Sunday, April 3, 2011

THE EDITOR CHARLES JOHNSON

During the years 1978-1998, I served as the first fiction editor for *The Seattle Review*. Over the course of two decades I had the pleasure of seeing that literary journal publish many writers, ranging from those who at the time were established and even famous (Joyce Carol Oates, John Gardner, Nicholas Delbanco), "emerging" (Daniel Orozco), and new (David Guterson). As one might guess, the real joy in selecting fiction for the *Review* came from discovering memorable stories from new writers whose work, given the always stiff competition for publication in commercial or mass market magazines, might not have found a home. (Early in my own life, many of my stories now frequently reprinted and anthologized, appeared originally in literary journals like *Indiana Review, Antaeus, Mss., Callaloo, North American Review, Mother Jones*, and *Choice*.) Historically, it is there, in the thousands of literary magazines in America, that many destined to become our finest writers first see their work in print.

It has always seemed to me that a "well-rounded" life as a writer involves not simply producing one's own creative work but also serving whenever possible what we call the larger literary culture in this country. In other words, helping others who do work we admire to find an audience. I count myself as fortunate in having had many opportunities to serve talented writers of every race, gender and cultural background at each stage of the creative process---first, by offering rigorous literary art instruction in my beginning, intermediate, advanced and graduate classes at the University of Washington (and elsewhere) for 33 years; then providing many people with their first publication in *The Seattle Review* for twenty years (some of those stories later received awards); and writing endorsements (blurbs) for their earlier and later books (these fill two and a half bookshelves in my library); and, finally, by serving as a fiction judge given the privilege of honoring their work with national literary prizes, grants, and fellowships.
The spiritual principle here is that whatever we want for ourselves we should also want for others. Or, as Martin Luther King Jr. said in "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life," the sermon he felt captured his vision best, the second dimension for completion and fulfillment in life is learning “that there is nothing greater than to do something for others.”

Or put it this way: If you want to be happy, first try to make someone else happy.

Publishing other writers is one small way of achieving that goal.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:32 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/editor-charles-johnson.html

Monday, April 4, 2011

MOVING PICTURES: A CLOSER LOOK

To ask if a story is "experimental" can be misleading. As one wag put it, *every* original story is an experiment when one is working on it.

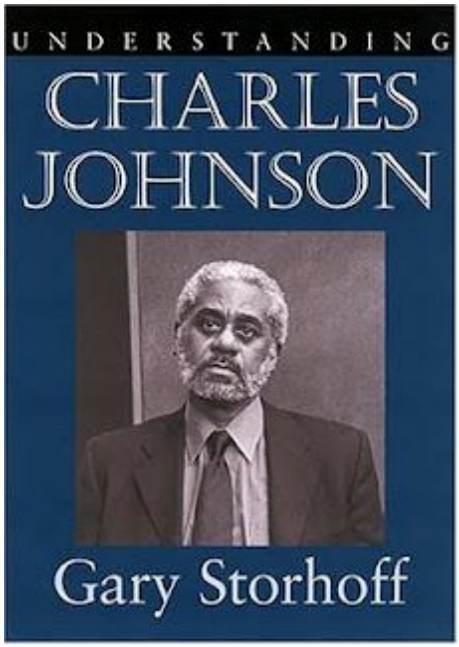
So I can't exactly say which of my stories is most "experimental." However, I *can* say that my short story "Moving Pictures" has sometimes proven to be challenging for some teachers and students who aren't familiar with Western philosophy and Buddhism. Its plot is simple, even deliberately minimalist, but the story dramatizes how we create and are responsible for every aspect of our lives---right down to the level of perceptual experience.

On the surface, that story, told in second-person viewpoint, is about an unhappy novelist-turned-screenwriter, who is sitting in a Seattle theater in the mid-1970s, watching a film (a corny western) he wrote. His life is an almost cliched digest of the usual post-modern complaints---divorce from a trophy wife, job dissatisfaction, selling out his literary dreams to make a buck in Hollywood, and cynicism. At the story's end, he leaves the theater, sees his car has been broken into, important papers in his glove compartment stolen, and after a moment of rage he collapses under the weight of his grief.

But, earlier, as he watched the movie he scripted, he recalls (in the pre-digital era forty years ago) seeing reels of film for the movie "hanging like stockings" in the editing room: scraps or rags of footage. There, as the film's editor assembles its scenes together in post-production, he, the curious hack writer, looks at the film through a viewer, seeing each frame individually.

With that editing room scene we enter deeper, philosophical waters. The story eases into an exploration of our perceptual experience, of how moment by moment our minds create *Samsara* (the world of illusion) when we project our desires and memories onto objects and others. The magic of the mind in conjuring our experiential "world" is analogous to the magic involved in experiencing a film that causes us to laugh, cry, feel suspense, catharsis, etc. At first, the screenwriter perceives through the viewer each frame "as a single frozen image, like an individual thought, complete in itself, with no connection to the others, as if time stood still; but then the frames came faster as the viewer sped up, chasing each other, surging forward and creating a linear, continuous motion that outstripped your perception, and presto: a sensuously rich world erupted and took....nerve-knocking reality."

No one---absolutely no one---who wrote about this story saw how the experience of watching a film is used in "Moving Pictures" as a metaphor for the way perception operates, driven by desire and intentionality and the ego. That is, until Dr. Gary Storhoff, one of this nation's finest literary scholars and a follower of Dharma, made the story's meaning perfectly clear. In his superb critical study, *Understanding Charles Johnson* (University of South Carolina Press, 2004), Dr. Storhoff brilliantly says this:



"The protagonist's question about the perceived unity of his sensuous experience is answered in his full viewing of the feature film, first in the cutting room and then in the theater. The two film versions are Johnson's allegory of human apperception, employing both Western and Buddhist theories. First, Johnson creates a subtle dramatization of Immanuel Kant's theory of epistemology in *Critique of Pure Reason.* As viewed frame by frame in the cutting room, the

protagonist's senses do not apprehend the world as a unified totality; instead, he perceives an apparently pointless procession of discrete phenomena, one unique object after another. The filmic world through the viewer appears discrete and intractable, where objects exist independently of other objects and move disparately and in randomness. When the projector is activated and the protagonist sees the film as it appears on the screen, the filmic experience is suddenly organized spatially, temporally, and causally---an actual stream of experience that does mysteriously hang together. These 'scraps of footage' do finally 'cohere'.

"Yet it is clear for Johnson as a Buddhist, the perceiver's mind does much more than process reality in this Kantian sense...in viewing the film filtered through his personal biases and emotional requirements, he is not aware that he is producing illusions stimulated by the film's sensory data and mistaking these experiences for an emotional reality...In other words, the protagonist's epistemology is marked by his emotional cravings (that is, his wants, wishes, felt needs, regrets, and so forth)...The theater's screen is in fact "empty" in a Buddhist sense; as a blank screen, it denies the reality the protagonist projects onto it...For this unenlightened protagonist, knowing the movie, like knowing the world itself, is filtered through his own personal desire...His spirit-shattering sorrow results directly from his flawed epistemology. Of course, the protagonist may yet revise his theory of reality since he is in charge of his life---'producer, star, director in the longest, most fabulous show of all'."

Needless to say, I feel eternally indebted to Dr. Storhoff for recognizing all I intended to express in "Moving Pictures," and for so eloquently walking a reader through that in his outstanding scholarship.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:35 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/moving-pictures-closer-look.html

Monday, April 4, 2011

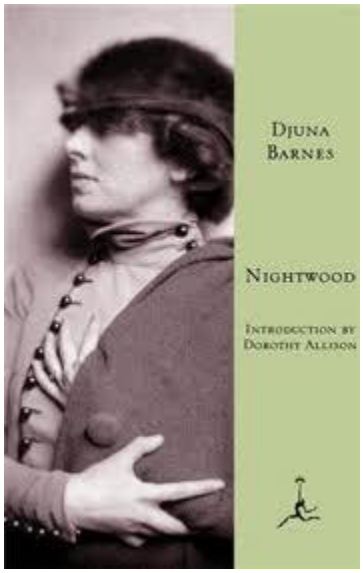
CHARLES JOHNSON ON SCREEN WRITING

CHARLIE SMITH

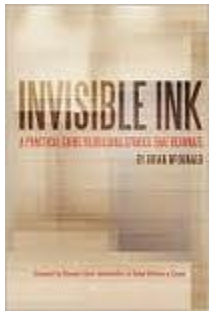
Unlike the unhappy screenwriter in my story "Moving Pictures," I never abandoned literary fiction for the lure of Hollywood. (See my last post.) However, over some 20 years I wrote 20 screen-and-teleplays for PBS (among them "Charlie Smith and the Fritter Tree" in 1978, which was about the oldest living American; and "Booker," which won a 1985 Writers Guild Award for best script in the category of children's television, and many other awards); screenplays for Tri-Star, Interscope, Columbia, Showtime, and in 1981 I worked as one of two writer-producers for the second season of the PBS dramatic series "Up and Coming" (a kind of forerunner to the "Cosby Show" about a black family's trials and tribulations). Being a college professor, I never felt the need to become a full-time screen-writer, but the work I did was enough for me to become "vested," *i.e.*, to qualify for early retirement and receive a monthly pension check from the Producer-Writers Guild with, of course, the possibility of working again as a screenwriter if something comes along that interests me.

Frankly, I began writing screenplays just to see how well I could produce entertainment for a mass audience. (And also to supplement my professor's salary.) Many of the workers I knew in the film-making business came from film school, places like CalArts , where they learned the technical side of their craft well. But film-makers frequently call upon the services of accomplished novelists and short story writers because they are strongly grounded in two things important for *any* story, regardless of its medium: well-developed characters, and structure (plot).

