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Chester Himes , Hilton Als (Foreword by)

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This story of a man living every day in fear of his life for simply being black is as powerful today as it was when it was first published in 1947. The novel takes place in the space of four days in the life of Bob Jones, a black man who is constantly plagued by the effects of racism. Living in a society that is drenched in race consciousness has no doubt taken a toll on the way Jones behaves, thinks, and feels, especially when, at the end of his story, he is accused of a brutal crime he did not commit. "One of the most important American writers of the twentieth century ... [a] quirky American genius..."—Walter Mosley, author of *Bad Boy Brawly Brown*, *Devil in a Blue Dress* "If He Hollers is an austere and concentrated study of black experience, set in southern California in the early forties."—Independent Publisher

If He Hollers Let Him Go Details

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From Reader Review If He Hollers Let Him Go for online ebook

April says

A racially charged story. It is intense, powerful, and painful to read. I do not recommend reading it if you want a feel good book. This will leave you feeling as though the life has been sucked out of you. It deals primarily with the day to day issues of a young black man (Bob Jones) in Los Angeles during WWII. It spans 4 days in his life in which he is confronted with inequality left and right, on the job, during his drive to work, at the movies, at dinner - anywhere and everywhere he turns.

There are two major female characters in the story, his upper class girlfriend Alice, who is dealing with her own issues regarding race in her own way and within her own social class, and Madge, a white female worker at his job site who refuses to work with him and calls him a nigger - prompting him to call her names back and subsequently get demoted. These two relationships are used to illustrate two different sides of Bob. With Madge (and the others on the job) he is constantly trying to hold back his urges to hurt, rape, and fight as he deals with being treated unfairly and has too much pride to let it go simply because he is one color and they are another. With Alice, he has the opportunity to change his social standing, and although they have trouble seeing eye-to-eye about their color, she eventually has a major impact on his outlook in regards to his color, convincing him that although his color may restrict him in regards to economic factors, it should have no bearing over other concrete things and core values like love, family, integrity, and courage. This is a big turning point in Bob's psychological outlook but it is short lived.

Due to unfortunate circumstances he ends up alone with Madge. She thinks she's going to be in trouble for slacking off on the job and turns the spotlight on his to defer the attention away from herself claiming rape. She has him beaten and arrested and he goes back to his old way of thinking. Alice tries to convince him to be rational and she will help him fight the charges in court but he runs. In the end he is "pardoned" and forced to enlist in the army, which made me think back to something one of the other black men working with him had said earlier on in the book about a black man being in the army. That such a man is only fighting against himself. Fighting for the right to keep on taking the same old crap. Like I said, painful to read. But a great read and an easy one as well.

Zack says

this is the story of an african american man who lives in LA in the late forties. he is very intelligent but very angry because he constantly experiences racism and hatred because of his skin color. he loses his job because a woman calls him a "nigger" and then he reacts and calls her a "cracker slut." then eeeeeverything starts going down hill.

o my gooooooooooooooooooooood. this is such a powerful book. extremely interesting and intensely sad. like my body hurt as i finished it. but it also felt good. because there was truth, true emotion, true experience even though it was a fictional book.

two things seem particularly interesting about this book....1. the main character does some truly horrible stuff in this book. yet it is so well written that we still sympathize with him. we know he is somehow a good man in spite of his actions. we can feel how evil society was at the time and how he is brainwashed and abused and driven to such horrific actions. 2. this is the ONLY book i've ever read that shows the power white

women had (and still have in a lot of ways) to manipulate black men using their sexuality and privilege if they choose to.

also this book is probably that only pre-1950 book i've read that really took the vale off of sexuality in general...that was unafraid to go there because it needed to.

books like this tell us a tremendous amount about the history of the USA. a history that has been systematically valed by those in power. a history so many have ignored because it is painful to face. but a history we HAVE TO face if we want to really understand who we are...where we are coming from...what we experienced...what we need to be aware of to change.

