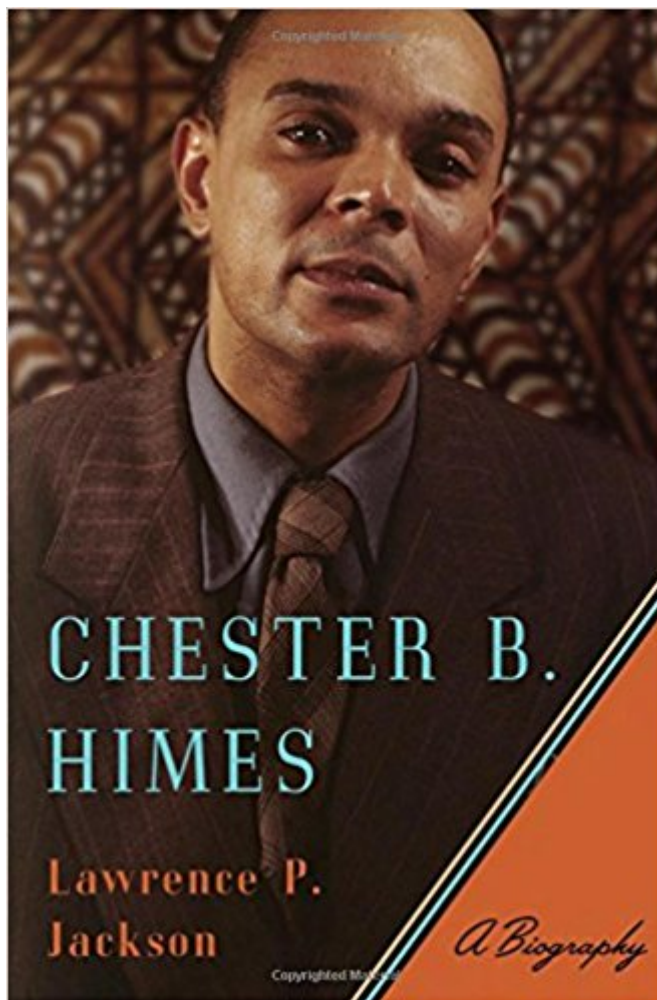


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# Chester B. Himes: A Biography



## Synopsis

The definitive biography of the groundbreaking African American author who had an extraordinary legacy on black writers globally. Chester B. Himes has been called “one of the towering figures of the black literary tradition” (Henry Louis Gates Jr.), “the best writer of mayhem yarns since Raymond Chandler” (San Francisco Chronicle), and “a quirky American genius” (Walter Mosely). He was the twentieth century’s most prolific black writer, captured the spirit of his times expertly, and left a distinctive mark on American literature. Yet today he stands largely forgotten. In this definitive biography of Chester B. Himes (1909–1984), Lawrence P. Jackson uses exclusive interviews and unrestricted access to Himes’s full archives to portray a controversial American writer whose novels unflinchingly confront sex, racism, and black identity. Himes brutally rendered racial politics in the best-selling novel *If He Hollers Let Him Go*, but he became famous for his Harlem detective series, including *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. A serious literary tastemaker in his day, Himes had friendships—sometimes uneasy—with such luminaries as Ralph Ellison, Carl Van Vechten, and Richard Wright. Jackson’s scholarship and astute commentary illuminates Himes’s improbable life—his middle-class origins, his eight years in prison, his painful odyssey as a black World War II era artist, and his escape to Europe for success. More than ten years in the writing, Jackson’s biography restores the legacy of a fascinating maverick caught between his aspirations for commercial success and his disturbing, vivid portraits of the United States. 20 illustrations

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Dr. Jackson has presented a much needed view of an important Harlem writer. I had the pleasure of knowing Chester and most of the folk he knew. He was fun. He was good looking. And he was a wonderful story teller. Chester struggled, as most writers do, with being himself. But when he opened the special door to Chester, we all could peep inside to a special genius. He was old and I quite young when we met. He had a flashlight to let me see the way down what could have been a dark road. Chester Himes is to writing what Miles Davis is to the trumpet, what John Coltrane is to the saxophone, what lips are to love. I am so glad this research has been completed. Chester deserves this sun to cast his shadow over the library that is the hope of black Americans.” - Nikki Giovanni

“A riveting, one-of-a-kind tale of a writer who saw the subject of race from odd, revealing angles.” - Clifford Thompson, Wall Street Journal

“Chester B. Himes is a bracing journey through the life of an uncompromising writer.” - Michael P. Jeffries, New York Times Book Review

“Fascinating. . . . Jackson [is] a fluid writer.” - Thomas Chatterton Williams, Harper’s Magazine

“Makes a convincing case for a writer who’s always been something of a tough sell. . . . Jackson memorably characterizes Himes’ great gifts as a writer.” - Maureen Corrigan, NPR

“Jackson’s book is big, intelligent and unflinching. It is what literary biography looks like when it’s done right.” - Kevin Canfield, San Francisco Chronicle

“Comprehensive.” - Alex Belth, Esquire

Lawrence P. Jackson is Bloomberg Distinguished Professor of English and History at Johns Hopkins University. Author of *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, *The Indignant Generation*, and *My Father’s Name*, he has been published in *NYT* and *Harper’s*. He lives in Baltimore, Maryland.

