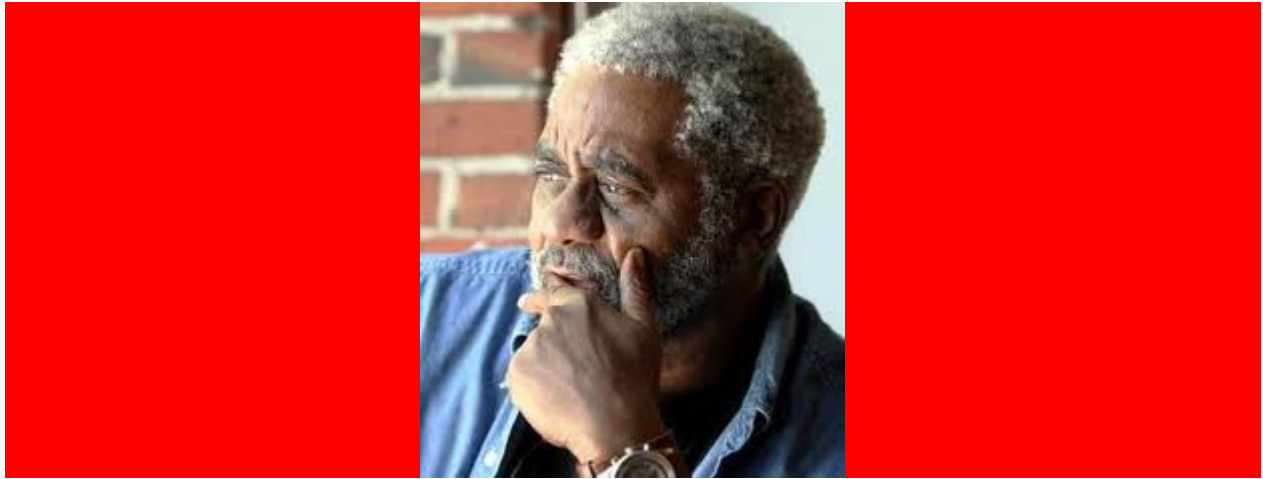


Saturday, January 8, 2011

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF CHARLES JOHNSON



My day is the reverse of what a day is for most people. Typically, I'm up working all night until 5 or 6 AM, the same kind of schedule kept by Descartes and Balzac. Those are the quiet hours I need to concentrate when the phone isn't ringing and there are no other distractions. I get up at noon or by 1 PM PST so I can reply to any messages or emails from my agents or editors (or anyone) on the east coast before 2 PM (or 5 PM their time, the end of their business day).

Each day is structured around my workout schedule, which is my priority to maintain health and fitness, especially now that I'm 62. On Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday I lift weights (my bench press is at 280 pounds) for an hour in the early afternoon and practice my Choy Li Fut kung-fu and Tai Chi Chuan sets; on Monday and Wednesday I get on our treadmill for 100 minutes. (No workouts on Friday and Saturday, my rest days.) With the day's workout out of the way, my body is completely relaxed and I'm then free to run errands for my family and friends, eat a light meal and settle into whatever creative work is in-progress.

Around 8 or 9 PM I usually take a nap to reboot my brain, then eat a proper "dinner" at 10 PM. Then I'm leisurely back to work again until dawn---reading, answering correspondence, writing, studying Sanskrit (I'm in my 13th year now), practicing meditation, with our dog Nova to keep me company, and maybe watching a movie if I'm in the mood.

Naturally, this schedule goes right out the window when I'm on the road for a speaking engagement or have an early morning meeting.

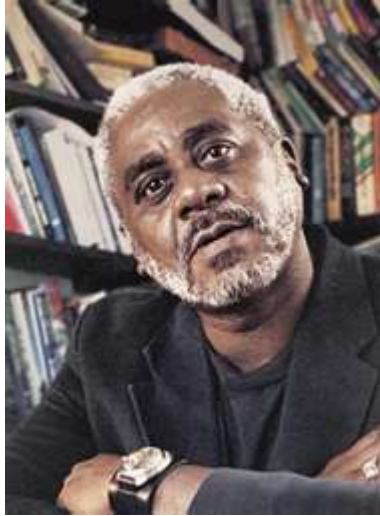
Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [4:11 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/day-in-life-of-charles-johnson.html>

Sunday, January 9, 2011

INTRODUCTION TO CHARLES JOHNSON -001

If one is interested in obtaining an overview of Charles Johnson's career begin here:

www.oxherdingtale.com



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [4:59 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/introduction-to-charles-johnson-001.html>

