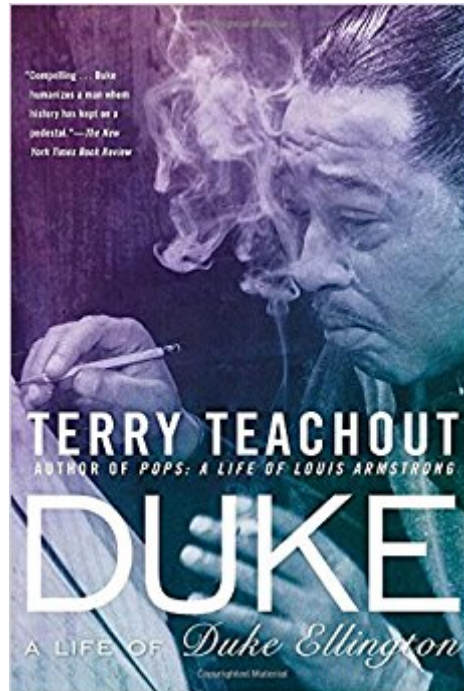




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# Duke: A Life Of Duke Ellington



## Synopsis

A major new biography of Duke Ellington from the acclaimed author of *Pops: A Life of Louis Armstrong*.  
Edward Kennedy *“Duke Ellington was the greatest jazz composer of the twentieth century and an impenetrably enigmatic personality whom no one, not even his closest friends, claimed to understand. The grandson of a slave, he dropped out of high school to become one of the world’s most famous musicians, a showman of incomparable suavity who was as comfortable in Carnegie Hall as in the nightclubs where he honed his style. He wrote some fifteen hundred compositions, many of which, like “Mood Indigo” and “Sophisticated Lady,” remain beloved standards, and he sought inspiration in an endless string of transient lovers, concealing his inner self behind a smiling mask of flowery language and ironic charm.”*  
As the biographer of Louis Armstrong, Terry Teachout is uniquely qualified to tell the story of the public and private lives of Duke Ellington. A semi-finalist for the National Book Award, *Duke* peels away countless layers of Ellington’s evasion and public deception to tell the unvarnished truth about the creative genius who inspired Miles Davis to say, *“All the musicians should get together one certain day and get down on their knees and thank Duke.”*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** In the selective bibliography of this comprehensive and well-researched life of America’s greatest jazz and popular-music composer and orchestra leader, there are more than a dozen full biographies; memoirs by Ellington himself (however unreliable), by his son,

Mercer, and by several band members; as well as innumerable profiles and a variety of ephemera. One might have thought yet another life, admittedly a "synthesis," 40 years after the subject's death might be superfluous. In this addition to our music literature, however, Teachout, drama critic for the Wall Street Journal and author of, among other writings, a biography of Louis Armstrong (Pops, 2009), abundantly justifies the effort. Though respectful and musically knowing, Teachout presents the famously evasive and not altogether admirable Ellington (among other traits, procrastination, manipulateness, and incorrigible womanizing) scars and all, including the rarely photographed one (rectified here) on his left cheek, inflicted by his jealous wife. It is Ellington's breathtakingly enormous musical contribution (1,700 compositions, from short pieces to major suites and sacred music) and his gift for collaboration, albeit often appropriation, that is the fitting focus of this important book. Included is a list of "key recordings," all currently downloadable, a perfect accompaniment to one's reading of this entertaining and valuable biography. --Mark Levine --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Praise for DUKE"Compelling narrative flow...poised impartiality. . . . Teachout writes in an earthbound style marked by sound scholarship and easy readability. . . . DUKE humanizes a man whom history has kept on a pedestal." • The New York Times Book Review "A thorough and fascinating portrait." • USA Today "a grand and engrossing biography...Thanks to this frank and sympathetic biography--whose every page is studded with sharp phrases and keen insights--we now seem to know Duke Ellington as well as we ever will or need to."--San Francisco Chronicle"Teachout adroitly chronicles how Ellington coaxed from his ensemble such timeless hits as "Mood Indigo." And he adeptly evokes the personalities of the ducal band..."--The Economist"an impressively lucid, compact narrative"--The Boston Globe "A thoroughly researched homage" | Teachout delivers a Duke unlike any we've seen in previous biographies | At last, Teachout affirms that music was Ellington's greatest mistress and to her, the composer was unrelentingly loyal. • Essence Magazine "Swinging." • Elle Magazine "This well-researched biography is sure to appeal to longtime jazz fans who revel in their memories of Ellington's work and others who may want to learn more about his fascinating life." • Associated Press "Mr Teachout adroitly chronicles how Ellington coaxed from his ensemble such timeless hits as "Mood Indigo" . . . evokes the personalities of the ducal band." • The Economist "Descriptively rich, the book is not so much a scholarly tome as it is a

