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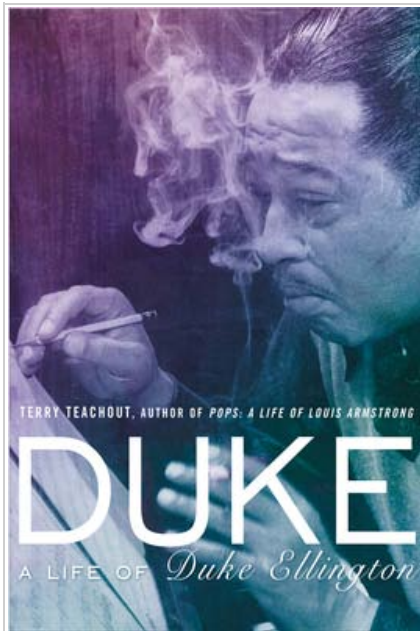
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May 15, 2014

**HUFF  
POST** **BOOKS**

## Books: Duke Ellington Swings and Stings in New Biography

Posted: 11/01/2013 5:23 pm



### **DUKE: A LIFE OF DUKE ELLINGTON**

\*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

By **Terry Teachout**

\$30 hardcover

Gotham Books

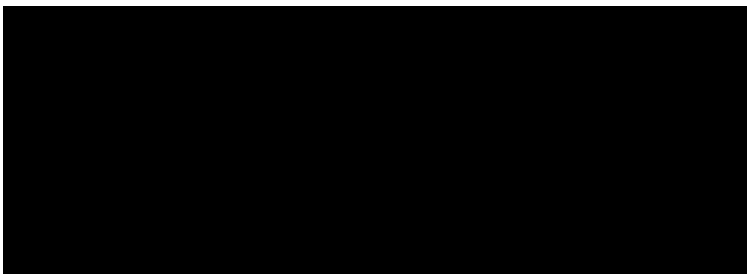
Critic **Terry Teachout** has followed his acclaimed, best-selling biography *Pops: A Life Of Louis Armstrong* with yet another legendary figure in jazz: Duke Ellington. Armstrong helped birth jazz; Ellington took it to sophisticated heights.

Often, biographies of artists get me a little antsy: Shouldn't I just be watching their movies, reading their books, studying their art or listening to their music? Isn't that artistic biography they themselves created -- the reason we're talking about them today -- the important stuff? But the best books capture their life and creative process, showing you

how they accomplished what they did, why they accomplished it, and shed new light on the work in the process. So then you scurry back to the art, but with a newfound appreciation for their craft and a new understanding of why it's so revolutionary.

*Duke: A Life Of Duke Ellington* certainly accomplishes that. Teachout captures the breadth of his life from spoiled mama's boy to spoiled genius who arranged everything and everyone in service to his craft. That's the right of artists and Ellington was unquestionably an artist of the first order.

With verve and insight, Teachout details Ellington's lucky breaks, from that stint at the Cotton Club to musicians' strikes that paradoxically helped him out. Naturally Teachout is sharp on the music in all its dizzying forms, from classic songs like "Take the 'A' Train" to extended works that fall in and out of favor but have proven enduring.



But Teachout is just as good at highlighting the cultural context: Movies played a vital role in establishing Ellington as an artist in the eyes of the general public, while elevating the image of the black man. It was rare indeed for even the best artists not to be demeaned off-handedly by the media they couldn't control. But Ellington was always elegant, classy, sophisticated and "important" and Teachout is at his best in showing how and why that happened.

Ellington made a virtue out of necessity: his orchestra would have trouble booking hotels in the south so they traveled by private train cars. This saved money in some ways, allowed Ellington his privacy and the luxurious comfort he expected and just as importantly added to his glamour and prestige. So Jim Crow made him seem classier and akin to the president and other major figures, while the yokels in small towns came out to stare at the train stations.

One detail in particular stuck with me about the racism he faced when forging his path towards world fame and acceptance as a composer of the first rank. Ellington had a caricature done by the legendary Al Hirschfeld. That's nice, I thought, a sign of having made it, since Hirschfeld did all of the big Broadway stars and other celebs.



