



## **Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class**

*Larry Tye*

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"A lively and engaging chronicle that adds yet another dimension to the historical record." -The Boston Globe

When George Pullman began recruiting Southern blacks as porters in his luxurious new sleeping cars, the former slaves suffering under Jim Crow laws found his offer of a steady job and worldly experience irresistible. They quickly signed up to serve as maid, waiter, concierge, nanny, and occasionally doctor and undertaker to cars full of white passengers, making the Pullman Company the largest employer of African Americans in the country by the 1920s.

Drawing on extensive interviews with dozens of porters and their descendants, Larry Tye reconstructs the complicated world of the Pullman porter and the vital cultural, political, and economic roles they played as forerunners of the modern black middle class. *Rising from the Rails* provides a lively and enlightening look at this important social phenomenon.

## Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class Details

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Author : Larry Tye

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## **From Reader Review *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* for online ebook**

### **Tessa says**

Read for my book group. Enlightening but it had some sections that I skimmed through. However, I learned a lot about the history of black Pullman porters and their contributions to the civil rights movement.

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### **Steven Freeman says**

Outstanding story of the role of the Pullman Porters in both the civil rights movement and the labor movement. A critical read about an important part of American history. Their sacrifices are mostly forgotten, but their impact on generations of African Americans (and workers in general) is significant.

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### **Toni says**

A really great book about a part of American history that has never been covered. Well researched and able to include interviews from actual porters, it's a fascinating glimpse of America--especially the parts that are so often covered up: Robber barons, discrimination, lynchings, the extreme prejudices faced by blacks after the Civil War & for more than the next 100 years.

Some interesting bits:

\* Some kids in 1918 lost their one and only baseball when it flew into the window of a Pullman car & was caught by a porter. Two weeks later when the car came back through, a ball came flying back out of the car--this time brand new but with the signatures of the Boston Red Sox starting lineup

\* Racial prejudice was so extreme that blankets for porters to use were a different color than those for passengers

\* Jack Benny was as cheap as he claimed to be and never tipped

\* The heiress to the Heinz fortune would "tip" the underpaid & overworked porters who served her by delivering a truckload of groceries to the porter's home

\* Ronald Reagan--he of the "trickle-down" economic theory, didn't tip at all, becoming a poster child for what was wrong with his economic theory

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### **Emmkay says**

Tye makes the case for the centrality of black Pullman (sleeping car) porters to the development of the black middle class, labour history, and the civil rights movement. Lots I didn't know! I found the writing a little

dull but it seemed well-researched and theirs is an important and interesting story. 3.5 stars.

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### **I Be Reading says**

My great-grandfather, who died long before I was born, was a Pullman Porter. I was so happy to find a book dedicated to the lives of these upstanding men, many of whom were the first to leave the farms in the South and went on to help create the black middle class. Five stars!

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### **Roger Mckenzie says**

I thoroughly enjoyed this book about the Pullman Porters. The stories of organising a union in secrecy were fascinating and eye opening. It's a shame, to say the least, that there was not more about the women working on the railroad but it was good to see how women were absolutely vital to the initial organising of the union.

Anything that tells the story of the vital contribution made by A Philip Randolph to trade unionism and to civil rights is fine by me but I was also pleased that the due respect was paid to others such as E D Nixon and C L Delums.

I recommend this book to anyone wanting to know more about how the struggles of the past give us guidance on how to stand up to the struggles of today and tomorrow.

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### **Chris Aylott says**

Simultaneously romantic and gritty, journalist Tye's account digs into the paradoxical story of the Pullman porters and the almost forgotten role they played in the civil rights movement. On the one hand, the porters were thoroughly exploited by the Pullman company, with long hours and low pay relative to their fellow railroad workers. On the other, they were a beacon of upward mobility for their neighbors and a critical information network between black communities. If you believe that economic opportunity is a critical first step toward education and true equality, you'll find a lot of ammunition for that argument here.

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### **Tonya Marshall says**

Upon seeing the documentary, *Rising From The Rails*, I immediately wanted to read the book that was associated. Rarely is the history and significance of the Pullman Porter discussed and appreciated with American History. This book personalizes the challenges, struggles, indignities, and successes experienced by these beautiful group of men and the other auxiliary groups including women and other minorities working for the railroad at the end of the 19th century and 20th century.

This book gives an abundance of history regarding the Pullman Company and the personalities of the founder, George Pullman and his successors. Larry Tye, the author, does an amazing job of making sure one understands the times which shaped the world during that time period. Through the voices of former Pullman Porters, the readers are privy to their experiences on the psychology of handling the public, the awareness of their job to be seen and not heard, and to be docile in the occupation. However, there greatest accomplishment was the respect, humanism, and dignity that these men demanded even in their silence. Now

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that is strength.

Written history underestimates the importance and powerful for which the The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters meant not only to American history but to the progress of American Labor and its Unions. The establishment and installation of this all black labor union was the most successful black union EVER. The Brotherhood was the first workers' organization of any color to displace a company union and was the first black union admitted as a full-fledged member of the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Under the leadership of A. Phillip Randolph, this union of Pullman Porters became a reality through a tireless persistence for over 10 years. A. Phillip Randolph is a jewel to African- American history which in most cases is not discovered. He is usually overshadowed by Dr. King. However, Mr. Tye does an excellent job of pushing this great civil rights leader, negotiator, and intellect to the forefront.