Monday, January 10, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON REFLECTS ON THE LIFE OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR



King's first northern campaign in 1966 is seldom mentioned because it was not an unqualified success like Montgomery or Birmingham. As a matter of fact, some feel King was outmaneuvered by "Boss" Daley. But it is during this period, between 1966 and his murder in Memphis in 1968, after his nation-changing successes are behind him (the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, his Nobel Peace Prize), that King's life is under tremendous pressure, and that makes for good drama. Of Chicago, he said, "I've been in many demonstrations all across the South, but I can say that I have never seen, even in Mississippi and Alabama, mobs as hostile and hate-filled as I've seen in Chicago."

That year he brought the Movement to Chicago, 1966, was personally attractive to me because I remember it well---it was during my senior year of high school in Evanston, a suburb of Chicago. I once knew that city. My wife, her two brothers and three sisters, grew up in south Chicago. I was for one summer an intern---journalist and cartoonist---on *The Chicago Tribune*, then a stringer for that newspaper for a year(1969-70). That town is deep in my DNA.

In *Dreamer*, the character Robert Jackson is based on my great-uncle William Johnson, a general contractor who with his all-black crew, which once included my father, built churches, homes and apartment buildings all over the North Shore, among them Springfield Baptist Church in Evanston, which is where I set King's big speech in the middle of the novel, though I renamed the church Calvary A.M.E. And Dr. Jennifer Hale is actually Dr. Elizabeth Hill, the woman who delivered me and all my black friends in my hometown, and created Community Hospital, where I was born, in Evanston in the 1940s. Before that, and because Evanston Hospital was segregated, she had to take her black patients all the way to Chicago's south side, and many died along the way.

What King didn't know, and certainly didn't prepare well enough for, was the kind of Windy City racism he would encounter in all-white places like Cicero (an enclave of blue-collar, ethnic whites), and also the fact that Chicago is a traditionally black nationalist city, home of the headquarters for the Nation of Islam, and once the briar patch for the Black Stone Rangers, Johnson publications in which I published racially-oriented cartoons (*Ebony*, *Jet*, *Black World*), *The Daily Defender*, etc. (President Obama came to realize that nationalism when he was a community organizer and attended Rev. Jeremiah Wright's church.) I also had a very personal

identification with King's upbringing. I was raised as a Christian in an African Methodist Episcopal church in Evanston and, like King, studied Christianity *as* an important philosophy when I did my master's and Ph.D. work.

The novel's prologue was the first part of *Dreamer* that I wrote. But before I could write it, I spent two years studying histories of the Civil Rights Movement, biographies of King, his sermons and critical studies of those sermons and speeches, his college papers---the first two volumes of *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.*---and declassified F.B.I. documents people sent to me when they learned I was writing this book. I made the trip to his birth home in Atlanta and the Lorraine Motel room where he spent his last night, always taking notes until the day came when I felt deep enough in his skin and spirit to do the prologue. (Finishing the novel took another five years and 3,000 thrown away pages.)

Those over-King's shoulder sections of the novel (all italicized) flowed easily from me. The tougher part was the Cain/Abel mythic sub-structure, and creating a fictitious double for King, Chaym Smith, who gave me the chance to create a contrast to King even though these two are physically identical---that is, to let him say things other black people were saying in 1966, to examine the very idea of "equality," and to raise the novel's central philosophical question: *How do we end evil without engendering error or evil?* As you know, I've continued to write fiction and non-fiction using King as a character (for example, the short story "Dr. King's Refrigerator"), so by now I've devoted a third of my life to thinking and writing about the man and his spiritual/philosophical legacy.

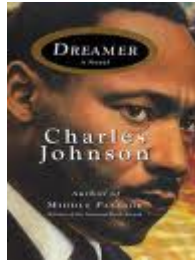
Everything I wrote about the Chicago campaign (and Evanston) is from the historical record. I made up the story about his having a double (I always prefer an imaginative premise for my novels and stories) and the two young black Movement workers who train him, Matthew Bishop and Amy Griffith.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [8:07 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/charles-johnson-reflects-on-life-of-dr.html>

Monday, January 10, 2011

DREAMER BY CHARLES JOHNSON



Dreamer is the only novel (to my knowledge) in American literature that explores King's life and his philosophical vision. During his 14-year public ministry he was the nation's preacher, this country's most prominent moral philosopher, and its most influential private citizen.

