **'Red Comet':** Heather Clark's new biography of the poet Sylvia Plath is daring, meticulously researched and unexpectedly riveting.

"The Autobiography of Malcolm X" evolved from a Playboy interview and an article on the Nation of Islam for Reader's Digest. Though Haley felt he never really knew King, he eventually developed a unique rapport with the charismatic Malcolm X, even if they did not always see eye to eye. The first thing Malcolm said to his future collaborator was, "You're another one of the white man's tools sent to spy!" and once, after their book came out, Haley called Malcolm "the angriest Black demagogue in America." It was a miracle the book ever happened. Forbidden to use a tape recorder during their interviews, Haley typed as Malcolm spoke, or wrote down what he said on legal pads. At the beginning, Malcolm revealed little personal information. But one evening, when Haley asked him about his mother, he suddenly opened up. After that, no question was off limits. Haley came to know not only the man's public rage but also his private tenderness.



Alex Haley in 1977. He spoke with the easy grace of a country parson, but no fire and brimstone emanated from his pulpit. Afro American Newspapers/Gado/Getty Images

I first realized what a compelling raconteur Haley was during a lecture on his work in progress that he delivered in Hamilton's chapel during the fall of 1968. He enraptured that room of diffident white college men with his tales of the 18th-century African named Kunta Kinte, whom his captors called Toby. He told us about Kizzy ("that means 'stay put'" in Mandinka) and Fiddler and Chicken George and the other characters who nearly a decade later would be known to all America. He spoke with the easy grace of a country parson, but no fire and brimstone emanated from his pulpit as he calmly but bracingly recounted what he said was his mother's family history. He did not shy away from describing the brutalities one race inflicted on another. The tradition at Hamilton at the time was to snap one's fingers in approval rather than to applaud; his lecture was received with thunderous snaps.

The book was swiftly evolving from its initial concept. When Haley proposed it to his agent in 1963, it was to be an autobiographical story about his childhood in Henning, Tenn., as well as a larger meditation on prewar rural Southern Black life and its contrast with the unrest of the civil rights era. Then he began researching the family stories he had heard his grandmother Cynthia and the other old ladies tell on the porch on hot summer days. By the time I got to Hamilton, he had devoted four years of research in archives on three continents — North America, Europe and Africa.

He thought his saga covering seven generations of a single African American family could be the Black "Gone With the Wind." He told me he originally wanted to call the book "Search," as it was his personal quest to validate his family's stories, but he feared it could be confused with a largely forgotten 1948 Montgomery Clift picture of the same title that none of us had heard of. While at Hamilton, he considered calling it "The African," then "Before This Anger." He sincerely believed that the book could be instrumental in healing a divided nation through its recognition of the enormous contribution of Black Americans to America.

Haley could hardly have been at a whiter campus than Hamilton, in upstate New York. One likely reason he was hired was a hope that his national reputation as the “author” of “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” might draw more Black students to the school. Of the 69 who applied in my year, 32 were accepted, but only six came. Of a student body of 830 men, just 17 were Black, including two Africans. Haley may well have been the only Black member on the faculty. As the fall semester commenced, he suffered a humiliating setback when Black students from Colgate and Cornell pulled out at the last minute from a panel on student power he was to moderate at Hamilton. It’s hard to recall today how tense colleges were at the time, when antiwar and civil rights protests culminated in the shooting deaths of four students by the Ohio National Guard at Kent State University on May 4, 1970. Kids were killing kids.