Just as film-makers benefit from a novelist's particular skills, so too the literary writer can more finely hone his (or her) craft through screen writing, where everything in a story must be dramatized, and concretely realized as a scene actors can actually perform (during a read-through they *will* "goof" on lines the writer composed that violate the authenticity of real speech). In a novel or a short story, one can rely on narrative summary (telling, not showing) and the poetic possibilities of language to hold a reader's interest. Not so in a screenplay or teleplay. If one is, for example, adapting a novel for the screen (or, if you like, the stage), all those places where the novelist went on automatic pilot, failing to "show and not tell," where he (or she) fell back on narrative summary or an entertaining voice or his (or her) talent for lyricism and left an action ambiguous or only suggested---well, *those* are precisely the places where a screenwriter must struggle to create a vivid scene, dramatic or otherwise. Thus, some novels and stories with minimal plot (but lots of dazzling language performance) are difficult to successfully adapt as films. Imagine the challenge a screenwriter would have with Djuna Barnes's 1937 classic *Nightwood.*



For me, the pay-off from writing screenplays probably came in *Middle Passage*, a novel that moves at a fast clip from one dramatic (or comic) scene to another (some people have told me they read the novel in one sitting) with narration used basically as a bridge (a poetic one, I hope) between scenes (of action and dialogue) and to prepare for them. Some writers I know first compose their novels as screenplays in order to carefully lay out the dramatic structure, then in later drafts add narration (telling) with all its rich possibilities.



For those interested in a brilliant and very accessible explanation of how great films are examples of superb storytelling, I suggest two books by Brian McDonald, *Invisible Ink: A Practical Guide to Building Stories That Resonate* and *The Golden Theme: How To Make Your Writing Appeal To The Highest Common Denominator*. McDonald has taught his story structure seminars at Pixar, Disney Feature Animation, and Lucasfilm's ILM. He is an award-winning director/writer who has written for comic books, A&E's *Hoarders* and directed spots for Visa. His highly entertaining film *White Face*, which imagines what it would be like if circus clowns were a separate race, has run on HBO and Cinemax, and is used nation-wide by corporations as a tool for diversity training. In a word, Brian McDonald is a master teacher whose every word on screen writing you can trust.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 9:57 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/charles-johnson-on-screen-writing.html

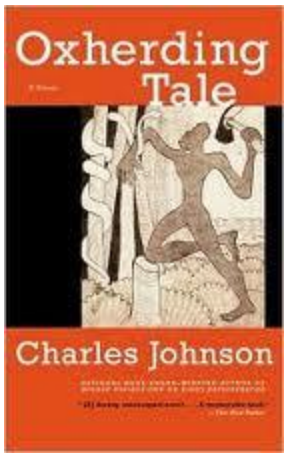
Friday, April 8, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON AND THE GOOD STUFF

After dating for two years, my wife Joan and I married in June, 1970 when we both were 22-years-old. (Our birthdays are seven days apart so I've always joked that our fathers probably impregnated our mothers at the same moment, therefore we were karmically fated to meet and marry.) During our first two years of marriage we were strict vegetarians because we considered that choice to be the morally and spiritually right one. I never missed meat, not *once*, and the reduction in our weekly grocery bill when I was in early graduate school was a blessing.

But I had a black, college friend who was raised as a vegetarian. He told me that he ate meat for the first time, in his twenties, when he visited a lady friend for dinner. "I was rolling around all night on the floor in pain," he said. And so my wife and I had to consider what we'd do if and when we had children. Raise them as vegetarians and perhaps let them endure an agonizing night like my friend experienced as their stomachs adjusted to something foreign? Or let them eat meat while we stayed vegetarian, and have to work out *two* different menus for our family every day? Furthermore, back in the early '70s in southern Illinois, it wasn't easy to find restaurants that offered vegetarian meals. And so after two years we drifted away from not "eating anything that has a face," as my friend mendicant Buddhist monk Claude AnShin Thomas once put it, for he is devoted to *ahima* or harmlessness toward all sentient beings. Just as a footnote: our 29-year-old daughter Elisheba, curator and owner of Faire Gallery Café, is by choice a vegan.

These early 1970s experiences and reflections no doubt played a big part in my thinking about the cultural, social and phenomenological meanings of food and eating when I wrote my second novel, *Oxherding Tale*, a philosophical, comic slave narrative for late 20th century readers.



The story's protagonist, Andrew Hawkins, is the product of a black butler, George Hawkins, and his master's white wife. Out of compassion, his master secures for him a tutor, Ezekiel William Sykes-Withers, a brilliant yet tragic Transcendentalist and correspondent with Karl Marx, who makes a cameo appearance midway through the novel. Ezekiel, a vegetarian, weans Andrew off meat-eating, and convinces his black step-mother Mattie to do the same, an act that leads in Chapter Two to an explosively comic scene in the slave quarters (where Andrew is raised or exiled to) when his black, meat-eating, biofather George racializes food and equates vegetarianism with everything he (now a bitter, black cultural nationalist after losing his job as a butler because he impregnated his master's wife) associates with the curious and effete ways of white folks. He wants what he considers to be "black" food (pig's feet, chitterlings, collard greens, ham, fried chicken, black-eyes peas, cornbread) and not the "funnylooking roots and raw tubers, paste, rice, and wood fiber without salt or syrup or anything like I was bird or an English poet…" which is how he describes the meal that Mattie puts on his dinner plate one evening. "Naw," says George, who sees Ezekiel as a 19th century version of a hippie, "eatin' vegetables and walkin' round the woods nekkid like I seen Ezekiel do—oh yeah, I *seen* him---is for *white* people. Colored folks got enough sense to *stay* in their clothes…Soybeans ain't hardly *food.* Beans or vegetables are okay for extras, but *I* need somethin' that'll fill up this emptiness and stick with me! Some things you *got* to kill for survival!" And so he does, storming out of the house with his gun, dragging Andrew along with him as he kills, then skins a deer.

Young Andrew is horrified by this act and thinks, "What if all Ezekiel's talk about how poleaxing preceded porkchops was saying that violence of the shotgun blast, the instant before the final explosion of dust, stayed sealed inside like a particle, trapped in the dying tissues, and wound up on the dinner table---as if everything was mysteriously blended into everything else, and somehow all the violence slavery crime and suffering in the world had, as Ezekiel suggested, its beginning in what went into our bellies?"

In *Oxherding Tale*, I wouldn't take Andrew's words *too* seriously. After all, Hitler was a vegetarian. But while I'm not a vegetarian now, I expect to one day return to my dietary choice during the years 1970-72 before the end of my life. (Hell, I'd start again tomorrow if the mood hit me in just the right way. Remember how comedian Dick Gregory critiqued heavy "soul food" dishes? They are *not* an example of healthy eating.) If one takes the appropriate dietary supplements (which my wife and I didn't know about in the early 1970s), vegetarianism is---or

so I truly believe---the most civilized and moral of eating choices, one that avoids the industries that brutally slaughter animals daily, and pump them with chemicals so they unnaturally produce more eggs and offspring at an accelerated rate---all *that* so far too many Americans can waddle around looking like inflated balloons ready to burst. Visit a slaughterhouse for cattle---or watch a video of one---and you'll never again want to eat a McDonald's hamburger. Or anything that "has a face."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:01 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/charles-johnson-and-good-stuff.html

Saturday, April 9, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT HIS LOVE FOR DOGS

Don't get me started on dogs.

I *love* dogs. Everyone in Seattle seems to love dogs and all my neighbors have one. Or more. I read books and articles about dogs for pleasure. Although I had cats when I was growing up and also one here in Seattle, it's dogs I love writing and thinking about---Berkeley the heroic watch dog protagonist of one of my most reprinted stories "Menagerie: A Child's Fable"; and the dog character Casey (named after our late lab/shepherd mix) who swaps minds with a human in my recent sci-fi story "Guinea Pig" in *Boston Review* (Jan-Feb, 2011). Even my last story, "Welcome to Wedgwood" in *Shambhala Sun* (March, 2011) has our present furry companion Nova, a West Highland White Terrier, as a character important for the story's action.

As a species we adapted to the same environments and living conditions with dogs over the last 10,000 to 20,000 years. As a matter of fact, we selectively bred most of the different dog breeds that exist. Our two species complement each other perfectly. Studies have proven that caring for a dog relieves stress (At Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state dogs are used to provide stress relief for deployed soldiers.) There is a 75% overlap in the genetic codes of humans and dogs; the structure of their brains contain most of the same organs found in the human brain. Dogs have emotions and personalities.

Our Nova's ears hear four octaves higher than I can perceive and they can be hundreds of times better than my own ears for some sounds. He can identify smells somewhere between 1,000 and 10,000 times better than a human can, and he has 50 times more scent receptors than I do. He has at *least* the intelligence of a two-year-old child. A border collie named Chaser recently was taught the names of 1,022 items, and can categorize them by function and shape, which is something children learn around age three.

Living with a dog, then, is like living with a younger, beloved family member. Last November our Nova tore a ligament in his right, rear leg. Repairing it required two surgeries. I spent the first month after his first and second surgeries carrying him everywhere, up and down stairs, inside and outside the house, to his twice weekly physical therapy sessions on an underwater

treadmill (thank heaven a grown Westie male weighs only about 25 pounds), and making sure he took his medications. In other words, Nova is my constant companion. My buddy. Wherever I am, he is. He's across the room right now on his soft mat as I write these words.

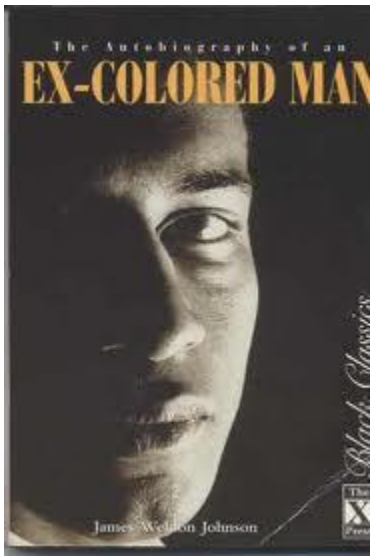
So, yeah, don't get me started on dogs. I plan to live the rest of my life with one (or more), and sneak them into my fiction whenever possible. And high on my reading list right now is *The Greatest Dog Stories Ever Told*, edited by Patricia M. Sherwood (The Lyons Press, 2001), which contains 36 dog stories by such authors as Willie Morris, Peter Mayle, John Graves, Vance Bourjailly, Farley Mowat, Jack London, Merrill Markoe, Will Rogers, Lord Dunsany, Thomas Mann, William Cowper, James Thurber, Sparse Grey Hackle, Rudyard Kipling, and one of my heroes, Ray Bradbury.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:46 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/charles-johnson-talks-about-his-love.html

Monday, April 11, 2011

THE FIRST READERS

"I am more or less happy when being praised; not very comfortable when being abused; but I have moments of uneasiness when being explained." Arthur Balfour



Two days ago, and after about three weeks of writing and revision, I completed a 2,924 word introduction for James Weldon Johnson's classic novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) for a new edition that Library of America is doing. My wife just read it. For 41 years she's always been my first reader. I can always trust that she will give me a "general reader's" reaction, and point out any typing errors I might have made.