Bill Lynas says

The first novel from Chester Himes has some good characters & sharp dialogue, but for me it doesn't come up to the standard of his later work. It still packs a punch & has plenty to say about racism, while the author's style is sometimes as aggressive as his characters. However, it isn't in the same league as some of his other novels like *The Real Cool Killers* or *Cotton Comes To Harlem* which can easily be read more than once.

ralowe says

another crazy-making cover. self-conscious people think i'm desperate for a white lover. well, it's too late. and the cover is provocative to those familiar with the novel already or are currently exposing themselves to the main character's obsessive thoughts about murdering white people. i would laugh outloud a lot. and then feel ashamed that murder is continually a part of my psyche. is desensitization a myth? is there no other way to sensitive to intimations of justice in the ongoing historical present? why do so few works of art seem to gratify this sense? am i reading the wrong shit? knowing that fanon was, i seem to remember, influenced by this. someone asked and i describe the author as being contemporaries with fanon. ah, the comfort of the articulation of the neurotic imaginary. himes is perhaps one of the best storytellers i've read, even if there feels like there's something missing in the story. this is a classic but it doesn't feel like a great book to me, and it is the albatross of the black artist under white supremacy. waiting for something other than unending life-death struggle dialectics and so-on. but he captures it well. this book delivers what i expected from the title of sharon patricia holland's 'the erotic life of racism.' i'm concerned with what people do with the questions himes invites-- you know, how it is that we're still living with these same problems. i find myself similar to with the h. rap brown book wanting to take defensive postures around the author's indefensible homophobia/misogyny. one incident in the book has a backfire effect where the homophobia, much like william friedkin's 'cruising,' becomes oddly charming without historical context-- the character vomits when he realizes his fiance is bisexual and passes out. the novel is a satisfyingly told story that handles the complexity of racialized desire the way charles burnett handles intramural intergenerational ambivalence in 'to sleep with anger.'

Kinga says

3.5...blistering account of endemic racism in the US during the 40s.

Dani says

I testament to the dangerous existence of white women in the world of black men. A pure horror story that's as relentless as it is brilliant. You should read this.

Brian says

An absolutely amazing book written not only by one of the best African American writers, but one of the best writers of the 20th century, who had to move to Europe since there was no place in the America of the 50s and 60s for a black man to be a creative and successful writer expressing the reality of being a person of color in this country. While he made his living writing noir novels based on 2 great characters, Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones, both black NYC detectives based in Harlem and from which 2 lame movies were made, Cotton Comes to Harlem and A Rage in Harlem, *If He Hollers* is an epic novel set in WWII-era LA and is about an educated black man working in the navy shipyards and engaged to the daughter of a successful black doctor. While he deals with racism on a daily basis, his fiancée has been sheltered from its effects thus far. I recommended this book to my brother, and when he was done I asked him whose work it most reminded him of, and he immediately said Steinbeck, which is exactly what I thought. So if you liked *East of Eden* or *Grapes of Wrath*, I guarantee you will like this book equally as much.

Professor says

At this point I've read quite a few novels by Chester Himes, but all of them have been from his series of crime novels starring Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, two tough, no-nonsense cops who have to navigate the insane Harlem Himes creates while simultaneously dealing with institutional racism. *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, however, is not set in a surreal world but instead in the reality of war time Los Angeles. The main character, Bob Johnson, is a "leaderman" at a shipyard and dating Alice, a social worker and the daughter of a prominent family. Unfortunately for Bob, however, he is black, and the world won't let him forget that. He loses his job early in the novel when he snaps at a co-worker, Madge, and from that point on his situation deteriorates.

The book is very interesting and depicts the world of wartime Los Angeles and war work as well as the racist system of the time. Definitely worth a look for Himes fans who want to see his serious work-it's also interesting to compare it to his genre novels. Both feature an escalation of tension that ends in a mad crescendo-here, however, absolutely nothing is resolved in a way that the protagonist would want, despite the fact that he is in the right.

Babydoll says

This book is a must-read for those who are literary fans of classic African American literature. Published in 1945, Chester Himes does a marvelous job capturing the vivid character Bob Jones, who endures racism

while living in California, discrimination on his job, and color complexes among his Black American friends. The main character, Jones, resembles the character Bigger Thomas from Richard Wright's great novel 'Native Son', in that they both deal with the infectious disease of social racism. As a result, they both grappled feelings of inferiority, thoughts of murder, rape, and destruction upon the Anglo-Saxon population. Himes proves himself to be a wonderful literary genius with this novel.

Sarah Zama says

This is the account of four life-changing days in the life of Robert Jones, a black leaderman of a black crew in a Californian shipyard during WWII. Bob is a fiery man who knows his own worth and tries to assert it in the white world he lives in, even with all the restrictions he knows he have to take into account. But there are things he's not willing to take, and he won't take. And when one of these happens and he is suspended from work because he stood his ground, his entire life is shaken to the roots.

Here starts a wild journey into Bob's soul, while he interrogates himself about what being a black man means in a white, segregated world, and what future there could ever be - what future of fulfilment there could ever be - for a man in his position.