In *Dreamer*, I isolate the main ethical points of his vision for attaining the "beloved community," and list them as (1) *Nonviolence*, not merely as a strategy for protest, but as a Way, a daily practice; (2) *Agape*, the ability to love unconditionally, a teleological love that sees beneath a thing or person's surface to its potential; and (3) *Integration* as the life's blood of Being itself.

Then I use three words to sum this up: "Others first. Always."

Although he only lived for 39 years, it seems to me that King's life and vision are capacious and rich---as well as historically important enough---for many, many imaginative novels.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [8:15 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/dreamer-by-charles-johnson.html>

Wednesday, January 12, 2011

Charles Johnson on King and Western Philosophy



King did his Ph.D. work at Boston University, home of the Boston Personalists. He identified Edgar Sheffield Brightman as his mentor and inspiration, and the philosopher who gave him "the metaphysical and philosophical grounding for the idea of a personal God." Brightman's book that King found very valuable is *A Philosophy of Religion* (1940), and I've read that he took Brightman's "Philosophy of Religion" class as well as one of his seminars on philosophy. Brightman died shortly after King began his doctoral studies so he continued his work with Brightman's colleague and former student, L. Harold DeWolf.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [12:37 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/charles-johnson-on-king-and-western.html>

Friday, January 14, 2011

REMEMBERING KING...



I was a sophomore sitting in my fourth floor dormitory room on a pleasant spring day when I heard students shouting outside that Martin Luther King Jr. had been killed. I was shocked at the time and uncertain what this tragedy meant, though I suspected it would unleash violence across America. The first people I discussed his assassination with were other students in my dormitory.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [2:43 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/remembering-king.html>

Friday, January 14, 2011



In college, I was an editorial cartoonist for a newspaper called *The Southern Illinoisan*, and also for my college newspaper, *The Daily Egyptian*. My response to King's murder was to publish in my college newspaper an editorial cartoon using the Statue of Liberty to express my grief, as Bill Mauldin had used the statue of Lincoln in the Lincoln Memorial for his famous editorial cartoon published when JFK was murdered. I've only done one other drawing using King, entitled, "King in Hell," which was published in *The Seattle Times* on January 18, 2004, along with three other cartoons, and an article I wrote about King's importance in the post-civil rights era.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [2:58 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/college-i-was-editorial-cartoonist-for.html>

Monday, January 17, 2011

THE MANY SERMONS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.



In his many sermons, Martin Luther King Jr. explained the complexity of the challenges we face, especially in the one sermon he liked most among all the presentations he gave during his too brief life of only thirty-nine years. He delivered this sermon all over America, and also in London at St. Paul's Cathedral in 1964 when he was on his way to Norway to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. The title is "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." If you don't know this beautiful sermon, I highly recommend that you read it as soon as possible. Because, for King, the first dimension of a complete life is self-acceptance. This means developing your personal resources, abilities, intelligence and talents. It also involves doing life's work "so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn couldn't do it better." Another time, he phrased it this way: "we must set out to do a good job, irrespective of race, and do it so well that nobody could do it better." King elaborated on what he meant by this first dimension when he said, "We must work on two fronts. On the one hand we must continually resist the system of segregation---the system which is the basic cause of our lagging standards; on the other hand, we must work constructively to improve the lagging standards which are the effects of segregation. There must be a rhythm of alteration between attacking the cause and healing the effects." In other words, this second front of struggle---self-improvement---is the first dimension of a complete life.

The second important dimension of life, said King, was learning "that there is nothing greater than to do something for others." This is what we are reminded to do each year during his birthday celebration. And finally, the third dimension for King was the quest for the divine because, he said, "We were made for God, and we will be restless until we find rest in him."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [6:17 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/many-sermons-of-martin-luther-king-jr.html>

Wednesday, January 19, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT BLACK MEN



My feeling is that not enough has changed in the lives of black males since John McCluskey Jr. and I published *Black Men Speaking* in 1997. (See that book as basically a transcript of the souls of black men as they speak about and describe their lives, hopes, and dreams.) In fact, in some ways things have worsened. Like the narrator of Charles Dickens's novel *A Tale of Two Cities*, we might say that for many black men, "It is the best of times, it is the worst of times." Beyonce Knowles last December gave her husband Jay-Z, whose fortune is worth \$450 million, the most expensive car in the world, a Bugatti Veyron Grand Sport priced at \$2 million; Kanye West just spent \$180,000 for a watch in his own image, which is only slightly less than the \$250,000 that rapper Usher paid a New York luxury watch company to create a timepiece with *his* face on it. More black American men are rich and famous today than at any previous time in American history.