The next readers are my agents of 38 years, Anne and Georges Borchardt, who will either send the manuscript along to whatever editor commissioned it or find a home for it if it is a new work of fiction, and sometimes others in their office will read it, too. Between 1972 and 1982, I often passed my stories and novels by the late John Gardner for any helpful comments he might make (and knowing full well that our visions of life and literature differed in important ways). These days when I've finished a story, I often send it along to the literary scholars who have published articles and books about my work as well as the work of others. All are officers in the Charles Johnson Society at the American Literature Association, and learned on matters pertaining to literature and culture so I greatly value whatever they might have to say. I often share a spanking brand-new work with friends who I think might find its subject of interest. Sometimes I'll send a new work to editors I know, ones I have a hunch might feel it is appropriate for their publication and, if so, they can then contact my literary agents to work out a contract and payment.

I always take seriously any comments and suggestions I receive from all the aforementioned folks, and I think about them for a long time because I want every work I create to be a gift for others. But I should mention that I'm never ready to show anything I write to others until I've worked it over thoroughly and through many drafts in which I've revised each line until I can't

revise it anymore, and not until I've considered every word choice dozens of times, and brought 46 years of publishing experience to it. The work is ready to show only after I convince myself that it reflects my best feelings, best thought, and best technique.

Writing screen-and-teleplays is, of course, a different matter. For the most part, this is committee work (or collaborative work, if you prefer), and a writer is professionally obligated to respond to all the notes he receives from the producers of a particular show. He (or she) is part of a team, a "hired gun," so to speak. In one of his interviews, playwright August Wilson talked about how when his first play was staged he had to get over a sense of ownership of the work since the process of moving a play from the page to the stage involves contributions from many people. (Nevertheless, his 10 plays clearly embody his own vision of black American life since August had final approval on all changes.)

But for original, literary art, it should be obvious that too many "cooks" can muddle, dilute or damage a story's coherence, clarity, and consistency, and sometimes move it too far away from a writer's intention. Seasoned, veteran artists know---and feel secure with---their own voices and visions of life and literature. What they believe and don't believe. What they want to say and how they think it is best to say it. Therefore, listening to "criticism" is not a problem, and is even quite interesting sometimes because a person's reactions to a creative work reveal as much about that person as they do about the work in question.

I believe James Baldwin addressed all these matters well in his essay "The New Lost Generation," published in the July, 1961 issue of *Esquire*. This quote has been in my writer's workbooks for decades, patiently waiting to be deployed, so I'm happy for the opportunity to share it now. There, in that essay, Baldwin said, "A man is not a man until he's able and willing to accept his own vision of the world, no matter how radically this vision departs from that of others."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:02 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/first-readers.html

Tuesday, April 12, 2011

SEX, SLAVERY AND OXHERDING TALE

E. ETHELBERT MILLER

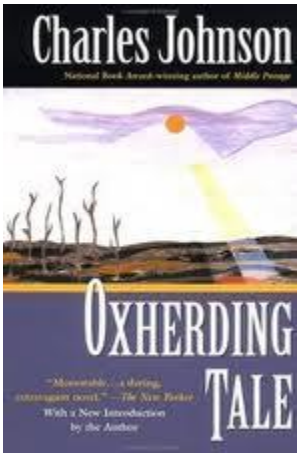
Poet E. Ethelbert Miller asks this spate of provocative questions:

Q. Often the characters in a novel ask questions the author should answer too. In Oxherding Tale, Flo Hatfield asks, "Is wanting tenderness too much?"
How would the novelist and Buddhist Charles Johnson answer this question?

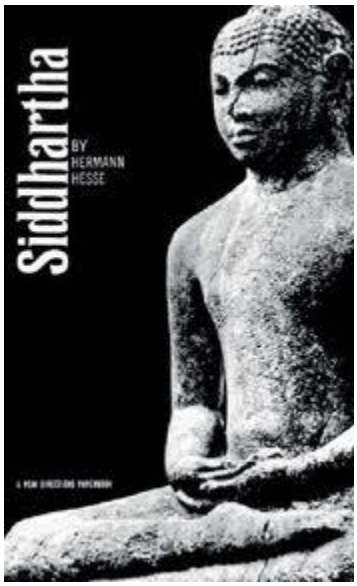
You establish an equation between sex and slavery in Oxherding Tale. Could you elaborate? Is this a relationship that only applies to a specific historical period or is it how men and women view sex and slavery in general?

To place all these questions in their proper context, let me first say that *Oxherding Tale* is a post-modern slave narrative that explores bondage not just in terms of physical and legal chattel slavery in the 19th century but also in respect to the timeless experience of different forms of mental enslavement---psychological, cultural, spiritual, and bondage to the ego.

When a phenomenologist does artistic variations on a phenomenon in order to imaginatively call forth new meaning from it, he often turns to the techniques of (1) Figure-ground reversals; (2) Juxtapositions of context; (3) Isolation of dominant and recessive traits; and (4) Transforming perspectives. This last method is used at least twice in *Oxherding Tale*.



First, its protagonist Andrew Hawkins is not the product of "miscegenation" between a white master and his female slave, as in the case of, say, Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, but is rather the offspring of George Hawkins, a slave butler, and his master's wife. Similarly, when Andrew as a young man is sent to work for another slave owner to earn his freedom, that character is not the stereotypical, overworked Simon Legree sort that readers might expect after reading some slave narratives, but rather an attractive, middle-aged yet profoundly tragic white woman named Flo Hatfield, who sates her erotic and ego needs on the helpless black bondsmen who come under her control. The two chapters in which she is prominently featured, entitled "In The Service of the Senses," are a send-up of the passages in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* where his enlightenment-seeking protagonist becomes the lover of the beautiful courtesan Kamala (In Sanskrit, the word for selfish desire and sensory craving is *kāma*).



But Andrew soon learns that even though Flo Hatfield is a rich and powerful slave-master, she is not free. The external things she pursues cannot provide lasting happiness, and in all of her actions she is *re*-active. In Flo's case, she has been married no less than eleven times---and still finds herself alone. Soon enough, Andrew discovers that she is self-absorbed, vain, an Opium Eater, vindictive, and one who exploits her relative position of power in the Peculiar Institution. None of this has brought her peace or satisfaction. Yet and still, it must be pointed out that in the patriarchal world of the antebellum South, Flo is historically as much the victim of white men as is Andrew, living a gender-limited life of "relative-being" in respect to the white, male Others in her past who never recognized her as a subject, and severely restricted the realization of her potential. Furthermore, as an astute (and somewhat embittered) student of men, she is fully aware that when love and unselfishness are missing in the experience of sex, which is sadly the only kind of relationship Flo has ever known, all that remains is an unpleasant, exploitative exercise in power and dominance between two people. (Andrew does later have such an unselfish and rewarding relationship with Peggy Undercliff, the daughter of a country doctor.) In one passage, Flo asks, "Is wanting tenderness too much? Or intelligence in a man?" Then after a beat she adds, "Of course, I *also* want sexual satisfaction compliments gifts fidelity a great body

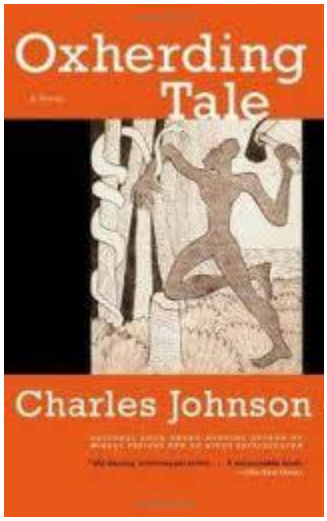
cleverness sophistication yet boyish exuberance a full head of hair good teeth and the ability to know my moods. Is *that* too much?"

Put another way, she sees Andrew as her new Boy Toy. And playing that role in order to earn his legal freedom almost kills him. For the last 29 years, I've been content to let readers decide if Flo Hatfield's miscellaneous list of wants and desires is "too much." If that is the way to approach Others---with a checklist we have for what we think they should be. And to decide as well if anyone, male or female, should so objectify another. Of course, she deserves "tenderness" but, even more importantly than tenderness, as a Buddhist I would say Flo Hatfield deserves compassion, and our Bodhissatva prayer that she will one day know happiness, awakening, and freedom from suffering.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:30 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/sex-slavery-and-oxherding-tale.html

Wednesday, April 13, 2011

THE CHARACTER MATTIE IN CHARLES JOHNSON'S OXHERDING TALE



A close, careful, textual reading of *Oxherding Tale* should reveal a very great deal about Mattie Hawkins. First, we know from her husband George Hawkins on pages 4-5 that Mattie is a devoutly Christian woman, one who at night he would find "turning the tissue-thin pages of her Bible, holding her finger on some flight of poetry in Psalms, which she planned to read to George for his 'general improvement'. She made him bend his knees beside her each night, their heads tipped and thighs brushing, praying that neither jealously nor evil temper, boredom or temptation, poverty nor padderolls would destroy their devotion to each other. 'You have me, I have you, and we both have Jesus." Put simply, her husband George lives in fear of disappointing this good, long-suffering woman, "by stumbling into their cabin reeking of liquor---it would destroy her faith that he was not, after all, a common nigger with no appreciation for the finer things." As the above quotes show, she is loving, not prone to personal displays of negativity, committed to self-improvement, and without complaint she accepts her husband's out-of-wedlock mulatto child Andrew as her own son.