delightful and entertaining read. Teachout writes with clarity and verve, presenting an astonishing amount of detail in a flowing narrative that brings to life not just Ellington and his music, but much of American culture of the period. *National Review* "[A] grand and engrossing biography. Thanks to this frank and sympathetic biography - whose every page is studded with sharp phrases and keen insights - we now seem to know Duke Ellington as well as we ever will or need to. *San Francisco Chronicle* "Teachout's exhaustive mining of archives, including a number of unpublished memoirs of some of the principals in his story, gives the musical history in Duke an impressive heft. *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* "By penetrating behind the curtain, this author has delivered a book that even those who think they know Ellington will need to read. *Dallas Morning News* "Teachout does a commendable job of contextualizing Ellington's career." *Austin Chronicle* "The definitive Ellington biography thus far. Valuable [one of] the most important books of 2013. *The Buffalo News* "Teachout captures the breadth of [Duke's] life with verve and insight. *The Huffington Post* "Teachout's book, as in the case of his earlier one on Armstrong, is the masterwork. *Jazz Journal* "Dimensional, thoughtful, and rigorously researched, Duke is an enthralling read from cover to cover." *BrainPickings.org* "Teachout brings a worthy level of scholarship to the telling of the notoriously secretive Ellington's life. *The Virginia Quarterly Review (Online)* "With this exhaustive, engaging study of the greatest jazz composer of his era, Wall Street Journal drama critic Teachout solidifies his place as one of America's great music biographers. *Kirkus, Starred Review* "Comprehensive and well-researched. Important. [an] entertaining and valuable biography. *Booklist, Starred Review* "Teachout gives much insight into Ellington's life, personality, working habits, and compositions. This work should appeal to Ellington enthusiasts as well as casual jazz fans. *Library Journal* "Revealing. Teachout neatly balances colorful anecdote with shrewd character assessments and musicological analysis, and he manages to debunk Ellington's self-mythologizing, while preserving his stature as the man who caught jazz's ephemeral genius in a bottle. *Publishers Weekly* "Terry Teachout's biography is destined to be the definitive biography of bandleader, composer, and complex man. •Edward Kennedy "Duke Ellington." *The American Rag* "a fascinating account... Teachout gives us a rich portrait of the man, his music and his era.. "--Tampa

Bay TribunePraise for Pops; A Life of Louis Armstrong: "Teachout restores this jazzman to his deserved place in the pantheon of American artists." The New York Times "Thirty-eight years after Louis Armstrong's death, Terry Teachout has made the possible, possible: He has written a definitive narrative biography of the greatest jazz musician of the twentieth century." San Francisco Chronicle "A masterpiece." Seattle Times "Teachout excels at conveying the interplay between Armstrong the artist and Armstrong the entertainer, and at examining the particular challenge of his legacy." The New Yorker "[An] exceptional biography" Upon finishing this definitive biography, the reader is instructed to flip to the discography, download every last song, listen and grin the hell back. The Washington Post Best Books of the Month, December 2009 "Crafted with a musician's ear and an historian's eye, is a vibrant biography of the iconic Louis Armstrong that resonates with the same warmth as ol' Satchmo's distinctive voice." Wall Street Journal "critic Terry Teachout draws from a wealth of previously unavailable material including over 650 reels of Armstrong's own personal tape recordings to create an engaging profile that slips behind the jazz legend's megawatt smile. Teachout reveals that the beaming visage of "Reverend Satchelmouth" was not a mark of racial subservience, but a clear symbol of Louis's refusal to let anything cloud the joy he derived from blowing his horn. "Faced with the terrible realities of the time and place into which he had been born," explains Teachout, "he didn't repine, but returned love for hatred and sought salvation in work." Armstrong was hardly impervious to the injustices of his era, but in his mind, nothing was more sacred than the music." Dave Callanan "Teachout turns to another mighty pillar of 20th-century American culture, Louis Armstrong, a black man born at the turn of the century in the poorest quarter of New Orleans who by the end of his life was known and loved in every corner of the earth. Teachout brings a fresh perspective Teachout's portrait reminds us why we fell in love with Armstrong's music in the first place. Publishers Weekly Starred Review "To this fine, exhaustively researched...biography, Teachout brings an insider's knowledge--he was a jazz musician before launching a career as cultural critic and biographer." National Post The Afterword "No one does better in exploring Armstrong's social context than Teachout." Montreal Gazette "Compelling narrative flow...poised impartiality. . . . Teachout writes in an earthbound style marked by sound scholarship and easy readability. . . . Duke humanizes a man whom history has kept on a pedestal." The New York Times Book Review "Teachout is a sensitive writer, and one reason his biographies are moving is that he has obviously been giving

