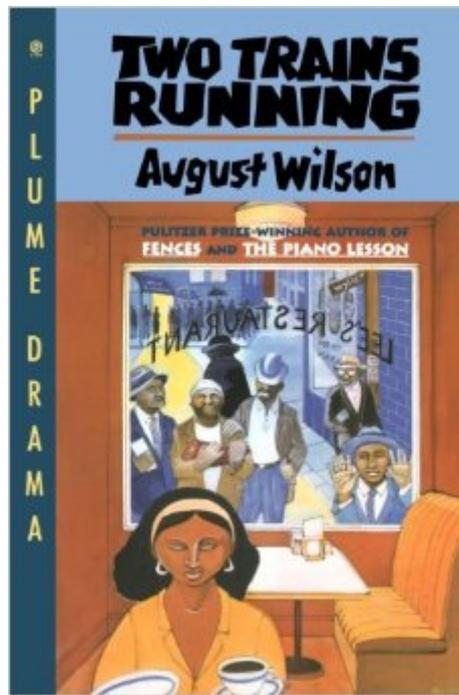


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# Two Trains Running



## Synopsis

August Wilson surged to the forefront of American playwrights with the success of such critically acclaimed plays as Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom* and Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, as well as his Pulitzer Prize winners *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. Now, with *Two Trains Running*, which *Time* magazine hailed as "his most mature work to date," he offers another mesmerizing chapter in his remarkable cycle of plays about the black experience in twentieth-century America. It is Pittsburgh, 1969. The regulars of Memphis Lee's restaurant are struggling to cope with the turbulence of a world that is changing rapidly around them and fighting back when they can. As the play unfolds, Memphis's diner - and the rest of his block - is scheduled to be torn down, a casualty of the city's renovation project that is sweeping away the buildings of a community, but not its spirit. The rich undertaker across the street encourages Memphis to accept his offer to buy the place from him at a reduced price, but Memphis stands his ground, determined to make the city pay him what the property is worth, refusing to be swindled out of his land as he was years before in Mississippi. Into this fray come Sterling, the ex-con who embraces the tenets of Malcolm X; Wolf, the bookie who has learned to play by the white man's rules; Risa, a waitress of quiet dignity who has mutilated her legs to distance herself from men; and Holloway, the resident philosopher and fervent believer in the prophecies of a legendary 322-year-old woman down the street, a reminder of their struggle and heritage. And just as sure as an inexorable future looms right around the corner, these people of "loud voices and big hearts" continue to search, to falter, to hope that they can catch the train that will make the difference. With compassion, humor, and a superb sense of place and time, Wilson paints a vivid portrait of everyday lives in the shadow of great events, and of unsung men and women who are anything but ordinary.

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## Customer Reviews

Two Trains Running is the August Wilson "Century Series" play depicting the African-American experience in the 1960s. In a 1969 Pittsburgh diner, 6 men and a woman share vignettes about their lives and the "American Dream." Memphis, the owner of the diner, is about to have the city seize the restaurant under "imminent domain." Sterling, (who will play a significant role in *Radio Golf*) has just been released from prison and is enamored with the Black Power movement. West, the community's mortician and Wolf, a number runner, are the wealthiest men in the Hill District. As these characters relate their lives, Wilson shows how the American Dream has been promised, and for so many, been denied. Memphis is frustrated and angry: he was run off his farm in Mississippi (with an allusion to *The Piano Lesson* (The August Wilson Century Cycle)), and now faces being run off of his business in Pittsburgh. Hambone, a homeless (and possibly mentally ill) customer has similarly been cheated. Reflecting on the American Dream, Halloway says, "People kill me talking about (African-Americans) is lazy. (African-Americans) is the most hardworking people in the world. Worked three hundred years for free. And didn't take no lunch hour. Now all of a sudden (African-Americans) is lazy. Don't know how to work. All of a sudden when they got to pay (African-Americans), ain't no work for him to do."

AUGUST WILSON'S *Two Trains Running* is the third play in Wilson's decade-by-decade dramatic expression of the African-American experience. The setting is Pittsburgh, 1969 at a restaurant owned by central character Memphis. Others in his circle include restaurant waitress and cook Risa, passing regulars, and Sterling, a young man who has just been released from jail. The play's arc documents the interaction of these seven as they go about their business during a week. What is so very interesting is that Wilson's drama is not that "dramatic" but rather "thematic." This is an ordinary week for the characters, yet it captures as a sequence of snapshots that point to deeper truths. The theme best expressed by lead character Memphis: "If you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up." For Memphis, he "dropped the ball" 40 years earlier when he was run off his rightful property in Mississippi by a group of white men. In a nod to Greek tragedy, Wilson places Memphis's chance at redemption of this injustice as mercurial as the gods: at the end of the play his chance to "pick it up" is simply by luck, rather than any effort on his part. The wheel of Fortuna is his only redemption: not his efforts against the unrighteous gods of his age. The most arresting character is Hambone. He

is instantly familiar to anyone who has ever worked with the homeless or unloved who wander the streets of any modern urban city. Hambone has been struggling to "pick up the ball" for nine years, for he was promised a ham in exchange for painting the fence of a white meat-shop owner. The mercurial and unjust butcher then substituted a chicken instead, but Hambone refused to accept it: holding to the honor of the verbal contract he had made with the butcher.

August Wilson is a distinguished playwright who has won numerous awards. He has chronicled the African American experience that begins with the 20s through the 90s. Two of the plays, *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*, both written in the mid 80s, have won the Pulitzer Prize. Set in 1969, *Two Trains Running* takes place in a small diner in Pittsburgh. The diner regulars include Risa, a waitress who scarred her legs in an effort to keep men away, which eventually works; Sterling, an ex-prisoner who depends on luck to find work rather than the hard way; Hambone, a mentally challenged middle-age man who was cheated by the white man for work he had done. Still after 9 years, his only and constant words are "I want my ham." Wolf is a numbers runner who uses the diner for his business and Holloway has a strong belief in the supernatural. Also included are the funeral owner, West and diner owner, Memphis. Urban renewal is a recurring theme in Wilson's work. Tearing down buildings has been an ongoing project and now the city has an offer for the diner owner, Memphis. He holds out for a respectable offer from the city. Memphis is logical with values but he doesn't have much faith for equality, freedom and justice or the black-is-beautiful concept. The play opens with the restaurant regulars commenting on the townspeople lining up outside West's Funeral Home to see the dead Reverend turned Prophet Samuel. They believe some luck might pass on to them. Funeral home owner, West, is a regular at the diner and he and Prophet are looked upon as two who got rich cheating people. The play doesn't have much in stage direction as it takes place at a diner counter. Little direction is needed.

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