We know, too, that Mattie comes to embrace vegetarianism (See my post dated April 8) like her step-son Andrew Hawkins, and his Transcendentalist tutor Ezekiel William Sykes-Withers, *i.e.*, she is a woman concerned with not harming other sentient beings. A Prayer Circle meets regularly at Mattie's place in the slave quarters, "fifteen women seated in a circle of chairs." They come together to pray for a wayward, selfish, womanizing slave named Nate McKay, a blacksmith who is the only black person on the plantation of Jonathan Polkinghorne to befriend her confused husband George Hawkins after he is exiled from the Big House when he impregnates his master's wife---but Nate only does this so he can get closer to Mattie and attempt to seduce her. The story clearly indicates that Mattie rejects his advances, because she tells George, "If you weren't so stuck on Nate McKay maybe you'd see why he really comes around here...He isn't safe..."

By observing Mattie as he grows up, by relating these very specific details about her, and by his fierce determination to buy her freedom along with his own, Andrew Hawkins unequivocally indicates his admiration for Mattie's high moral standards, her faith, quiet piety, and strength.

The novel doesn't require a specific scene between them, because we see that sprinkled throughout the text Mattie teaches Andrew through her outstanding personal example.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:46 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/character-mattie-in-charles-johnsons.html

Wednesday, April 13, 2011

THE SOULCATCHER COMETH

Of all the characters in *Oxherding Tale*, Horace Bannon, the Soulcatcher, is probably my favorite. Many decades ago when I was a writer in my early twenties, I read that it was helpful if a work of fiction had a Magnet Character. That is, someone who is larger-than-life, fascinating, unpredictable, imaginative, shocking, outrageous, perhaps even a bit dangerous, and instantly captures the attention of an audience or reader whenever he or she steps on stage---like a magnet. Someone we *must* watch.

In *Faith and the Good Thing*, that character is the Swamp Woman. In *Middle Passage*, it's Capt. Ebenezer Falcon. In *Dreamer*, it's the double for Martin Luther King Jr., Chaym Smith. In *Moby Dick*, it's Ahab. In John Gardner's *Grendel*, it's the gold-hoarding dragon. In Jack London's *The Sea Wolf*, it's Wolf Larsen. And in *Oxherding Tale*, the Magnet Character is the Soulcatcher (and possibly at times, but to a lesser degree, Flo Hatfield).

Beyond all doubt he is a mad serial killer. He has murdered hundreds of humans and other sentient beings. His body is heavily tattooed with the images of his black victims, which at the novel's end present a hair-raising vision of the interconnectedness of Being similar to the one Krishna reveals to Arjuna. Those two characters are important, because Bannon is in possession of a warped philosophy of duty and karma (his duty or pre-destined fate, as he sees it, being to kill) that is right out of the *Bhagavad Gita*, Book XVIII, verse or *sloka* 47, where it says, "Better one's own duty, though imperfect, than the duty of another well performed; performing the duty prescribed by one's own nature, one does not incur evil."

In a slave state where runaway bondsmen are legally hunted, the Soulcatcher (that was the name black people often used for slave-catchers) finds himself in the bizarre world of the Peculiar Institution, where his psychotic urge to murder is not only allowed but encouraged and needed by a social system of racial oppression that requires massive, regular doses of violence to maintain white supremacy. Bannon provides that violence, fulfilling antebellum society's need for an executioner, or what Frederick Douglass called a Negro breaker. He sees himself as someone who is selflessly performing a service to the State, *i.e.*, the slave state of South

Carolina. He is the veterinarian who puts homeless dogs to sleep; the person who injects lethal fluid into the veins of the Death Row inmate after all his appeals have failed.

But part of the Soulcatcher's uniqueness, the way he "breaks" his prey, lies in his method. He traps them psychologically, or spiritually. When he slowly hunts down a runaway slave, he does so with the greatest empathy (think of the "mirror neurons" we all have that allow us to understand Others) and manipulation. He identifies completely with a slave's suffering and pain, his hopes, fears and dreams (his "soul," if you like). He gains that black person's trust. Like a dear friend, he enters with compassion into that individual man or woman's way of thinking (as an actor playing a role might), making it his own. That allows him to anticipate their next move. (In another context, he might be the pimp who woos a runaway, teenage girl, working hard to gain her trust before he puts her out on the street.) By the end of this process, Bannon's act of murder, his extinction of their misery based on their being reduced to chattel, comes almost as an act of mercy---like someone who pulls the plug during an assisted suicide.

I've often thought that one could easily create such a character for the Holocaust, someone who thoroughly sympathizes with the plight of Jews in Nazi Germany (or perhaps is secretly Jewish himself), and as a tool of the Third Reich uses that travesty of compassion to guide them straight to Treblinka and Auschwitz. The method I've just described enables Bannon to hunt, then kill Andrew Hawkins's father, George. But the Soulcatcher fails to capture one important, black character in the novel: Reb the Coffinmaker, a member of the Allmuseri tribe (which later figures prominently in *Middle Passage*) who is the resident Taoist/Buddhist in *Oxherding Tale.* That failure convinces Bannon to cease his bloody work as a Negro hunter. One might say his failure to capture Reb leads to the Soulcatcher's own liberation.

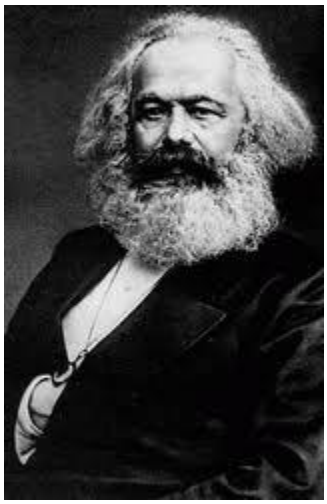
So is there a "moral" for this post? I think perhaps it is this: Try to create a Magnet Character for your stories. That person will provide you and your readers with a great deal of fun.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:24 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/soulcatcher-cometh.html

Thursday, April 14, 2011

KARL MARX IN THE FICTION OF CHARLES JOHNSON

Over the decades many real people have walked through my stories, novels, and screenplays. The list includes Plato and Diogenes, the Buddha, Descartes, Martin and Coretta King, Frederick Douglass, Phyllis Wheatley, Rev. Richard Allen, Martha Washington, Charlie Smith, Booker T. Washington, and Karl Marx, who was the first historical figure I treated in a work of fiction.



KARL MARX

Marx has a rather spirited cameo in *Oxherding Tale*, one that I almost didn't write. Early in that novel the narrator Andrew Hawkins mentions that Marx paid a visit to the Cripplegate plantation of his master Jonathan Polkinghorne. When I wrote those lines in 1979 I had no idea if I could pull off an appearance by Marx, and promised myself as I proceeded to write each chapter that I would delete that early remark if bringing Marx to America (which he never visited) proved to be too difficult. But I knew Marx's biography well; I devoted my master's thesis to him, Freud and Wilhelm Reich, and taught Marxism as a teaching assistant in the Philosophy Department at SUNY-Stony Brook for a year.

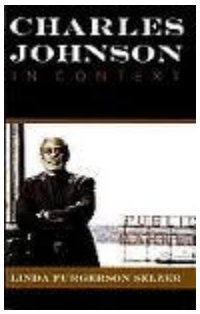
To a degree, the problem presented by writing fiction about a real person is deciding what traits or characteristics one will make dominant in one's interpretation and presentation of that person. And which ones will be recessive. As a young philosopher, I naturally identified strongly with Marx the philosopher, with his genius and intellectual courage, his indebtedness to the dialectical method of Hegel, and the poverty that plagued his family. So the Marx who arrives at Cripplegate to visit Transcendentalist Ezekial William Sykes-Withers is not so much the standard image of the fiery, anger-filled political activist immersed in class struggle (though he does bristle once or twice at Ezekiel's unconscious classism), but instead a more phenomenological Marx who chastises Ezekiel for his intellectual elitism and hubris.

My Marx makes him see that the true foundation for the socialist vision must be inter-subjectivity and, yes, love. In the ontogenesis of the Self, *noesis* (subject) and *noema* (object) are

two sides of the same epistemological event, linked like fingers on the hand. On the deepest ontological level, self and other (or object) are in a sense one. That appearance by Marx, that one scene---and resolving the question of *how* he would appear on the pages of the novel and what he would say---took a month and a half of writing.

The young KARL MARX

I've always had difficulty feeling comfortable with any version of socialism or communism that lacked love as its foundation, and promoted a discourse of hate, divisiveness, anger and dualism. (I suppose I should mention that M.L. King was naturally troubled by Marx's atheism---how could he not be?---and at the end of his life was what one might call a Christian Socialist.) As literary scholar Linda Selzer points out in *Charles Johnson in Context*, forty years ago I was more closely aligned with *critical* Marxism (the New Left) rather the positivist, rigid economic determinism of *classical* Marxism (the Old Left, which was simply abysmal when it attempted to discuss art and aesthetics). And I was absolutely turned off by thinkers like George V. Plekhanov.



In her book, Selzer mentions a 1972 collection of essays entitled *The Unknown Dimension*, which addressed an "underground tradition" in Marxism, one that sought to "restore human consciousness, human subjectivity to the heart of Marxism." That was the interpretation or

phenomenological "profile" of Marx that I attempted to portray in *Oxherding Tale*, a socialism more informed, one might say, by Buddhist Dharma.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:34 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/karl-marx-in-fiction-of-charles-johnson.html

Thursday, April 14, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON: Reflections on Life.

There are two days each year when I make sure I sit in formal meditation on my 31-year-old *zafu* or cushion, and these are the occasions when my meditation practice is most powerful and emotionally moving. The first is at 12:01 AM on New Year's Day, which for the last three decades has always found me in deepest meditation when the old year ends and the new one begins. The other is my birthday, and that day, April 23, is approaching---age 63---soon. My wife and kids always have a brief, quiet birthday celebration for me (we have such a time for every family member on his or her birthday), but I've never been a party person so I prefer for them not to make a Big Production of it.