This book makes the reader aware that not only is the existence and organization of the Pullman Porters important to the progression of Civil Rights for African Americans. But their successes profoundly impacted the elevation of future generations in the field of politics, law, academia, and social activism. (less)

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### **Elizabeth Higginbotham says**

I enjoyed *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class* by Larry Tye. I have been reading much about Pullman Porters and Tye's book is recent. He covers some of the familiar ground, such as the nature of the work and the discrimination built into job. We learn about the complexities of the work and what these men learn about negotiating in the White world. Many men used these skills to move into Civil Rights work, as the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters represented a watershed moment in labor relations, civil rights and also race relations.

Tye does not ignore the troubles of this work, but addresses them even the masks that Black men had to wear on the job and the many compromises involved working in the early 20th century with little power and few concrete rights. We see how the lessons are important for the next generation. Historically many sons and nephews followed their elders into the job, but the next generation has wider options.

Tye covers the leaders, like A. Phillip Randolph, but also the many secondary leaders who not only inspired others but did the hard work of logistics and organizing. This is a balanced book that could be enjoyed by a wide audience.

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### **Beverly says**

Some months ago, several of my friends from my Red Hat group went to a train museum in Kentucky. It was a really fun day and while we were there we watched a short film about the Pullman Porters who took care of the sleeper cars and their occupants...treating them to a luxurious experience while traveling. Being a porter was an enviable job and basically led to a more middle class life for those who stayed with the job.

Unfortunately, maintaining the job also meant taking much abuse from the wealthy white passengers who called almost all the porters "George" (since they worked for George Pullman) and expected them to perform any chore at any time of the day or night. The book was really fascinating to me, with the exception of the chapter regarding unionizing (or at least trying to) and even it was interesting enough that I read every bit of it!

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## **Colin says**

Well written and insightful, although it spends too much time on civil rights leader and pioneer A. Philip Randolph - a subject no doubt deserving its own book. The Pullman Porter was the connective tissue of the Black community, passing information, inspiration along as well as union pamphlets and activist literature. I wished the author spent more time profiling the outsized number of children and families that benefited having a Pullman Porter in their family.

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## **Mikey B. says**

This book discusses the Pullman porters and how they became the Black middle class. They were more travelled than ordinary black folk of that era and also came into contact with a much wider diversity of people – particularly if you compare them to share-croppers in the Deep South. They instilled a work ethic in their families; sons could inherit the positions of their fathers.

There was a price to this as the author points out. The Pullman porters hid behind a mask – smiling and shining shoes for their white clientele. They were often called “George” – or much worse. But they could become couriers of news for the black community – picking up books and newspapers from across the country and over-hearing the conversations of their customers.

They were only able to form a union in the 1930’s when the Roosevelt administration passed laws over-ruling company unions.

There was a certain redundancy in this book and some themes are repeated too often. The biographical descriptions of George Pullman and A. Philip Randolph are interesting. The son of Abraham Lincoln – Todd, certainly did not follow in his father’s footsteps by exploiting the Pullman porters.

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## **Gerry Connolly says**

*Rising from the Rails* is Larry Tye's account of the Pullman porters. Over 100 years these black workers transformed train service, established a middle class, organized a union and won recognition after a decade long fight. A Philip Randolph used his perch as Brotherhood President to launch the civil rights movement. A story of hardship, endurance and triumph. The Pullman porters' legacy was profound

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## **Don says**

Really enjoyed this book. I thought it was well researched, particularly in light of the difficulty in finding living Pullman Porters and setting up opportunities for oral testimony/history with them. Its one of the particular joys of reading a history book when it covers something that is seemingly forgotten, and may only get a sentence, if that, in a normal history textbook. The transition of African-Americans who were slaves in the South to working on these luxury sleeping cars is fascinating, including everything from their status among themselves, with their individual communities, and as compared to larger society as well. The book doesn't sugarcoat the life, and while the story is amazing, its also a sad reminder that nothing better was

available to these men because of the color of their skin. It was also interesting to read the impact the founding of the Porters' Union had on other labor movements, as well as the greater civil rights movement.

Fascinating read on a small segment of our history but a very important and impactful part of history. Worthy read.

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## **Linda says**

Seattle Rep commissioned a work on the Pullman Porters which became the Pullman Porter Blues. My husband and I saw it and, of course, immediately became interested in the historical background. This book is a great one for that. It not only traces the history of George Pullman and his decision to use black porters (he hired ex-slaves because they were already subservient and, since they were black, they would not be threatening to white riders.) It's fascinating to find that former porters were actually the founders of the Civil Rights movement too.

The only part I didn't like was the chapter on wearing the mask. Tye uses that term way too many times in showing how blacks had to be "in the background" while they learned about how "white folks" lived and turned these lifestyles into something they could steer their children towards.

Oh, yes. The play very well represented the three generations of porter: the first, subservient, desperately so, doing and suffering almost anything to keep the job; the second, organizing unions, trying to improve conditions; and the third, romanticizing the job but finding out how difficult and demeaning it was after having been raised to be "middle class."

If Pullman Porter Blues makes it big and starts traveling, please be sure to see it. It's a wonderful distillation of the history of the porters.

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