But it's the reason Ellington commissioned the elegant looking sketch that struck me. It was done by his savvy manager Irving Mills for promotional purposes. Ellington was world famous by the 1930s but as a matter of course white newspapers simply refused to run pictures of black people. They would write about his tour, do profiles of him and rave about his shows...but they wouldn't run his picture.

Yes, Ellington had a vivid private life with wives and mistresses angling for attention from the man whose first and last love was himself and his music. But the real excitement here is the creative process. Ellington famously wrote "for" his world class musicians, crafting and arranging music specifically for them. Figures like the great Johnny Hodges come vividly to life here. Ellington also gleaned their riffs for material that would become the basis for some of his most famous songs. Rather than parsing each song for a debate over who deserves how much credit for this or that gem, Teachout constantly uses songs to illuminate how this riff evolved into that tune. Each artist in his group gets their due but the inevitable argument arises that the musicians who often felt cheated were rarely if ever able to forge out on their own and create music of equivalent greatness as composers. Whatever ingredients went into them, the alchemy was often Ellington's and Ellington's alone.

Needless to say, his collaboration with the great Billy Strayhorn is a different matter, with that gay composer/arranger trading the spotlight in exchange for freedom, though he often chafed at not getting his due or feeling taken for granted.

Teachout also debunks Ellington's many post-facto claims for his songs, how this one was about such-and-such and written in a particular circumstance when in fact it had been inspired by some riff of one of his musicians and titled something entirely different before getting "rebranded." Ellington was also invariably promoting operas and other lengthy work he was just about to finish with the next day.

Teachout argues that if critics hadn't been so dismissive of Ellington's extended works early on that he might have been more encouraged to pursue symphonic pieces with even more vigor and confidence. Still, he turned out quite a few and Teachout argues convincingly for some of them, especially the religious-themed works. But it's the

Blanton-Webster years and the dizzying string of classics that came before, during and after the band's artistic heyday that turn your head: "Cotton Tail," "Chelsea Bridge," "Sophisticated Lady," "Satin Doll," "Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me," "Solitude," "East St. Louis Toodle-O," "Mood Indigo," "It Don't Mean A Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)" - that just scratches the surface and you're already humming one of those gems, aren't you? You'll appreciate them more, not to mention seeking out less familiar fare with new excitement. If you're really lucky, you can play key tracks as they come up in the book. It extends the reading time, but in the most enjoyable way possible. Ellington and Teachout would surely approve.

### **BOOKS I'VE READ SO FAR IN 2013**

1. A Natural History Of Dragons by Marie Brennan \*\*\*/
2. Mother's Milk by Edward St. Aubyn \*\*\* 1/2
3. Junius And Albert's Adventures In The Confederacy: A Civil War Odyssey by Peter Carlson \*\*\* 1/2
4. Why Priests? by Garry Wills \*\* 1/2
5. The Black Country by Alex Grecian \*\*\*
6. Toms River by Dan Fagin \*\*\*/
7. Breakfast At Tiffany's by Truman Capote \*\*\* 1/2
8. The Art Of Hearing Heartbeats by Jan-Phillip Sendker \*\* 1/2
9. London Falling by Paul Cornell \*\*\*
10. Transatlantic by Colum McCann \*\*\* 1/2
11. Matilda by Roald Dahl \*\*
12. Maggot Moon by Sally Gardner \*\*
13. Great North Road by Peter F. Hamilton \*\*\* 1/2
14. A Dual Inheritance by Joanna Hershon \*\*\* 1/2
15. Little Green by Walter Mosley \*\*\* 1/2
16. Masqueraders by Georgette Hayer \*\*\* 1/2
17. Life After Life by Kate Atkinson \*\*\*
18. The Vatican Diaries by John Thavis \*\*\*
19. Island Of Bones by Imogen Robertson \*\*\*
20. Circle Of Shadows by Imogen Robertson \*\*\*
21. Queen Of The Air by Dean Jensen \*\*\* 1/2
22. His Majesty's Hope by Susan Elia MacNeal \*\* 1/2
23. The War Below by James Scott \*\* 1/2
24. Bad Monkey by Carl Hiaasen \*\*\*
25. The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri \*\*\*\*
26. The Unwinding by George Packer \*\*\*\*
27. Winger by Andrew Smith \*\*\* 1/2
28. Hickory by Palmer Brown \*\*\*
29. Soulless by Gail Corriger \*\*\*
30. Revolutionary Summer by Joseph Ellis \*\*\*
31. The Longest Way Home by Andrew McCarthy \*\*\* 1/2
32. The Cleaner Of Chartres by Sally Vickers \*\*\*
33. The Man Who Was Poe by Avi \*\* 1/2
34. Openly Straight by Bill Konigsberg \*\* 1/2
35. The Bone Season by Samantha Shannon \*
36. Blood Of Tyrants by Naomi Novik \*\*\* 1/2
37. White Butterfly by Walter Mosley \*\*\* 1/2
38. Black Betty by Walter Mosley \*\*\* 1/2
39. The Mouse With The Question Mark Tail by Richard Peck \*\* 1/2
40. Proxy by Alex London \*\*\*
41. Delilah Dirk and the Turkish Lieutenant by Tony Cliff \*\* 1/2
42. A Monster Calls by Patrick Ness \*\*\* 1/2
43. More Than This by Patrick Ness \*\*\* 1/2
44. Dissident Gardens by Jonathan Lethem \*\*\*
45. The Good Soldiers by David Finkel \*\*\*\*
46. Fallout by Todd Strasser \*\*\*
47. Boxers by Gene Luen Yang \*\*\* 1/2