The story is told in the first person by Bob and it's mindblowing. Himes takes you into Bob's heart of hearts and let you into his deepest, more secret thoughts and feelings. Into his most secrets fears, his most unspeakable of hopes, into his deepest frustrations. There had been moments I had to remind myself: "You are not Bob Jones", so deep the identification was. I really thought with him, felt with him, got angry with him, grabbed and lost hopes with him. It's like walking all the way right beside him.

Himes is a master of dialogue. I've always liked his strong grip on people's way of speaking of themselves in the sheer way they speak of anything. Sometimes it's more like listening to his characters than read them. I've rarely read such an involving story. I enjoyed it a lot.

Shake says

This book is gutwrenching, and accurately describes the complexity of Blackness, anti-Blackness, and white privilege. Broke my heart into a million pieces reading the raw truth of what we as Black people face... even in 2018.

jo says

i am not sure how many people would find this fun to read, but it's such a literary feat, it seems to me an essential chapter in african american literature. first of all, it *is* fun to read: it's fast-paced, gritty, fabulously political, witty, sharp, and strikingly contemporary. but i imagine college students reading it (since i plan to teach it, this particular audience knocks on my attention's doors again and again) and, in my mind, i hear them complaining about the narrator's rantish rage, his defeatism, his inability to find a way to fit or at least soothe his anguish. what makes the book so astonishing is that himes should have managed to write what is, in fact, a long, sustained, high-pitched rant in the easy, engrossing tones of a hard-boiled novel.

among the themes that are touched in the novel: racism in wartime (nominally) non-jim crow states; sexism and black masculinity; black self-loathing; interracial working class dynamics; class layering in the black community; jazz; los angeles los angeles los angeles.

i may be wrong, but bringing the classroom to see a well-designed structure of oppression underneath bob jones' self-defeating, out-of-control fury will be a challenge. i'm totally looking forward to it.

i really loved, by the way, the description of segregated 40s los angeles, from the docks to the neighborhoods to the nightclubs.

Nancy Oakes says

The setting of this novel is Los Angeles during World War II. The main character, Bob Jones, is an African-American man, who gets a job at a defense shipyard there, and is the narrator of this story. Bob is, in fact, the supervisor of a small crew of other African-Americans. The action takes place just after the forced internment of Japanese-Americans in California, which kind of sets the stage for how Bob sees himself as a black man in white Los Angeles. He's also in a situation where, because most of the able-bodied men have gone off to war, there's an influx of laborers, both white and African-American, men and women. He often ruminates about his existence as a black man, realizing that even with his position as supervisor, other supervisors will not share their white workers when he needs them to do so, or that he is not wanted in white, middle-class restaurants or other establishments. In short, Bob is aware that as an African-American man at this time, he's being oppressed, and the whole symbolism (imho) of the Japanese internment reminds him constantly that it could happen to him at any time for any reason.

Bob has a girlfriend, Alice, who, since her father is a very well-paid physician, lives a very middle-class sort of life. Alice is fair-skinned and a social worker, entertaining herself with intellectual friends. When Bob tries to explain how he feels because of being African-American in Los Angeles, Alice tries to explain to him that if he'd just let all of these feelings of white oppression go, and find himself a place in the middle-class scene, life would be so much easier for him. Alice is sort of a dreamer, who doesn't want to come to terms with her heritage; she really has no clue. Bob, on the other hand, can't ignore the realities of his life, and this hits home one day on the job when a trashy white woman laborer from Texas calls him the n-word and he reacts in kind, setting off a chain of events that snowball out of control.

I liked this book, and I'll probably read many more by this author in the future. His characters were believable, the setting was entirely believable and as a reader, you get into Bob's head very quickly and you stay with him the entire time. Himes is an awesome writer. I would most definitely recommend this book to people who want a bit of grit in their reading, or to people who may have been previously on the fence about reading this author, but don't expect to come away with this upbeat 'cause it ain't gonna happen.

Terence says

A very powerful book, probably the closest thing in print a white man can come to experiencing what it's like to live in a world where no matter what you do you're always a "boy" - a second-class citizen. I particularly liked Himes' ability to look at the many ways African-Americans cope with that status.

I *think* it's better today than when this book first appeared in 1945 but then I read about a private swimming pool that barred a bunch of black children from swimming there (after they had joined) because they caused the white parents too much anxiety, and I live in LA and know how segregated people still are here.

