Wil Haygood

Contemporary Authors Online, 2013 Updated: September 26, 2013

Born: September 19, 1954? in Columbus, Ohio, United States
Nationality: American
Occupation: Writer

WRITINGS:
BIOGRAPHIES; EXCEPT WHERE NOTED


Contributor of articles to periodicals.

*Lee Daniels' The Butler*, adapted from an article by Haygood, was released by the Weinstein Company.


"Sidelights"

Wil Haygood is a journalist and nonfiction author who primarily writes biographies, including *King of the Cats: The Life and Times of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.* Haygood also wrote the memoir *The Haygoods of Columbus: A Love Story*. His book *In Black and White: The Life of Sammy Davis, Jr.*
explores the eponymous singer, dancer, and actor's life. Haygood discusses Davis's mixed ethnic background and his climb to fame. The biography also details Davis's many powerful and famous friends, such as Jerry Lewis, Tony Curtis, and Eddie Cantor. The author especially focuses on Davis's fraught relationship with Frank Sinatra. Discussing the book in a *Publishers Weekly* interview with Mark Rotella, Haygood explained: "I wanted a subject that would totally exhaust me. I wanted to go in and investigate things that I knew nothing about such as vaudeville, Hollywood and Broadway. As a biographer, I had a wonderful tunnel of differing opinions and attitudes toward Sammy."

Critics applauded the author's efforts, and *People Weekly* reviewer Leah Rozen called *In Black and White* a "nuanced portrayal of Davis's conflicted sense of self." She noted that the volume is "a perceptive though uneven biography" and an "intriguing book." A *Kirkus Reviews* critic was also impressed, finding that "the movies, the clubs, the Broadway shows, the spending ... are all covered perceptively." The critic added that Haygood portrays "an American life considered with art and understanding in a major work of biography." William G. Kenz, writing in *Library Journal*, praised the "richly researched book" and stated: "In contrast to Haygood's title, this is a many-hued treatment of the life of one of America's finest entertainers." According to Ilene Cooper in *Booklist*, "Haygood never loses sight of Sammy the entertainer, indefatigable on stage and insatiable in his craving for adoration." She described *In Black and White* as "a fascinating American life story, brilliantly told." *Time* reviewer Lev Grossman pointed out that "Haygood's Sammy is a hall of mirrors with nothing behind them." He added: "Can you blame him for being screwed up? Race, money, love, applause--for little Sammy they were all mixed up from the start. As hard as he worked, and nobody worked harder, he never got them straight."

In his biography of boxer Sugar Ray Robinson, *Sweet Thunder: The Life and Times of Sugar Ray Robinson*, Haygood follows his subject's abject childhood in both Detroit and New York City. He also explores Robinson's interactions with other influential African Americans, from jazz musician Miles Davis to poet Langston Hughes. Robinson's boxing career, remarkable track record, and numerous championships are detailed as well.

"With this book, Haygood ... completes a biographical trilogy that includes earlier prize-winning volumes on Sammy Davis Jr. and the Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr.," wrote Tim Rutten in the *Los Angeles Times*. "*Sweet Thunder* is by far the best of these books and, in describing an athlete now universally acknowledged as the greatest prizefighter who ever lived, better also than Robinson's own collaborative autobiography." Rutten added: "Haygood gives a fine account of Robinson's career in the dazzingly competitive welter-and middleweight ranks of his era, but where this lyrically written biography--with its jazz-inflected prose--truly excels is in its evocation of the culturally rich post-renaissance Harlem, where Robinson began boxing as a 9th-grade dropout." Bill Ott stated in his *Booklist* review: "Haygood brings this remarkable twentieth-century story to life in all its myriad shades of meaning."

"I'm lucky in a way, inasmuch as I came to writing and journalism with experience of life itself, grit and woe: I had worked as a dishwasher in Brooklyn, a hotline telephone operator in Columbus, Ohio, a retail manager at Macy's department store, and a university typist. I didn't know I wanted to write until I decided I cared to do nothing else except write. I am a trained journalist, lucky enough to have reported for the *Boston Globe* from across most of America and many foreign countries.
"If there is a weed that grows through and underneath my work, I like to think it is a concern for the unknown stories, the lost stories, the stories in the back country. In my first book, I explored forgotten towns along the Mississippi River; in my second book, a forgotten New York politician. My third book is about the Midwest and a family farm in Georgia, about the history of the two places and the hidden and obvious growth of a family."

Further Readings

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

PERIODICALS
- *Day*, December 1, 2009, "5 Questions with Sweet Thunder Author Wil Haygood."

ONLINE
- *Ohio History Central*, http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/ (September 12, 2010), author profile.*


Source Citation