But I am profoundly troubled by a report published last November by the Council of the Great City Schools, entitled "A Call for Change." It states that "the nation's young black males are in a state of crisis," and describes their condition as "a national catastrophe." This report shows that "black boys on average fall behind from their earliest years. Black mothers have a higher infant mortality rate and black children are twice as likely as whites to live in a home where no parent has a job. In high school, black American boys drop out at nearly twice the rate of white boys, and their SAT scores are on average 104 points lower. In college, black men represented just 5 percent of students in 2008." Commenting on this situation, Ronald Ferguson, director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard, said, "There's accumulating evidence that there are racial differences in what kids experience before the first day of kindergarten. They have to do with a lot of sociological and historical forces. In order to address those, we have to be able to have conversations that people are unwilling to have."

Syndicated columnist Bob Herbert, writing recently about this alarming report, described our current situation in the post-civil rights period as a "raging fire that is consuming the life prospects of so many young blacks....Cultural change comes hard," he said, "and takes a long time, but nothing short of profound cultural change is essential." This feeling that a new way of thinking is necessary was expressed even earlier by one of the icons of the Civil Rights Movement, John Lewis. "If King could speak to us today," Congressman Lewis said in 1994, "he would say, in addition to doing something about guns, he would say there needs to be a revolution of values, a revolution of ideas in the black community. He would say we need to

accept non-violence not simply as a technique or as a means to bring about social justice, but we need to make it a way of life, *a way of living.*”

We can take the first small steps toward this revolution called for by Congressman Lewis by mindfully changing the way we talk to each other, by eliminating the violence and disrespect in our speech. (And, yes, I *am* talking about that anger-provoking cultural ritual called Playing the Dozens that every young black male is exposed to before he’s ten years old.) I would like to suggest a simple test for whatever you want to say *before* you say it. Think of this test as being three questions---or three doors---your speech must pass through before you make it public. The first door is, *Is it true?* The second door is, *Is it necessary?* And the third door is, *Will it cause no harm?*

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [5:17 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/charles-johnson-talks-about-black-men.html>

Friday, January 21, 2011

JOHNSON ON SPORTS AND MARTIAL ARTS



I was on my high school soccer team my sophomore year, but that's it. I did follow boxing for years because that's a Western martial art that those in Asian martial arts understand they need to know something about. You might find interesting an article by James Grady entitled "Fist of Fantasy: Martial Arts & Prose Fiction---A Practitioner's Prejudices," published in 2000 in *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, Vol 9, No. 4. He looks at martial art stories by me, Adam Hall, David Hunt, Jay McInerney, and Peter O'Donnell, and includes two 1982 photos of me---one doing a two-man empty-hand set with a friend in Seattle's first Choy Li Fut *kwoon*, and another as I practiced a staff weapon set.

I started training when I was 19-years-old in 1967 at a very rough, controversial, and (at the time) cult-like martial art school in Chicago, Chi Tao Chuan of the Monastery. (You might say I had my first rite-of-passage as a young man in that place.) This was during the so-called "Dojo Wars" in Chicago (my school and teacher vs. a very popular, self-promoting martial artist in Chicago who called himself "Count Dante"), and when I wrote the first of my six, unpublished apprentice novels between 1970-72, that story was based on my experiences in this school. My interest was in health and self-defense. Also because the late 60s were a violent time in American history, and I wanted to know how to fight.

All total, I've studied three karate systems and three kung-fu systems in Illinois, New York, California and Washington state, settling in 1981 on Choy Li Fut kung-fu as taught by grandmaster Doc Fai Wong of San Francisco. Historically, Choy Li Fut is an old Shaolin Buddhist monastery kung-fu system (named after its founders, Mr. Choy, Mr. Li, and "fut" in Chinese means "Buddha"). Friends and I in this system co-operated a studio for ten years here in

Seattle, teaching first under the name Twin Tigers (the name given to a friend and I by grandmaster Wong when we started teaching), then later as Blue Phoenix Club.