During the two formal sessions I mentioned the theme I take into meditation has always been a profound sense of thanksgiving for the many blessings I've experienced, especially for the blessing of another year of life, and the hope that in the coming year I can serve well in the many roles I've been assigned in this lifetime. Thanksgiving is a very important theme for Buddhists insofar as the Dharma says again and again how difficult it is to achieve the blessing of a human birth, which is the only realm---not that of gods, demons, animals, or hungry ghosts---in which one can hear the teachings, experience awakening, and follow the Bodhissatva vow.

Ethelbert asks, "Do you have a 'fear' of growing old?" The answer, odd as it may sound, is that I've always looked forward to old age. These are the years when all one's knowledge, experience and acquired skills bear fruit. Writer Tony Ardizzone once told me, "You have an old soul," and I suspect that is true. In all my 62 years, I've never taken a vacation or wanted one. I get bored when I'm not creating, learning, growing or improving in some way. Life for me has always had a single meaning: work and service.

I've never lived for pleasure (only for my duties and responsibilities) because creating has been my greatest pleasure since childhood. Even in my teens I was turned off by America's annoying obsession with youth culture, which I saw as selfish, naive, infantilized, and I always preferred to be around older people who had a wealth of experience, elders from whom I could learn

something interesting. Furthermore, in my thirties I made a promise to myself about my fiftieth birthday. In "The Threads That Connect Us: An Interview with Charles Johnson" conducted by Geffrey Davis (*Callaloo,* Summer 2010, Volume 33, No. 3), I put it this way:

"My creative work will continue until the last day of my life, until I take my last breath. But decades ago I made myself a promise that by the age of fifty, which is the year I published *Dreamer*, I planned to have all my duties and responsibilities to everyone in my life---parents, teachers, colleagues, editors and publishers, friends and family, and students---discharged or completed. For the last ten years, there hasn't been anything I 'have' to do, only the things I want to do creatively that nourish me spiritually, intellectually, and artistically.

(My kids are grown, both my beloved parents dead.) See this in terms of the Hindu 'Four Stages of Life.' In youth (spring) our most important job is to study and acquire skills. In adulthood (summer), we enter the work world with its various obligations and put those skills and that knowledge into play. In middle-age (fall), we serve our family and community as householders, creating wealth so that we can help others achieve happiness and avoid suffering. Then at the beginning of old age (winter), we retire from the worldliness of the world to devote ourselves exclusively to matters of the spirit, to knowledge (*vidya*), and preparation for death.

In every 'stage,' I create, but the intention and motivation behind the creative work matures, changes, and evolves during one's passage through life...I'm confident I did the work God put me here to do."

That promise to myself was 13 years ago so I'm now in the winter of this rewarding journey. There isn't a decade of my life that I'd be interested in repeating. Two years ago, I retired from teaching after 33 years and became a professor emeritus. I like very much one meaning of emeritus, which is "retired or honorably discharged from active professional duty." As a lay Buddhist, an *upasaka,* when I think of that definition, I always see an image of a soldier who has tried to stay dutifully at his post, serving out his tour of duty in a foreign land, and now he is free.

The Dharma teaches us to cling neither to life or death, youth or old age. We do not think, as Buddhists, about being 63 or 53 or 43 or 33 or 23. We don't live in the past or future. Instead, we try to live in the *only* place we *can* live, and that is the present moment, *here* and *now*. That makes every moment fresh. And new. And like a rebirth.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:47 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/celebrating-with-charles-johnson.html

Saturday, April 16, 2011

THE N-WORD

I believe we can all agree that racial slurs like the N-word are unacceptable for anyone who considers himself (or herself) to be civilized. (A funeral was held for the N-word by the NAACP a few years ago, but like a zombie it does seem to be deathless.) For anyone who cares about civility, the N-word or any derogatory term used for another person is simply the opposite of what Buddhists call Right Speech. Words *do* wound.

But what about our fictional characters?

For the sake of honesty and full disclosure, I have to say that you *will* find the despicable N-word coming now and then from the mouths of fictional characters in some of my novels and stories (a slave hunter, for example, in my story "Soulcatcher"), usually from despicable people I wouldn't want to be around. But fidelity to a character---what he or she would actually do and say---trumps political correctness. Fiction is a mirror held up to the world. Sometimes it is a distorting funhouse mirror.

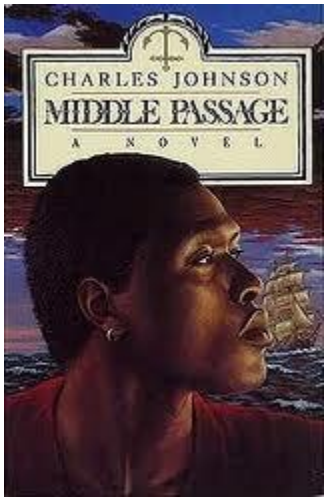
But always it presents unflinchingly---and uncensored---what a literary artist has seen and heard or found in the historical record. Whether we like it or not, that is a writer's job, and readers with even a smidgen of literary sophistication will avoid the mistake of believing that all the characters in a work of fiction represent the views of their creator.

Yet and still, we as readers have every right to cringe when we encounter the N-word, and as writers to pray we'll be forgiven when the demands of our job in a less than perfect world require us to write something distasteful in order for our stories to present characters with all their warts and wrinkles on display.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:43 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/n-word.html

Sunday, April 17, 2011

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE ALLMUSERI



Readers have asked me about the origin of the Allmuseri tribe in *Middle Passage* for 21 years now. The truth is that they didn't spring fully formed from my imagination, like Athena from the head of Zeus, but developed gradually over several years and over earlier stories and novels.

When I wrote *Faith and the Good*, which features magic (as a metaphor for art), I read 80 books on sorcery. In one book I came across an African name that caught my attention: al-museri. The Assyrians and Babylonians called Egypt by many names, one of them being "museri." In Arabic "al" is a definite article meaning "the." Thus, al-museri can be translated as "the Egyptian."

I jotted the name down in one of my writer's notebooks in 1972 or '73, and paid it no further attention until early 1976 when I began writing the short story, "The Education of Mingo." I needed a tribe for the slave Mingo in that tale to be from. So I plucked al-museri from my notebook, but since I didn't want to associate him with any particular African tribe, I dropped the hyphen, added another "l," and rewrote the name as Allmuseri. At that time I provided no details for this fictional tribe, but in another short story entitled "The Gift of the Osuo" in *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*, I wrote about an Allmuseri king named Shabaka, who receives from his wizards a piece of magic chalk that makes anything he draws come to life (As a cartoonist this fairy tale was great fun for me to write). In that story, and during that period in their fictitious history, the Allmuseri are Muslim.

I began writing *Oxherding Tale* in the mid-to-late 1970s around the same time as the two aforementioned short stories, and that novel has a very important character named Reb, an African coffin maker on the plantation of Flo Hatfield. Again, I needed a tribe for him to belong to. I made him an Allmuseri, like Mingo and King Shabaka. But Reb is the resident Taoist/Buddhist in *Oxherding Tale*. The way he developed as the spiritual mentor for the protagonist, young Andrew Hawkins, and the way certain details about Allmuseri history emerged as I wrote, made me think about the creative possibilities I could explore if I created an entire tribe from scratch, filling in all the details about their history, their language, rituals, religion, their god, all the minutiae an anthropologist would be interested in discovering. All my

adult life I've been fascinated by cultural relativity, the different cultural interpretations we find in the world---so the imaginative challenge of fleshing out the Allmuseri, not just individually as I'd done earlier but as an entire culture, was simply too great to ignore.

The opportunity for doing that came in 1983 when I began writing *Middle Passage* and had to have a large number of captured Africans on the slave ship, The Republic. (By the way, the working title for that novel was *Rutherford's Travels*, and I first envisioned it as a Swiftian tale, one that would see the crew encounter several different tribes; in an early draft they do find themselves among an island people after the Allmuseri take over the ship, but I cut that episode from my rewrite of the novel. Why? Once the Republic leaves Africa, I decided it was crucial that the protagonist/narrator Rutherford Calhoun *not* set foot on land because that would remove the constant danger of dying at sea, thereby diminishing an important element for suspense.) It was even my stated "goal"---fleshing out this tribe---when I applied for a Guggenheim fellowship to finish the book, which I received in 1988.

What I wanted was a whole tribe of Gandhis, Martin Luther Kings, and Mother Teresas, the most spiritual people on planet Earth, who also just happened to be the first tribe of humankind. They are mysterious, magical, and philosophically they represent the complete opposite of Capt. Ebenzer Falcon's conflict-based, Western vision of the world. True enough, there are fanciful things rumored about them by white sailors on The Republic, *i.e.*, that they have a second brain; and I did decide that they would have no fingerprints (their palms being blank like the Uncarved Block, a metaphor for the state of *wu wei* in Taoist thought).

But a fair amount of Allmuseri spiritual practice and culture is drawn from actual practices in Africa and the Far East. For example, after *Oxherding Tale* was published, the French publisher for that book flew me to Paris for a week of promotion, and there I met the wonderful, late poet Ted Joans, who took me under his wing and showed me the sites. One was a museum that contained a statue of a deity from an African tribe he loved (he even kissed it). Ted explained that when outsiders arrive at that tribe, the tribal folk spit at their dusty footwear----a gesture meant to say, "You have traveled a long way and we wish to cool your feet," but Westerners always see this as an insult. That became an Allmuseri practice. In Kerala, India, a day each year is set aside for the practice of giving up a selfish desire. That became an Allmuseri custom. The way they experience and learn the Allmuseri language is the way a Seattle friend of mine described his study of Mandarin. That became a feature of the Allmuseri language. Finally, and on an autobiographical note, when I was kid visiting the Evanston, Illinois home of my maternal grandmother, Nana, I would sometime start talking about things I wanted or wished I had, as kids do. My grandmother replied to that by saying, "What you should do is wish in one hand, piss in the other, and see what hand fills up first." So, yes, *that* became an Allmuseri saying, too, one delivered to Rutherford by Ngonyama, whose name I think means "brave lion."