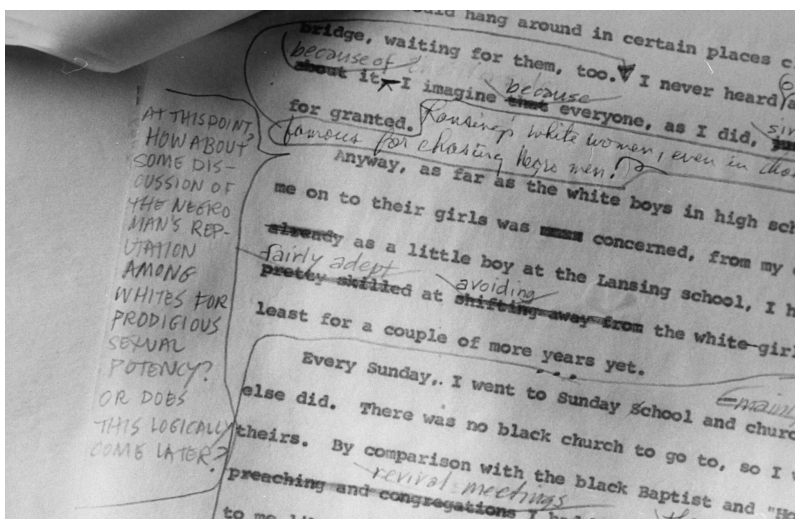
On a visit to Hamilton in 1966, before he was hired to teach there, Haley had met a political science student from Gambia, Ebou Manga. He shared with Manga some of the Mandinka words that had been passed down to Haley’s grandmother Cynthia, hoping the young man might recognize them. Manga spoke Wolof, not Mandinka, but he offered to introduce Haley to their shared homeland. The following week, the two left for Africa. There, Haley was told that he needed to speak with a griot, or oral historian, and on a subsequent trip a few months later, he did, learning not only the name of the Gambian village where a likely African ancestor of his had lived — Juffure — but also that ancestor’s name: Kunta Kinte. Everything now seemed to be falling into place.

By the time he taught me, he was thoroughly absorbed in his African research. He conducted his class as a small seminar of no more than a dozen young men. Only one Black student enrolled when I did, and Haley naturally gravitated more toward him than toward the rest of us. The first assignment was to write an essay about an early encounter with a person of color. It was a brilliant way of putting us in touch with our inherent racism as well as informing Haley about the particular prejudicial makeup of his predominantly white and middle-class students. It told him exactly where he stood with us.

The most important thing he taught us that year was that the one great American story that had never been fully told was the Black story. Far from being a side issue, it was at the very core of the American experience. History, he suggested, concerns the lives of ordinary people; genealogy was not just for royalty anymore. He taught me that despite what the textbooks said, Black history did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation. Years later I thought of Haley when I worked with the Lakota in South Dakota and learned that their history did not die at Wounded Knee.

It was sobering to realize that Haley had more claim to being an American than I did. He could trace his people back 200 years, while my father arrived in New York in 1928. We belonged to vastly different classes. He came from a distinguished Black family. Haley’s father was a college professor. One of Haley’s brothers was a Kansas state senator; the other was an architect in Maryland. My grandfather had been a collier in northern England, my father a career Marine sergeant. I may have been the first man in my father’s family to earn a college degree. But there was never any condescension in Haley’s voice. He emphasized similarities rather than differences. There were no “your people” or “my people” — only “we, the people.”

Class was held on campus once a week, late in the afternoon. On one occasion, he took us to his office, which was in the same building as Hamilton’s radio station. It looked unusually neat for a writer’s workplace, but perhaps he’d tidied it up before we arrived. He showed us how he wrote in longhand on yellow pads and passed what he’d written to his typist, who was not much older than we were. The pressure was on to finish the book.



A manuscript page from “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” a collaboration between Alex Haley and the Black leader. The first thing Malcolm said to Haley was, “You’re another one of the white man’s tools sent to spy!” Thomas S. England/Getty Images

Thanks to the success of “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” Haley’s lecture agency booked him for more than 70 appearances around the country in 1969. He was constantly flying off here and there to speak on “What the Negro Must Do for Himself” and “Black Heritage — A Saga of Black History.” (He summarized his travels that spring in a lecture at Hamilton: “60 Days, 70 Campuses.”) I suspect he could not afford to turn down any paying gig because his advance on “Roots” hardly covered his ballooning expenses. The book was scheduled for publication in June 1969. Reader’s Digest had committed to publishing an abridged version; Dell would bring out the paperback; and foreign rights had been secured in 14 languages. Film rights had been sold to Columbia Pictures as a projected four-hour feature with Elia Kazan as director, a script by Haley and a multimillion-dollar budget. “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” too was in development and James Baldwin was working on the screenplay. Still, Haley was always running out of money. He had to teach, lecture and write the occasional article to help pay for each leg of his research.