48. The Boy Who Swam With Piranhas by David Almond \*\*\*
49. The Heart Of Everything That Is by Bob Drury and Tom Clavin \*\*\*
50. A Little Yellow Dog by Walter Mosley \*\*\* 1/2
51. Gone Fishin' by Walter Mosley \*\*\*
52. Thank You For Your Service by David Finkel \*\*\*\*
53. Bad Boy Brawly Brown by Walter Mosley \*\*\*\*
54. Elect H. Mouse State Judge by Nelly Reifler \* 1/2
55. Six Easy Pieces by Walter Mosley \*\*\*
56. Someone by Alice McDermott \*\*\* 1/2
57. A Blind Goddess by James R. Benn \*\* 1/2
58. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance by Robert Persig \*
59. Slaughterhouse-Five by Kurt Vonnegut \*\*\*
60. A Tree Grows in Brooklyn by Betty Smith \*\*\* 1/2
61. The Apothecary by Maile Meloy \*\*\*
62. The Mark Of Zorro by Johnston McCulley \*\*
63. Valdez Is Coming by Elmore Leonard \*\*\*\*
64. The Fisher King by Paule Marshall \*\*\* 1/2
65. The Fantastic Family Whipple by Matthew Ward \*\*\*
66. Bambi: A Life In The Woods by Felix Salten \*\*\*\*
67. Invasion by Walter Dean Myers \*\* 1/2
68. Seeing Red by Kathryn Erskine \*\* 1/2
69. Dark Lies The Island by Kevin Barry \*\*\*\*
70. Duke: A Life Of Duke Ellington by Terry Teachout \*\*\*
71. The Double by George Pelecanos \*\*
72. Beatles Vs. Stones by John McMillian \*\*\*
73. Moonday by Alex Ross \*\*\*/
74. American Mirror: The Life and Art Of Norman Rockwell by Deborah Solomon \*\*\*
75. A Massacre in Memphis by Steven V Ash \*\*\*
76. Revolutionary by Alex Myers \*\*\*\
77. Farthing by Jo Walton \*\*\*
78. The Returned by Jason Mott \*\* 1/2
79. Lincoln's Boys by Joshua Zeitz \*\* 1/2
80. The Fault In Our Stars by John Green \*\*\*
81. A Boy and a Bear in a Boat by Dave Shelton \*\*\* 1/2
82. Dominion by C.J. Samson \*\*\*
83. Little Scarlet by Walter Mosley \*\*\* 1/2
84. Hombre by Elmore Leonard \*\*\* 1/2
85. The House Of The Scorpion by Nancy Farmer \*\*\* 1/2
86. Longbourn by Jo Baker \*\*\* 1/2
87. The Son by Philip Meyer \*\*\* 1/2
88. The Ghost Of The Mary Celeste by Valerie Martin \*\* 1/2

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*Most titles listed here will be available in multiple formats. Do check individual titles for availability in all their various guises and price points.*

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