Years later, I suggested in *Dreamer* that King's double Chaym Smith is a direct descendent of Baleka, the little, African girl saved, then adopted by Rutherford Calhoun in *Middle Passage*, so Allmuseri blood also courses through Smith's veins.

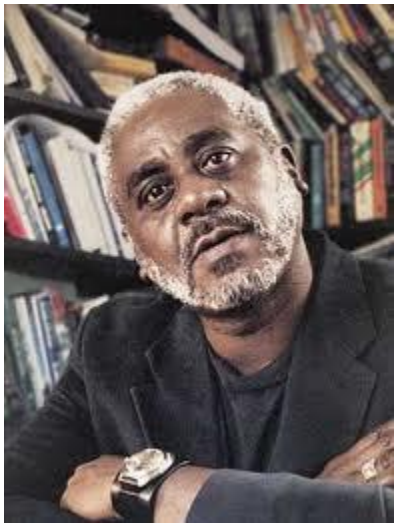
For the last two decades, I've enjoyed a certain gleeful, maybe even wicked, pleasure based on the fact that some readers of *Middle Passage* believe the Allmuseri are a real tribe, as some people in Jonathan Swift's time believed in Lilliputians and Brobdingnagians were real. One

literary critic even published an article arguing that I'd based them on a specific tribe on the African continent. Among literary scholars who have written well about the Allmuseri, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy deserves praise for his superb article, "The Phenomenology of the Allmuseri: Charles Johnson and the Subject of the Narrative of Slavery" (*African American Review*, Vol. 26, No 2). I strongly recommend that work of literary scholarship.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:32 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/all-you-need-to-know-about-allmuseri.html

Tuesday, April 19, 2011

LITERARY ADVICE FROM THE DESK OF CHARLES JOHNSON



What a writer in our time has to do is write what hasn't been written or beat dead men at what they have done. Ernest Hemingway.

For more than thirty years I taught young (and old) writers the craft of literary fiction, emphasizing in my classes the virtues I believed great writers brought to their creations. After one such mini-lecture 25 years ago that had me huffing and puffing for perhaps twenty minutes, a young woman raised her hand and said, "You know, I'm glad you told us that." I asked her why. Her reply was, "Because now I understand that I *don't* want to be a great writer. I just want to write a few stories and maybe get them published, and that's all."

I said, "OK, that's fine," and I promised to do everything I could to help her achieve that goal. I relate this story because when we ask what advice we should give to young writers, or wonder what are the strategies for a "successful" literary career, it's important to first ask what a person *wants* from writing and publishing. Is it money? (If so, most apprentice writers would likely do better by going into real estate.) Is it about getting attention or creating poems, books and stories as ornaments for their egos? (As a Buddhist, I have a few problems with that one.) Some people, like the young woman in my class, simply want to write for the sake of self-expression and to have a little fun. Others want a career writing the kind of genre fiction they enjoy reading (romance novels, murder mysteries, fantasy, street lit, etc.). Still others hunger for what they consider to be "fame and fortune" and want their ephemeral personalities to leave an impression on the (equally ephemeral) contemporary literary scene.

There's nothing terribly wrong with any of these intentions. I'm not holding them up for ridicule---or at least not too high. The world of fiction writing is capacious enough to hold many different kinds of stories, many different kinds of writers. And offering "business" advice to writers so motivated is certainly easy enough: Get a good literary agent to handle your contracts, protect your interests and the rights to your material, and provide a statement of your yearly earnings for

the IRS---unless you enjoy doing all that yourself. (With a good agent, you can forget about things like this and just create.) Make sure you pay your taxes. If you have one or more "big" years, make sure you set aside what you know you will owe Uncle Sam. (I've known way too many writers who after their 15 minutes of fame didn't pay when they had a book that sold well, or somehow didn't notice that the MacArthur they received is taxable). I would recommend getting a good financial advisor (or a team of advisors) who can wisely and carefully diversify a financial portfolio, and help you plan each year for your expenses, and for your retirement.

Get a lawyer to help you work out a will that explains in detail how you want your literary properties handled after you're gone (mine is 50 pages long with much granularity of detail and, even as I write this, I know it needs to be updated---all wills should be revisited every 5-to-7 years or so). If you get rich, live like you're poor (but treat yourself to something you really want now and then, of course). Don't give up your Day Job, at least not immediately. I've always been fond of the image of the company CEO who drives, not a Lexis, but an old beater and wears clothes off-the-rack. That's extreme, obviously, but you get what I mean: if you make a bundle, don't radically change your life-style. Just because you have a best-selling book (or a "hit" record, as they say), there's no guarantee you will have another, especially if you're a literary artist and not writing industrial fiction year after year. Let me say a bit more about that.

The commonplace advice offered above would cover (and skimmingly so) some aspects of the "business" side of any profession. But, in my view, a literary artist is not just producing over and over again a product or a commodity like toilet paper or a bar of soap. Movie people (and the sales people in publishing) like to believe they can "target" audiences for a particular work. That's their job. Regardless of the merit of a work's content, they're supposed to think in terms of units sold and profits made or, as a Hollywood screenwriter friend of mine once put it, "asses in the seats." But this may present a problem for literary writers who, from book to book, go wherever their robust imaginations take them. The audience for *Middle Passage* or the slave stories I wrote for *Soulcatcher* is---well, I guess it's generally people with some interest in the Peculiar Institution and matters related to the subject of race. I don't think that audience generally overlaps with readers of *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (or I'd wager at least not by much), nor should it overlap.

So this is for me a perennially interesting question, one wrestled with by every American writer I know about since the 19th century: art vs. commerce. From the time I first starting writing seriously and steadily when I was 22-years-old, it seemed to me that the first thing *any* writer needed to determine before putting pen to paper is if he (or she) had something original and important to *say* or show us. A writer would be wise to ask, "What can I uniquely bring to the table that enriches literary culture? What is missing from our literature, and can I fill that lacuna?" James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, Zora Neal Hurston, and Ralph Ellison knew *exactly* what they were bringing to the table, what there was about their work that hitherto had never been seen in literary culture---and they produced the equivalent of literary manifestos or an *ars poetica* that made their artistic intentions clear. In my case, I wanted to contribute to a thematically and aesthetically expansive American philosophical fiction, especially in the area of black literature. (I've never forgotten something my literary agent once said: "Charles never sold out." My first impulse was to reply that I didn't know *how* to do that. Maybe he should tell me.

I'm just kidding here.) August Wilson once asked me, "What makes a great writer?" I didn't hesitate, and replied, "A great vision." August nodded and thought about that.

In one of my essays, "Progress in Literature" I expressed the issue in a way that probably echoes Hemingway's statement above:

"At any given moment, physicists here and abroad are laboring to answer objective questions handed down by Einstein, Bohr, and others---tracking down the Higgs bosen particle (or "God particle" as it's been called) at the Large Hadron Collider, for example, or patching up cracks in Unified Field Theory; it's a competitive race of sorts, as James D. Watson points out in *The Double Helix.* Similarly, the history of literary practice creates objective aesthetic possibilities, artistic works demanded historically by the foul-ups and partial breakthroughs in past literary art, novels and stories that fill in the blanks and potholes created by the oversights and omissions of those writers who preceded us. No, these are not your average 'commercial' novels, only great books that *advance* literary practice. As the old saying goes, good fiction sharpens our perception; great fiction *changes* it. In the realm of American literature at any time there are always important subjects, unexplored, that cry out for dramatization..."

So before committing oneself to a lifetime of writing, I would suggest every young literary fiction writer (and old ones, too), answer for themselves the questions Jean-Paul Sartre posed in *What is Literature*?, "*Why* do I write? For whom do I write? What is writing? What do I hope to accomplish?" And I highly recommend that they consider, first a statement from Noble laureate Saul Bellow's 1970 essay "Culture Now," which I placed before my students for three decades, and then August Wilson's "Four Rules" for writers.
Saul Bellow wrote:

"This society, like decadent Rome, is an amusement society. Art cannot and should not compete with amusement. It has business at the heart of humanity. The artist, as Collingwood tells us, must be a prophet, 'not in the sense that he foretells things to come, but that he tells the audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts.' That is why he exists. He is a spokesman for his community. This account of the artist's business is old, much older than Collingwood, very old, but in modern times this truth, which we all feel, is seldom expressed. No community altogether knows its own heart, and by failing in this knowledge a community deceives itself on the one subject concerning which ignorance means death. The remedy is art itself. Art is the community's medicine for the worst disease of mind, the corruption of consciousness."

And here are August Wilson's "Four Rules":

1. There are no rules.
2. The first rule is wrong, so pay attention.
3. You *can't* write for an audience; the writer's first job is to *survive*. (Italics mine.)
4. You can make no mistakes, but anything you write can be made better.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:31 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/literary-advice-from-desk-of-charles.html

Wednesday, April 20, 2011

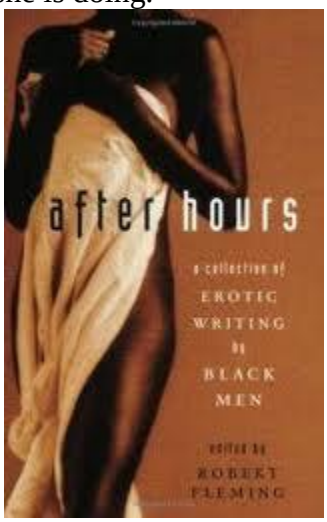
"CULTURAL RELATIVITY" by CHARLES JOHNSON

E. Ethelbert Miller asks this question:

Q. Where did the idea for the story "Cultural Relativity" come from? If I was a young black woman I might be upset with the ending. Must black women settle for frogs? What happens when readers can't look pass reality to embrace what is simply a story? This story seems to bring back the old question -What is the role of the black writer? Do you have an answer?