Owing to his hectic schedule, he was often tardy to class. Once or twice he didn’t show. Most of the students would give up after a half-hour of waiting for him. I and one or two others would remain until he finally arrived. He was always profusely apologetic and to make up for it he would take us to dinner at Kentucky Fried Chicken or his favorite restaurant, the Savoy, in nearby Rome.

Sometimes I was the only one who stayed, and when we faced each other across the dinner table, the real education began. I probably learned more about writing during those private bull sessions than in class. He never treated me like just another student but spoke to me as if I were a fellow writer. My enormous ambition must have amused him. I tried to write something, anything, every week, in a variety of genres. He had no use for literary theories outside of an English class. The important thing was that I produce. He never returned any of my coursework, and I know he did not read it all, but I needed to let him know I was deeply committed to being a writer. I did show him a dreadful novel I had written in high school. He promised to read it. Now I hope he never did. When he noticed that it was signed “Michael Patrick Hearn,” he informed me that mine was “a solid as a rock name that any publisher would be proud to have on a title page.” (Perhaps he felt affinity with me because he could trace some of his roots back to Ireland.) The greatest gift he gave me was confidence in what I had to say. He assured me that people *would* want to read what I had to write.

He was known as an easy grader and I aced his course. He seemed sincerely interested in what I had to say, no matter how naïve or uninformed. He never let me know how insufferable it must have been to listen to my opinions on things I knew little about. He may have been my father’s age, but I felt comfortable telling him things about myself I would never have dared tell my dad. But he was a mentor, not a pal; he never discussed his private life with me.

He urged all of us in his class to write about what we knew, about our college experiences. He was impressed with “The Strawberry Statement,” a best-selling eyewitness account, by 19-year-old James Kunen, of the student takeover at Columbia University in the spring of 1968. Hamilton was an exciting place that fall. Its “sister school,” Kirkland College, opened that semester across the road, and Alan J. Pakula was filming “The Sterile Cuckoo” with Liza Minnelli on campus. But I was not personally involved in these events. I was trapped in the Straight — the student union — at Cornell the day it was taken over by Black students the following April. We were instructed not to leave the building; the poet-activist Daniel Berrigan opened his office so we could sleep on the floor. It was apparently the only armed student uprising of the period. But I never wrote about it. Or about Woodstock, which I attended that August. I did write a poor novella about sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll at Hamilton that was gently rejected by a sympathetic editor at Scribner’s.

What I *did* know was “The Wizard of Oz,” and I knew that the publisher Clarkson Potter wanted to add the book to his successful line of annotated classics inaugurated by Martin Gardner’s “The Annotated Alice.” I cobbled together a proposal, submitted it through the slush pile and a month later I received a contract. I was 20. I would never have found the courage to send the proposal if not for the encouragement I had received from Haley. In the spring of 1971, Gardner wrote an essay about Oz that appeared on the cover of The Times Book Review and mentioned my “Annotated Wizard of Oz,” which would be published two years later. A young Broadway producer named Ken Harper saw the piece and it gave him the idea for the super soul musical “The Wiz.”

By then both Haley and I had left Hamilton. I never saw him again. We corresponded briefly and then lost touch. His letters were typed, but signed and corrected in his indelible green ink; and in each he encouraged me to submit my work. We shared a contact at Doubleday who kept me informed on his book’s progress. The publication date was pushed to the fall of 1970, then to September 1971. In 1972 the title became “Roots.” Two years later, ABC agreed to produce a mini-series based on the story, but there was no guarantee it would find an audience.