Author Lawrence P. Jackson says in the acknowledgements, “I have endeavored to write the big book that Michel and I thought Chester deserved.” In my estimation he has indeed succeeded in completing a big book that explores the life and work of Chester Himes. The research that obviously went into this definitive work had to be painstaking. The end notes are copious which indicates a careful and thorough examination of Chester Himes. It is fascinating to read about the struggles that Chester endured to

bring his books to print. He apparently worked up quite a reputation within publishing circles, because he was extremely vigilant about every affront, slight or in his mind unwarranted criticism. Chester Himes was what one would call a "race man" and his novels reflected that. "But what was holding him back was his everlasting resistance to a world that did not have a place for a black artist who didn't emphasize the value of assimilation." His indictment of America and her treatment of Black people were a consistent theme throughout many of his novels. He was on the scene before Richard Wright and had already published novels to critical acclaim when Ralph Ellison wrote *Invisible Man* which opened the eyes of the NY publishing world and they began to look anew at Black authors. It's amazing that Himes didn't get the full applause until later in his life, although the talent he brought to the page was universally recognized early on. Chester first began writing in prison, having been given twenty years for a simple armed robbery. He ended up doing seven and a half years, and in prison is where he began his writing career. While the biography obviously focuses on Chester's life, the surrounding history of the cities Chester lived in and life for African-Americans in general is explored to great effect. At nineteen years old and looking at twenty years, having lived through a prison fire that killed 322 inmates due to failure to act by the administration, "Writing was one activity that helped him overcome lonely isolation and puzzle through the welter of emotions after the fire..... His efforts to deal with the personal tragedy of incarceration, loneliness, physical vulnerability,.... launched his writing career." Himes would send out his short stories to magazines hoping they would bite and he began to have some success, becoming skilled at fictionalizing real life he had watched and experienced. Using characters to express his thoughts on subjects would become a staple of his writing for decades. Quickly realizing that American whites "wished to read about themselves as forceful decision makers" he began to write prison stories with white protagonists and landed a series of stories in the upstart magazine *Esquire*. He would leave prison and pursue writing as a career eventually publishing his first novel, *If He Hollers Let Him Go* to modest success a few weeks after the death of his mother. Himes lived from story to story most of his life filling in the lean times with odd jobs or leaning on the job of his wife to support himself. It wasn't until later in life that he began to make real money writing and publishing, much of it due to his crime series, featuring detectives Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones, which he is probably most widely known for. The book *Cotton Comes to Harlem* was made into a movie that was very popular in the early 70's. Himes actually found success in France before really becoming a literary name in his home of America. He lived in France, Spain and other places in Europe beginning in the early 1950's and would never officially live again in the United States. He died in Spain in 1984. This

biography is one to place on the bookshelf as you may return to it frequently for reference to the publishing industry, for the atmosphere in France where many African-American artists found refuge, for the conditions of 60's America, for the overall struggle of a Black writer trying to make a living, and insight as to how racism can undergird the process of becoming. I received this review copy from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

Lawrence P. Jackson's absorbing and definitive biography of Chester Himes is essential reading for fans of the prolific African American novelist. Though Himes wrote two outstanding memoirs, Jackson--professor of English and history at Johns Hopkins University--shines as an astute literary critic and compelling biographer. At age 19, Himes was convicted of armed robbery and sentenced to 20 to 25 years in prison. He started writing short prison stories. When he was paroled early at age 26 in 1936, he had already published stories in Esquire. He spent 16 years trying to get his first novel published. A hard-hitting look at prison life and homosexuality, it was rejected and rewritten numerous times. By the time a toned-down version was finally published as *CAST THE FIRST STONE* in 1952, Himes had already published two other novels. His contentious relationships with publishers, editors and peers marginalized his career as much as the racial and political content of his novels. In the late 1950s, he moved to France and began writing noir mysteries featuring Grave Digger Jones and Coffin Ed Johnson. "The two Harlem detectives solving crimes enabled him to depict black urban life, with its rural slave and blues roots, with a kind of opulence and intrigue that was difficult in books with more obvious political meaning," writes Jackson. These mysteries (including *COTTON COMES TO HARLEM*) brought Himes international fame, financial security and stability. Jackson's outstanding biography is a massive (nearly 600 pages) and intimate look at the volatile life and layered fiction of noir expatriate Chester Himes. Jackson's outstanding and intimate biography of Chester Himes is essential reading for fans of noir fiction, and those interested in race relations in history and lives of adversity.

Lawrence P. Jackson's biography of Himes -- as well-researched as it is passionate -- rocks and invites fresh takes on the great ex-patriate American writer's life and career. .

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