I became aware of Himes through a quotation in Mike Davis' *City of Quartz* which deserves repeating here:

Up to the age of 31 I had been hurt emotionally, spiritually, and physically as much as 31 years can bear: I had lived in the South, I had fallen down an elevator shaft, I had been kicked out of college, I had served seven and one half years in prison, I had survived the humiliating last five years of the Depression in Cleveland; and still I was entire, complete, functional; my mind was sharp, my reflexes were good, and I was not bitter. But under the mental corrosion of race prejudice in Los Angeles I had become bitter and saturated with hate. (*City of Quartz*, p. 43)

Definitely a book that should be read.

Daniel Polansky says

A black worker in a naval plant in WWII-era Los Angeles is brutalized and driven insane by American racial politics. The prose is strong, though not as strong as it would get in his later books, and he still has the sharp eye for injustice and hypocrisy, as he demonstrates throughout the Harlem detective series, but the plot, such as it is, is kind of...loose? Predictable? Ultimately I think his 'genre' stuff is stronger, not so much because of the genre angles specifically but more because of the sense of place which is so abundantly vivid in his Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones stuff, but somewhat less thick on the ground here. Library, probably I'd drop it not cause it's bad but because on my theoretical book shelf I already have like, 8 Chester Himes books and I could probably do w/out a 9th.

Andy says

World War II-era novel about a man fighting his own personal war against racism and hometown sellouts. Although it would be years before Himes would begin writing crime fiction, the writing style in *If He Hollers* is distinctly hard-boiled, slash and burn, in other words, NOIR. Patricia Highsmith was a fan, and I can't think of no higher endorsement of Himes' great works.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 4.5* of five

Many long years ago, this book and I crossed paths while I was working at Thunder's Mouth Press. I was gobsmacked by the rawness of Bob Jones's hate and fury. I would never have imagined the horrors of racism and the vileness of color prejudice among African Americans NOT inducing hatred and rage, but Himes was such an amazing writer that I experienced Bob Jones's feelings as deeply as my own.

I can't think of a reason that you wouldn't already have read this book, but if for some reason you have not, do so. Now. Soon, at the very least. The opportunity to experience writing like Chester Himes's is not to be missed. The sad and deflating truth is that the novel is as relevant to today's African American experience as it was to World War II's.

That makes me a little ill and a lot sad.

I can't give the book the full five because, to be frank, I found the rape-centered part of the story off-puttingly positively portrayed. No actual rape occurs, to be sure, but the topic...well, it's one that I don't find anything redeeming in and thus I judge even a hint of positive portrayal harshly.

Shelly Leyden says

Snow wasn't the only blanket of whiteness in the Minnesota of my childhood. Growing up, I didn't grasp the history of, present reality of, or pervasive machinery of racism. Did not get it at all. I mean, I was watching Sesame Street, reading Dr. Seuss, and listening to Free to Be You and Me. Everything was coolio. When shown *A Class Divided* in elementary school, I marvelled at how people could look down on other people just for *the way they look*. Ridiculous! With every episode of Star Trek, I felt that racism was an ignorance we'd soon leave behind. With every laugh track on The Archie Bunker Show, I felt it would be dead and gone before I came of age. I recall shock and horror when I dropped into a social studies classroom a few minutes early to find two boys slinging racial slurs around. Loud and proud, like they did it every day. While my teacher sat by, trying to mind his own business. In. Social. Studies. How could this be? Why didn't someone stop them? How could kids at my nearly homogenous high school, in my milky state, in my modern time be haters — and who exactly were they hating on?! Did not get it at all. In college, I took an amazing course on the civil rights movement. The material we covered opened my eyes even as the class itself shut my mouth. In that classroom, I was a minority. My thoughts were suspect. My knowledge was lacking. My poise was lacking, too. I had much to learn. We watched *Eyes on the Prize* and read oodles of stuff, and I did learn. Slowly. Reading this book was a jolt. I felt a powerful shift in perspective, a painful consciousness raising. I suddenly saw what white privilege *is*. I wanted more people to read it and see it, too. The more the better. And that's how I got kicked out of book group. It was a couple years later, and we weren't in college anymore. I missed reading and discussing books with people when along came the book group craze. Whoop! Mistake #1 was when I joined this particular book group. Mistake #2 was when they agreed to read this book at my suggestion. Mistake #3 was when one of them said something lazy and privileged and not getting it at ALL, and I went all verbal jujitsu on him. I'm an English major, man! There's nothing I love more than debating literary evidence for pity's sake. Plus, he was lazy and I enjoyed showing him exactly how lazy ... and, welp. I was no doubt insufferable. He later called me up and passive aggressively asked me to "... rethink my commitment to book group." Which I most certainly did. And I never went back. And I still don't do book groups. #MapMyReadingLife

James says

Q: Who's more racist, black people or white people?

