

H.28 Holiday, Billie, and Alex Meeropol “Strange Fruit.” A song introduced at Café Society, New York City, 1939.

■ First published in 1937, in a magazine of the New York teachers’ union, as a poem by Alex Meeropol (who later adopted the sons of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, executed atomic bomb spies), its devastating attack on lynching of Southern blacks is powered by the central image of the gallows tree:

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
 Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
 Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
 Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Poet Meeropol (known professionally as Lewis Allan) initially set the words to music of his own, but the immortality of the work was ensured when Billie Holiday introduced her own version of the song at New York City’s Café Society in 1939. See David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Billie Holiday, Café Society and an Early Cry for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2000).

The title of the Holiday-Meeropol song has been adopted by an anthology of anti-lynching plays by female authors (*Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, ed. Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens [Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press 1998]).

Another of the immortal lynching protest songs of the 1930s is Irving Berlin’s “Supper Time,” performed by Ethel Waters in the topical revue, *As Thousands Cheer* (1933). Under a headline reading “Unknown Negro Lynched by Frenzied Mob,” Waters “delivered the magnificently understated lament of the wife of the victim, who must tell her children that they will never see their father again” (Laurence Bergreen, *As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin* [New York: Viking, 1990], 321).

H.29 Holmes, Richard *Dr. Johnson and Mr. Savage*. New York: Pantheon, 1993.

■ Between 1737 and 1739, the young Samuel Johnson was guided through London’s nocturnal haunts by Richard Savage, proto-romantic poet and convicted murderer. Holmes’s book is a study of the friendship between the two men and is also, in the author’s words, “the biography of a biography,” a close analysis of Johnson’s *Life of Savage* (London, 1744).

Savage’s self-image as a social outcast was based in large part on his claim that he was the illegitimate son of Lady Macclesfield and Earl Rivers. Although Holmes cites evidence tending to disprove this noble parentage, he does not believe that the poet was a conscious impostor: “Much of the evidence, documentary and otherwise, is reconciled if we assume that through the disrupted, unhappy circumstances of his childhood, Savage was genuinely deluded about his identity.”

Holmes links Savage’s persuasion of his high rank to the murder for which he was sentenced to death, only to be spared by a pardon granted through the intercession of Queen Caroline. In 1727 Savage and two cronies became involved in a brawl at Robinson’s Coffee-House (a tavern and brothel), in which the poet made a lethal sword thrust into the belly of James Sinclair, one of their antagonists. Holmes believes that although it was