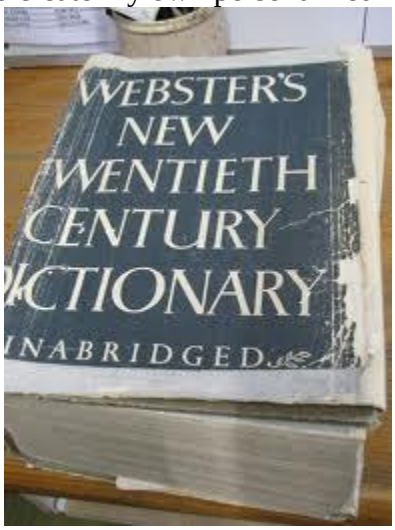
"Cultural Relativity" is probably the silliest, most playful, sly, and whimsical story I ever published, and intentionally so. But what is wrong with a story making someone upset? Is the role of the black artist---or any artist---one that dictates he (or she) should never ruffle any feathers? (If that is the case, we will have very few black, editorial or political cartoonists.) Surely we, as a people, aren't *that* thin-skinned. Are we?

This story was originally written for the yearly fund-raiser held each year in Seattle by Humanities Washington, and the theme or topic at that time was "A kiss goodnight." I at first called the story, "Felicia's Kiss." It was published in *Indiana Review* (May, 2002); reprinted as the lead piece in *After Hours: A Collection of Erotic Writing by Black Men*, edited by Robert Fleming (Plume, July 2002); and made into a short film by David S. DeCrane, which was shown at the Newport Film Festival on April 17, 2004. And I'm corresponding right now with a Seattle actress who may adapt it for a film she is doing.



It's a simple enough story about a young black college student and her African boyfriend who won't kiss her because kissing is forbidden in his culture. (Do a little research on the history of kissing, it's a very Western practice.) But the story's protagonist, so certain she's right in demanding that he kiss her, forces the issue, ignoring his warnings about the relativity of cultures, and the consequences of her desire and insensitivity lead to a preposterous but classic conclusion.

More and more I'm reminded these days that many Americans, black, white, and otherwise, don't know *how* to read and understand a story. But is this surprising when 1 out of 5 Americans is functionally illiterate and cannot read with comprehension a newspaper editorial or the directions on their prescription medicines? They've not taken many (or any) literature classes in high school or college, courses where stories are analyzed and discussed. They've not been exposed to many different *kinds* of stories. They are uncomfortable with irony. They've never been taught how to raise appropriate questions for literary fiction. Nor do they have a critical vocabulary for such discussions. Many will look at a dense, intellectually and imagistically layered passage on the page and simply not recognize what they are looking at (especially its literary and philosophical allusions), or know how to interpret it---usually, they will skip over it, as if it isn't even there.
And all of this points, tragically, to a startling failure in our system of education, especially in the humanities. I can't tell you how many times I've heard from black readers that they had to look up too many words they didn't know in my fiction, reading with a dictionary at their elbow.
Well, guess what? Writers love words, so much so in my case that when I was in graduate school I read the 2,129-page *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* (a Christmas gift from my parents) cover to cover in order to create my own personalized lexicon.



Michael Gorman, a librarian at California State University and president of the American Library Association addressed this problem when he said, "It's appalling---it's really astounding. Only 31 percent of college graduates can read a complex book and extrapolate from it. That's not saying much for the remainder." He expressed dismay at how few entering freshmen understood how to use a basic library system, or enjoyed reading for pleasure. "There is a failure in the core values of education," he said. "They're told to go to college in order to get a better job, and that's OK. But the real task is to produce educated people."
As an educator, I have to agree. I saw what he describes every day in the classroom, and increasingly over the last 10 or 20 years. Other college professors will tell you that, too.
So, if indeed a "young black woman" (or man) gets upset by the ending of "Cultural Relativity." I suggest they remember something philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer wrote about the proper way to approach an artwork before one begins criticizing it. In *The World as Will and Representation*, he wrote: "Everyone must stand before a picture as before a prince, waiting to see whether it will speak and what it will say to him; and, as with the prince, so he himself must not address it, for then he would hear only himself."

And black readers will also do well to recall what James Weldon Johnson said in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man.* This remarkable and enormously influential novel was published 99 years ago. Over the past century it has moved from being a "novel" to becoming an essential cultural artifact for understanding the American experience. Portions of it devoted to a description of black life in 1912 read as if they were written last night:

"In fact, it may be said that the majority of intelligent colored people are, in some degree, too much in earnest over the race question. They assume and carry so much that their progress is at times impeded, and they are unable to see things in their proper proportions. In many instances, a slight exercise of the sense of humor would save much anxiety of the soul."

Amen.

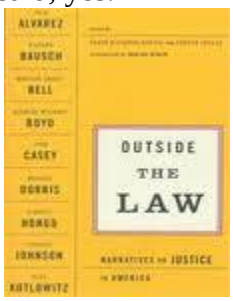
Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 6:23 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/cultural-relativity-by-charles-johnson.html

Friday, April 22, 2011

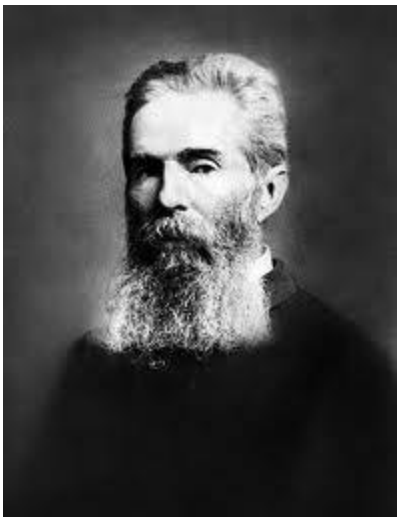
"Executive Decision" and Affirmative Action. Charles Johnson explains...

SUSAN RICHARDS SHREVE

In 1996, Susan Richards Shreve wrote to me, asking if I would be interested in contributing to a book she and Porter Shreve were doing. That book is *Outside the Law: Narratives on Justice in America* (Beacon Press, 1997). The other contributors had already selected their topics. I asked Susan if anyone was writing about "affirmative action." She said, no. Then I asked her if I could compose a story on that subject. Susan said, yes.



Her request led to my writing "Executive Decision." A story using second-person viewpoint, it is set in Seattle, where a white CEO must decide between two candidates for an executive position in his company. One is a black man. The other is a white woman. Both are exceptionally qualified for the position advertised. So that is the premise, the set-up, or "ground situation," as John Barth once described a story's conflict---the "agony of choice," to borrow a phrase from Sartre. I selected second-person viewpoint ("You" are the protagonist) to place the reader in the CEO's shoes, to force a reader to ponder the question, "Who would *you* choose? And why?" This tale is riddled with allusions to "Bartleby the Scrivener," deliberately implying that this story's protagonist is a descendent of the first-person narrator in Melville's tale, indeed, that this business is what the one Melville described in 1853 evolved into. My unnamed CEO has two close associates, who were his classmates at Harvard in the late 1960s, and have the nicknames Nips and Turk (a tip of the hat to Melville's characters Turkey and Nippers), and an elderly secretary, Gladys McNeal, who worked for his father and knows "where the bodies are buried" in terms of this firm's history.



HERMAN MELVILLE

The CEO and Turk are quite comfortable, on a personal level, with one charming candidate, Claire Bennett. In many ways, she could be their biological and cultural daughter, wife, or sister---she has moved in social and racial circles they are familiar with since childhood in an America that ended legal segregation, yes, but one that still engages in what I call Jim Crow-lite. On the other hand, Nips---who occasionally socializes with black people---favors hiring Eddie Childs, a man who (like Bartleby) is a social, cultural, and historical mystery to the others. They do not know the *Lebenswelt* ("Life-world") or world of daily lived-experience that produced a high-achieving Negro like Childs, a man who has negotiated his way through a racial minefield every day of his life, and emerged unscathed (or has he?). They do not know his mind, his soul, but on paper he clearly matches Claire Bennett in worldly achievements.

The story grapples with the complexities of affirmative action, the meaning of "equality," and John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971). All night long the CEO agonizes on which candidate he will choose, and by the story's end it is a personal revelation about old Gladys and his dead father---and the ambiguous illusion of "race"---that tilts him toward selecting one candidate instead of the other.

I will leave it up to the reader to decide if he made the right decision.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:48 AM

http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/executive-decision-and-affirmative.html

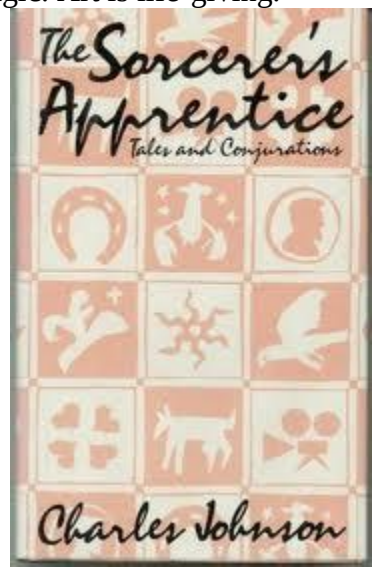
Saturday, April 23, 2011

THE SORCERER'S APPRENTICE

A couple of years after I started teaching at the University of Washington, I received a letter from a young woman in Chicago. She'd been given a copy of my novel *Faith and the Good Thing* by one of my former students at SUNY-Stony Brook. She told me she'd read it without it having much impact on her. She said she was an artist or perhaps an aspiring writer, I don't remember which. I *do* remember that in her letter she told me that one night she decided to kill herself. She was laying out the instrument for this---the razor to slash her wrists---when she decided to take another look at *Faith.* On that second reading, in her darkened state of mind, she said she finally "got it." That is, the meaning of the story, which is life-affirmative for the protagonist Faith Cross after she suffers a novel's worth of grief. The letter-writer told me she just wanted to say "Thanks."

I read and re-read her letter several times. The next day I sent her flowers. And I thought (and still think) of how what she said shores up John Gardner's statement in *The Art of Fiction*, a book I made my students read every academic quarter for more than thirty years "To write with taste, in the highest sense, is to write with the assumption that one out of a hundred people who read one's work may be dying, or have loved ones dying; to write so that no one commits suicide, no one despairs...every writer should be aware that he might be read by the desperate, by people who might be persuaded toward life or death...The true artist is never so lost in his imaginary world that he forgets the real world, where teen-agers have a chemical propensity toward anguish, people between their thirties and forties have a tendency to get divorced, and people in their seventies have a tendency toward loneliness, poverty, self-pity, and sometimes anger. The true artist chooses never to be a bad physician."