A: Black people, because black people hate black people, too.

40's era racism sounds like a bummer. Johnson says he feels white while terrorizing a (white) man who

mugged him, i.e. he understands suddenly the feeling of power, control, and safety that white people enjoy all the time. You shouldn't threaten to kill people, but it's not hard to justify his actions given that the white dude robbed him because he knew he could get away with it, and it is an effective simile. Later, though, when he attempts to rape the white lady who called him a 'nigger' and precipitated him losing his job, you can't make that same claim.

Himes has responded to this criticism, saying basically that he is depicting the effects of racism, and that if you don't like the raw effects of oppression then you can't handle the truth. At some point while reading Johnson stalk a woman to rape her, though, it occurs to me that if a white dude wrote a drunken black dude obsessed with raping white wimmin, I'd throw that book out on principle, but I'm letting Himes get away with the same because he's a black guy.

So, you say, what the fuck do I know, with all my white middle-class privilege and experience, about the experience of poor black men? Fuck all, but neither does Himes. The assumption is that the most autobiographical character is Robert Johnson, but he has a lot more in common with Johnson's middle-class, light-skinned (of course) girlfriend, Alice. Both Himes and Alice are middle-class, both think poor blacks are dangerous imbeciles, and both fuck white people for career purposes.

Himes says of his fellow inmates from his six years in prison: "stupid, uneducated, practically illiterate, slighting above animals." What a fucking cock, right? Betrayal, classism, and the same discrimination that makes monsters of us all. And still, a stupid part of you wants to give him a pass, some belligerent brain cell that claims it is impossible to fully understand the black experience so therefore I can't call out this bullshit. It is impossible to shake that impulse, despite the simple fact that if a middle-class white person told me that they felt that poor whites are barely above animals, I'd think that person was an idiot.

There is a gut-wrenching scene where Robert talks to Alice's mom, who insists that black people will remain oppressed until they prove to white people that they're good enough by being patient and working hard for less until white people give them freedom. And, because Robert is so angry about it, we must assume that Himes doesn't believe this sort of shit. But, why? Robert doesn't actually defend his position, he just takes out his girlfriend, makes a scene at a restaurant, lets her get a ticket for speeding while driving his car drunk, and then beats her up at a party before driving his car onto the sidewalk on the way home. If this is how black people actually acted, then Alice's mom's reasoning would make sense. But, of course, black people don't.

I can't say whether the mistake is that Himes has let blacks be defined by the oppressors or if he just hates poor blacks, but it doesn't matter. His documentation of racism, and his comments on the same, are lost behind his disdain for those he considers beneath him.

Thanh Ha says

4.5 stars

This book is so emotionally densed. It had me on my edge from start to finish. The night I finished the book, I had a dream of being trapped in a pitch-black house of hundreds of room where enemies came from every sides. That was how I felt reading this novel.

This isn't the kind of book that will provide you with a wonderfully groundbreaking argument on

institutional racism and oppression. Many times when I thought Himes was going to let his characters talk it out, the conversation was broken off.

Himes, however, did an amazing job in profiling his characters and their struggle over control and power. The characterization was classics in a way.

- Bob, troubled, short-tempered, with an urge to preserve his manhood, dignity, and self-worth, by getting even with white folks, by not letting them rule over his life.
- Alice's mom, fully internalized the belief that black people could only make it at white people's mercy.
- Alice, light-coloured, sheltered, not entirely blinded from the faults of the system, but choosing not to talk about it & to live within the limitation of her race.
- Leighton, the benevolent white god, infantizing Bob as an unruly child
- Marge, where power took in the form of sexuality
- The black folks at the shipyards who felt the need to protect white women but not their black women
- And that comical Cleo whose definition of white tramp doesn't extend to white male

The book has many powerful, sensual moments that can get under your skin.

- The scene of Bob and Alice at the restaurant was heartbreaking. I was really rooting for Alice to own it. She regained her control at some points, became beautiful & poised, then they got on her nerves, and she finally did break down in the end.
- Bob's input to the phoney discussion among social workers in Alice's room:
"... Well, sister, you're asking for it, I thought. Aloud I said: 'Well, now, I think we ought to kill the coloured residents and eat them. In that way we'll not only solve the race problem but alleviate the meat shortage as well.' ..."
- The psychological battle of control taking the form of lust (in which he lost, again) on the night Bob went to find Marge

He lost the final battle too. All that psychological losses ended up in a physical loss. He woke up naked, beaten, cornered, without help, with his penetrator being sung a hero. There can be no other way around it. He didn't have a choice.