Alex Haley in front of his childhood home in Tennessee in 1977. Robert Abbott Sengstacke/Getty Images

It may have been at this point that Haley's "nonfiction" book became a novel, though both author and publisher insisted that it was unadulterated truth. I heard a rumor that Doubleday had to lock Haley in a hotel room with the phone off the hook to get him to finish the manuscript. The air date of the mini-series was fast approaching. Haley's expenses included more than a half-million miles in flights and totaled around \$80,000 — about \$500,000 today. One night his writer's block was so intense that he contemplated jumping to his death off the freighter near Liberia, where he had gone to write.

"Roots" was finally published on Aug. 17, 1976, 12 years after he began it. In that American bicentennial year, it was the right book at the right time. The author knew it would be big, but even he was unprepared for its immense popularity and his burgeoning, bewildering celebrity. Appropriately, James Baldwin reviewed "Roots" for the Book Review. "Alex Haley's taking us back through time to the village of his ancestors is an act of faith and courage," he observed, "but this book is also an act of love, and it is this which makes it haunting." It ranked at the top of the New York Times nonfiction best-seller list for 22 weeks, selling 15 million copies in less than a year.

In 1977, "Roots" won special citations from both the National Book Awards and the Pulitzer Prize board. It had evolved beyond the story its author described at Hamilton, and it was far more engrossing than I expected. Haley and Doubleday might have saved themselves a lot of trouble had they acknowledged from the first that their big best seller was *based on* a true story. Haley used the word "faction," a portmanteau of "fact" and "fiction," to describe what he had tried to do. The concept echoed the term for a then popular genre, the "nonfiction novel," the most famous examples being Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" (1966) and Norman Mailer's "The Armies of the Night" (1968). While those authors toyed with facts, both books retained the veneer of truth. By contrast, "Roots" was a great yarn. When the mini-series aired, I watched it as diligently as the 130 million other viewers, proud that I had once known its creator.

Then came the backlash. Scholars who had spent their careers studying Africa and American slavery questioned the reliability of Haley's Gambian sources (one historian pronounced the author's methods "a virtual scenario for how *not* to conduct fieldwork in an oral society") and the accuracy of his research on his enslaved American ancestors. Shortly before Haley was awarded the special Pulitzer citation in April 1977, his book was the subject of a 5,000-word exposé in The Sunday Times of London that was picked up by The New York Times. "There appeared to be no factual bases," the New York paper reported, "for Mr. Haley's conclusion that he had actually traced his genealogy back to Kunta Kinte in the village of Juffure."

"Roots" captured the country's imagination and reinforced the historical importance of the nuclear family in Black American life at a time when it was under attack (including for a supposed epidemic of "absent fathers"). Yet its accomplishment was marred by its errors. Two writers accused Haley of plagiarism; one case was dismissed, and he settled the other out of court for \$650,000 (or \$2.7 million today). The lawsuits were debilitating and humiliating.

The criticisms persisted after Haley died from a heart attack at 70 in 1992. "Roots" disappeared from college syllabuses and fell off recommended reading lists. Perhaps the severest condemnation was its absence from "The Norton Anthology of African-American Literature." Malcolm X is there but not Alex Haley.

Yes, Haley was not a scholar. He was not a genealogist. He was not even a novelist. What he was was a professional journalist always on the lookout for a good story. And he never found a better one than that of his own family history. He was a superb storyteller. "Roots" was not the Black "Gone With the Wind." It was a unique work of art that touched millions of Americans. If his methods were flawed, his

intentions were not. He showed me how to conduct an in-depth interview and do “saturation research” in public archives and obscure places.

Haley was not a historian, but he made history. The tragedy is that the success of “Roots” intimidated and finally engulfed him. He never finished another major work. But did he have to? “Roots,” the book and the TV series, changed the conversation about race in America, inspiring generations of readers and viewers to look at their own stories, no matter where they might lead or how painful they might be.

Michael Patrick Hearn’s books include “The Annotated Wizard of Oz,” “The Annotated Huckleberry Finn” and “The Annotated Christmas Carol.” He is currently completing “The Annotated Edgar Allan Poe.”

A version of this article appears in print on , Page 1 of the Sunday Book Review with the headline: A Writer’s Roots