

## Q&A with Calvin A. Ramsey, Author of *Ruth and the Green Book*

Calvin A. Ramsey is a playwright, photographer, and painter who lives in Atlanta, Georgia. Before writing *Ruth and the Green Book*, he wrote a play called *The Green Book*, about *The Negro Motorist Green Book*.

*How did you learn about *The Negro Motorist Green Book*?*

Five or six years ago, I went to a funeral here in Atlanta, for some friends' son, who was killed in a car accident. The young man's grandfather, who was in his 80s, was from New York State. We met in the backyard. He asked where he could get a *Green Book*. He'd never been down south before and thought he still needed one. I dedicated the book to Little Tony, whose grandfather was at his funeral and mentioned the *Green Book*.

*What was it about the *Green Book* that interested you enough to write about it?*

I was aware of the Underground Railroad, but I wasn't familiar with this phase of African American history. [After talking with Little Tony's grandfather,] I started researching about the travel guide and I just got hooked. I should also mention that I had already started writing plays at this point in my life, and I was on the advisory board of special collections at Emory University's Robert W. Woodruff Library. So I was already in that environment and this *Green Book* just hit me, grabbed my attention.

*Why do you think the *Green Book* is not very well known?*

I'm not sure why it's not more well known. There are people who are familiar with it. [The people using it] were mostly African American men, the first ones who were hired [by corporations]. They relied on it heavily. When I talk to people about it, a lot have not heard of the *Green Book*, and then there are a few who have a story. It might be regional. But I think with the play and the children's book, it will find a place in U.S. history.

*You've written a play about the book; what made you want to write a children's book about it?*

There's so much talk about this generation, the young kids today not getting history taught to them in a way that was very engaging. I thought this would be a way to introduce them to the topic and there'd be discussions and lesson plans, so they'd know what previous kids went through. Not just the black kids, but all of them. I had no idea the book would turn out so well and that [illustrator] Floyd Cooper would be involved.

*Why do you think it's important for young people to learn about the *Green Book*?*

They know about anti-slavery, the period of the Underground Railroad, and about Reconstruction, but even after that, travel was really difficult. This is really recent history, because the Civil Rights Act was not signed until 1964. And even then, the law was not followed everywhere. As late as 1970, it was problematic for African Americans to travel in some places. These stories are missing links, and we could all benefit from discussing it. Even some of those who hadn't heard of the *Green Book*

had stories—I call them Green Book stories—everything to do with eating, sleeping, traveling, and someone who was kind and helpful or not kind and helpful.

*In your research, you probably came across many stories about real people who used the Green Book. Would you be willing to share any?*

Wynton Marsalis is a jazz trumpet player from New Orleans, who is the jazz artistic director at Lincoln Center [in New York]. His father is Ellis Marsalis Jr., who is also a musician, a piano player, who taught [musician and actor] Harry Connick, Jr. to play. Ellis told me this story. Ellis Marsalis Jr.'s father, Ellis Marsalis Sr., had an Esso service station, called Billboard Esso, that was listed in the Green Book. He also had a small African American motel in New Orleans. Ellis Jr. worked there. Ellis Sr. named the service station Billboard because of a man named Billboard Jackson. Esso had hired Billboard Jackson to train men to run their own service stations, and he trained Ellis Sr. Ellis Marsalis Sr. thought so much of this man that he named his station after him. Ellis and his father even went to visit Billboard Jackson in New York City. His father and Billboard Jackson are very close.

Another story comes from James S. Avery, one of the first blacks hired by Pepsi-Cola. Avery and other black men were hired directly out of business schools at black colleges. He used the Green Book all the time. There was an article in *Fortune* magazine where he talks about how he and other blacks in corporate America relied on [the Green Book] because they couldn't belong to AAA [an auto services club]. And I talked to Avery about that.

*What were the Esso station owners' motives in helping to publish and sell the Green Book?*

Standard Oil, the company that owned Esso, was owned by John D. Rockefeller, Sr., who was America's first billionaire. His wife was named Laura Spelman. That may not mean much to everyone, but there's a black women's college here in Atlanta called Spelman College, named for her. Her father was a minister and abolitionist. He was very active in the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad went through their house in Ohio. So it was probably Laura Spelman who got her husband involved, because of her background growing up under her father's influence. There were white people who were kind to black travelers, but you never knew [who they were].

Victor Green, who started the Green Book, was a mailman, and couldn't print a lot of copies. When Rockefeller got involved, it spread. Billboard Jackson got involved, and circulation got broader. Other men who were special reps of Standard Oil were based in Harlem, New York. Rockefeller did not have to [help share the Green Book], but he did, probably because of Laura's influence.