himself an education in the realities of American racial history as he writes them." [•The New Yorker](#) "A thorough and fascinating portrait." [•USA Today](#) "A thoroughly researched homage [Teachout](#) delivers a Duke unlike any we've seen in previous biographies" [At last](#), Teachout affirms that music was Ellington's greatest mistress and to her, the composer was unrelentingly loyal." [•Essence Magazine](#) "This well-researched biography is sure to appeal to longtime jazz fans who revel in their memories of Ellington's work and others who may want to learn more about his fascinating life." [•Associated Press](#) "Mr. Teachout adroitly chronicles how Ellington coaxed from his ensemble such timeless hits as "Mood Indigo" . . . evokes the personalities of the ducal band." [•The Economist](#) "Descriptively rich, the book is not so much a scholarly tome as it is a delightful and entertaining read. Teachout writes with clarity and verve, presenting an astonishing amount of detail in a flowing narrative that brings to life not just Ellington and his music, but much of American culture of the period." [•National Review](#) "[A] grand and engrossing biography" [Thanks to this frank and sympathetic biography](#) - whose every page is studded with sharp phrases and keen insights - we now seem to know Duke Ellington as well as we ever will or need to." [•San Francisco Chronicle](#) "The definitive Ellington biography thus far" [valuable](#) [\[one of\]](#) the most important books of 2013." [•The Buffalo News](#) "Dimensional, thoughtful, and rigorously researched, Duke is an enthralling read from cover to cover." [•BrainPickings.org](#) "Teachout does a first rate job" [Teachout's](#) book is a worthy read. It successfully brings Duke Ellington and his music back into the public consciousness, reaffirming the man's artistic genius while telling a fascinating story." [•PopMatters.com](#)

With all that has been written about Duke Ellington, one should no longer expect any major or even minor revelations. What Teachout has done so well is to lucidly coalesce from numerous sources all the important information about the man and his music, while offering up some intelligent analysis and informed opinions along the way, which, of course, are open to debate. The author doesn't shy away from Ellington's faults and imperfections, among which were his being a procrastinator, a manipulator, an exploiter, a male chauvinist, and very superstitious. Those less familiar with Duke's music may be surprised to learn that many of his most famous compositions were at best only partially written by him, many themes either stolen outright from his orchestra members' playing or obtained for a very nominal sum. One of his musicians in fact called Duke a "compiler" rather than a composer. All in all, this is a well-focused bio of Ellington, and should be the first stop for anyone

wishing to begin learning about this great American jazz artist. Teachout's extensive notes and bibliography will help point you towards further reading as well.

An interesting read but not a particularly enjoyable one, as Teachout seems to go so far out of his way to "humanize" his subject that one of my musical heroes is portrayed as a master manipulator, heartless womanizer, habitual liar, and regular thief of other people's musical ideas who knew little about composition beyond his knack for tonal colour. Teachout is a reasonably good (albeit joyless) writer, and I suppose it's worthwhile to have a detailed bio of the Duke available, but this one leaves mud splattered all over the urbane and charming public persona we came to know and love. Teachout leavens the negativity by lavishing praises on a composition here or there - like "Ko-Ko", for instance - but even then he seems almost contemptuously astonished that this lazy and self-aggrandizing "autodidact" managed to produce it. Genius? But barely.

I am not an Ellington scholar, by any stretch of the imagination. But I have read quite a bit about him and have played and studied 100 or more of his 3 1/2 minute chestnuts. That said, I can say without reservation that this is the best single piece of Ellington scholarship I've read to date. There are opinions galore, of course, but most appear to be based on fairly solid research. (The bibliography and footnotes section at the end of the book are as extensive as I've ever seen in a biography.) I'd certainly recommend you read Terry's book before you read Duke's autobiography, which, to me, was largely a waste of time. As in most things personal to Ellington, the concept of telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth appear to have been largely alien to him.

I gather from this book and others I've read that anyone who undertakes an Ellington biography has his or her work cut out if the goal is to reach the heart and substance of the man. For a very public person, he led a very private life and he gave nothing away about his personal life, and that includes how he composed and arranged music. What I found most valuable in this biography was Teachout's description of the Ellington-Strayhorn relationship. It appears to have been rather prickly and more competitive than one would have supposed. I would have enjoyed more space devoted to the relationship between Ellington and his son, Mercer. Teachout's style is graceful and flowing, like a Johnny Hodges sax solo, and I would suppose one could enjoy his book without being a jazz fan. But like most complicated subjects, if you want to get some handle on Ellington, you have to go to several sources to get a composite picture no matter how hazy. For instance, the best analysis of Ellington's music, without getting too technical, and his relationship to his sidemen, I would suggest

can be found in James Lincoln Colliers' "Duke Ellington." In the meantime, Teachout's book should be regarded as the best all-around one volume study of a life that's hard to pin down.

Treachout's effort is a standout Ellington biography. He places Ellington where he belongs artistically but really digs into his growth as a composer and his approach arranging. I also appreciated the depth of discussion about his working and personal relationships with band members. Of the dozen or more Ellington books I've read over the years, this one is among the best.

I'm not finished reading the book yet but I'm giving it 5 stars. It is an excellent biography of Duke Ellington. I am thoroughly enjoying it. Well researched. I particularly like the parts about Duke's personal life and life during the 20s, 30s, 40s and beyond. Great job Terry Teachout.

Terry Teachout's biography of Duke Ellington may very well be the best book yet on the subject. There are numerous anecdotes you won't find anywhere else. The most interesting part to me was how Teachout dissects Duke's interpersonal relations and manipulation of the people in his life. It is an honest, but respectful, account of an immensely talented and complex artist.

Enjoyed reading this book very much, good use of photos to highlight the material. Also enjoyed the insight into Mr. Ellington personal and business life, would recommend to anyone who want a deep understanding of the Duke.

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