This sense of art as potentially life-saving was heavily on my mind when I wrote "The Sorcerer's Apprentice." In that tale, art is magic. Art is life-giving.



And the young apprentice sorcerer in the story, Allan Jackson, has dedicated himself to healing others through magic. But the problem is that he wants *too* badly to heal, to do good, and to

serve. He is *attached* to the desire to do good. After a successful, even stunning, conjuration that relieves the suffering of a black seamstress in South Carolina and formally brings his apprenticeship to an end, Allan feels he *must* be able to heal like that all the time, that the techniques he has learned from the elder sorcerer Rubin Bailey should *never* fail him. But they do---they fail him spectacularly one night, and with his beloved father in the room as a witness. The pressure on Allan's ego, his sense of self, is tremendous. He is brought to the brink of suicide.

It is only his awareness of how he will spiritually and psychologically destroy his own father if he kills himself that finally draws Allan back from the edge of self-annihilation and, by doing that, he unconsciously heals his father of a life-time of wounds inflicted by the racist South. In a Buddhist sense, Allan learns to "let go;" to live, if need be, without magic (the pride he felt at being a sorcerer) or to patiently wait for its reappearance.
The lesson he has learned is simple but hard: "The charm that cured the seamstress had whipped through him like wind through a reedpipe, or---more exactly, like music struggling to break free, liberate its volume and immensity from the confines of wood and brass. It made him feel unessential, anonymous, like a tool in which the spell sang itself, briefly borrowing his throat, then tossed him, Allan, aside when the miracle ended...God or Creation, or the universe---it had several names---had to seize you, *use* you, as the Sorcerer said, because it needed a womb, shake you down, speak through you until the pain pearled into a beautiful spell that snapped the world back together."

At the end, Allan understands that he cannot egoistically claim the magic, the healing, the art. As Reb the Coffinmaker says in *Oxherding Tale* when the narrator praises his work, "*I* didn't *do* anythin'. Things are done, that's all."

And Reb's statement should be compared to my fictional Martin Luther King Jr. in *Dreamer*, when during his Kitchen Conversion, he felt "he was traveling light again, for the long, lurid dream of multiplicity and separateness, the very belief in an 'I' that suffered and strained to affect the world, dissolved, and for the first time he felt like a dreamer gently roused from sleep and forgetfulness. Awake, he saw he was not the doer. How could he have ever believed otherwise? That which he'd thought practiced virtue, surrendered to vice, held degrees, opinions and elaborated theories, and traveled toward a goal was spun from a spiderweb of words, no more real than the cantels of the erstwhile cup before him."
Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 2:42 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/sorcerers-apprentice.html

Monday, April 25, 2011

THE BIG MAC: The MacArthur Awards

When Nature has work to be done, she creates a genius to do it.
Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The first and perhaps most important thing to say about the MacArthur fellowships, which some have called a "mini-Nobel," is that not every one who receives this yearly recognition is a genius. Administrators at the Foundation will be quick to tell you that, and rightly so.

Starting in the 1980s, and long before I received my MacArthur in 1998, the Foundation sent me the nominating statements for other writers and asked me to evaluate their work, partly because I worked in the same field as those nominees, and partly because with *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970* I established some credentials as a literary critic. I gave them reports on several writers, black and white, and nominated one recipient, a man who is distinguished for his work with at-risk black youth and ex-convicts.

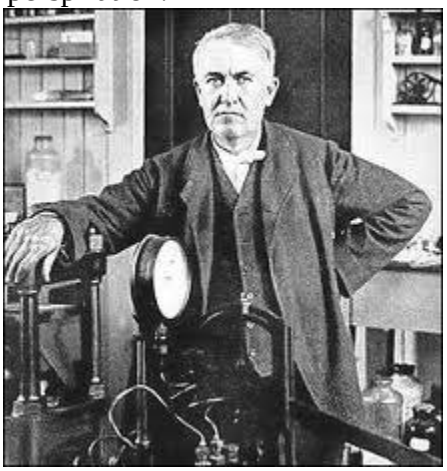
The money given to MacArthur fellows is, of course, a blessing. But no one gets rich from it, nor is it the intention of the Foundation to make anyone rich---only to provide them with the freedom to continue their work. What's nice is that fellows don't have to continue the *same* work that brought them the award. They can pursue any new path dictated by their intellects and imagination. It's likely many do exactly that because MacArthur fellows, as a group, don't follow the herd or fashionable trends. Rather, they tend to be people who innovate---often for many years in obscurity---and strike out in new directions.

So, as I said, the money was fine, but far more interesting to me---and something almost everyone ignores during the excitement when the awards are announced---is the specific, unique reason *why* someone receives this award. If anyone cares to know, the answer is on each individual fellow's citation. Mine reads, "Charles Johnson is a novelist, short story writer, essayist, cartoonist, and screenwriter. His works address fundamental philosophical questions and transcend the boundaries of class, ethnicity, and culture that separate us."

More rewarding than the five years of financial support was (for me) the recognition of the essence of my *oeuvre* up to the year 1998. When they called to tell me I'd received a MacArthur (they prefer the Call to other ways of first communicating with you), I was informed that it took their judges a full year to read all my work.

In regard to how I feel about receiving a fellowship often called the "genius grant," I have to say that I'm not bothered by that at all. All (false) modesty aside, I've been called a genius all my life. First, and quite predictably by my mother (who was clearly biased). Then by Howard Long, founder of the Journalism School at Southern Illinois University, who in 1977 when he presented me with something called a Delta Award sponsored by Friends of Morris Library ("For significant contribution to intellectual commerce of our time") said that, "I've only known two geniuses in my life and both of them were cartoonists." And, lastly, by John Gardner in one of his newspaper interviews in (I think) the early 1980s.

To my eye, genius is much more commonly distributed among members of our species than we sometimes think. It takes many forms, but perhaps all of them have one thing in common that philosopher William James identified when he said, "The essence of genius is knowing what to overlook." And I would add that Thomas Edison famously said that "Genius is one-percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration."



THOMAS EDISON

I believe I can testify to the "perspiration" part of that statement.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 3:24 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/big-mac-macarthur-awards.html

Monday, April 25, 2011

THE ART OF BOOK REVIEWING

Between 1977 and 2008, I published over 50 book reviews in *The Los Angeles Times* (Carolyn See and I were two of a handful of reviewers their editor convinced to do a book review every month starting in 1989); *The New York Times Book Review; Washington Post Book World; The Chicago Tribune; Common Knowledge; The London Times; The Wall Street Journal; The American Book Review; The Seattle Weekly; Pacific Northwest; Tricycle: The Buddhist Review;Shambhala Sun;* and *Buddhadharma.*

I reviewed the work of many authors, among them Richard Wright, Raymond Roussel, Thomas McGuane, Cormac McCarthy, William Trevor, Barry Lopez, Toby Olson, Caryl Phillips, Chinua Achebe, Margaret Walker, Larry Neal, Wole Soyinka, Richard Rive, Stanley Crouch, Reginald McKnight, Shelby Steele, John Edgar Wideman, Gordon Parks, James H. Cone, Ben Okri, Kwame Anthony Appiah, John Updike, Gerald Early, Paul Theroux, Jerry Gafio Watts, Nelson George, Richard Ford, Dinesh D'Souza, Jim Crace, Albert Murray, Madison Smartt Bell, Jan Willis, and Angel Kyoto Williams.

I decided that after over 50 reviews, I could let reviewing become one of the things I'd done enough of and could finally "let go." But why did I begin reviewing in the first place? The short answer is that I was eager to review books because some of the reviews of my first novel *Faith and The Good Thing* were shoddy, shallow and profoundly disappointing to me when I was a young man; a few reviewers made, in my opinion, all the mistakes that a critical reader should *not* make. Also, I began reviewing because I felt a serious writer has an obligation to respond to and be engaged with other contemporary authors during the moment they share in literary history.

Traditionally, and not that long ago, book reviewing was a literary art form in itself. (And not, as my daughter once said when she was a kid, "You're doing another *book report,* Dad?") Far from being like a high school "book report," a well-done book review can be a thing of beauty as

memorable as the book under review---and in some cases *more* engaging and memorable than the book being discussed. In the case of a writer like, say, John Gardner, his reviews in *The New York Times Book Review* in the 1970s were often insightful "position papers" on some aspect of aesthetics inspired by whatever book he was discussing.

But I was not interested in my reviews being position papers. I preferred to restrict my taking of intellectual and artistic positions to my philosophical essays. Instead, and in a phenomenological spirit, the first thing I always did when approaching a book I had to review was "bracket" or set aside my own partisan, aesthetic positions, my personal feelings, and my notions of what a story or novel should be. (That was something I hoped each text I reviewed would teach me anew.) In other words, the first step was to get "me" out of the way. I sought to experience the work from within and in its *own* terms, and to let the text guide the aesthetic and cultural questions I would raise. I found that it was important to give readers as concise and accurate a summary of the book as possible, but in the case of a work of fiction never to reveal too much, because that would spoil the sense of surprise and discovery for them if they bought the book.

And, most important of all, I found it helpful to quote liberally and (when possible) at length from the book. Why? Well, because that way a reader could directly experience the work without me, the reviewer, as a middle term mediating (or standing in the way) of readers encountering the author's own thoughts and prose style. Personally, I might not like a particular book, and sometimes a reviewer is tempted to just throw up his hands and repeat the line attributed to Abraham Lincoln: "People who like this sort of thing will find this the sort of thing they like." But generosity in giving quotations gives the reader a taste of the work's flavor, and lets him (or her) make up their own mind---they might just decide that they disagree with my judgment, if it was negative, and that this *is* a book they would find interesting.

In a word, I always tried to review the work of others with the kind of mindfulness, sympathy, compassion and care that I hoped reviewers would bring to my own literary creations.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:08 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/04/art-of-book-reviewing.html