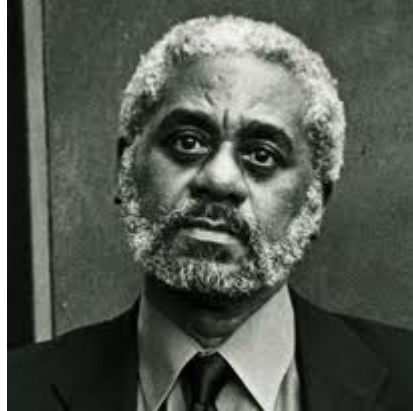
I continue to train happily every week, but I seldom speak about this now because (1) People in this culture are quick to negatively associate black men with violence (I always talk about Buddhism instead); and (2) Because some reporters who interviewed me in the late 80s and early 90s got way too interested in this side of my life, in my humble opinion, instead of my work in art, philosophy, and literature.



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [7:55 AM](#)
<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/johnson-on-sports-and-martial-arts.html>

Monday, January 24, 2011

Correspondence between Charles Johnson and E. Ethelbert Miller



Information for Charles Johnson Scholars:

<http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/xml/scrbg005.xml>

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [11:45 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/correspondence-between-charles-johnson.html>

Tuesday, January 25, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT POETRY



LANGSTON HUGHES

I am a long-time lover of great poetry. In college when I was an undergraduate, I memorized many of my favorite poems. Today I enjoy reciting them whole cloth from my head when I have to do a microphone test before a taped interview or reading. My wife and I first met when we both were 20-years-old, and during that first year of dating, we'd read and discuss poems from Langston Hughes to Amiri Baraka to Gwendolyn Brooks (and all the Chicago poets of the 60s). I even wrote 80 poems of my own (and in 1972 made up one for the Swamp Woman to sing in *Faith and the Good Thing*), but they were bad, clumsy, amateurish poems. They made me realize that I'm basically a prose person (fiction, literary journalism, essays, philosophy, screen-and-teleplay writing, storytelling). Just as one must instinctively *feel from within* the structure or narrative forms that will turn raw experience into a well-made story, so too, one must have what I call a particular "cognitive style" that one cultivates over a lifetime, and must immerse himself (or herself) in the theory and practice of great poetry worldwide in order to experience life in ways that lead to writing good poetry. Many of my friends and colleagues have done just that for many decades: Heather McHugh, Richard Kenny, Linda Bierds (all three of these poets in our creative writing program are MacArthur fellows), Ethelbert Miller, Shayla Hawkins, James Bertolino.

So I've lived my entire life as a passionate admirer of poetry and its power to refine and elevate language to new levels of performance, to help us see things with greater granularity of detail (Gerard Manley Hopkins's notion of *inscape* or a thing's individual essence), and radically transform our perception, as Martin Heidegger explains so well in *On The Way to Language*, and *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Remember: I was fiction editor for *The Seattle Review* for 20 years (1978-98), and my late colleague Nelson Bentley, one of the architects of northwest poetry (along with David Wagoner and their mentor Theodore Roethke, who started creative writing classes at UW right after World War II) was poetry editor.

Therefore, I regularly consumed a diet of his poetry selections (more than 1,000 of his students went on to become published poets, among them Tess Gallagher) with each issue. And, obviously, I work as hard as I can for lyricism in my novels and stories, *i.e.*, poetic prose. I have

many books on the "how" of writing poetry. Perhaps now that I'm retired from teaching, I can try to revisit poetry as a form of expression. Doing that, I think, would be rewarding.

I once served very briefly on the board for Copper Canyon Press; I have a full bookshelf of their publications and read them when I want to relax from the utilitarian transparency of prose and hunger for poetry's density, compression, and opacity. Last year I made a promise to myself to read a few poems every night before I go to bed. I think fine poetry is all around us, wherever we encounter the coalescence of thought and feeling compressed into powerful, original expression--in song lyrics, haiku (Richard Wright discovered that form and wrote a ream of haiku), novels like Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Zen writings (see Dogen), a pithy observation on a T-shirt or a greeting card, everywhere that language suddenly and unexpectedly lifts us above the banality of speech and writing overheard in the supermarket or at the DMV or encountered in government documents.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [2:54 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/charles-johnson-talks-about-poetry.html>

Friday, January 28, 2011

AT THE MOVIES WITH CHARLES JOHNSON



When I was a kid in the 1950s, three movies had a huge, lasting impact on me. The first was Frank Capra's "Lost Horizon" (1937), which was quite a masterful, cinematic improvement on James Hilton's moodier 1933 novel, at least in terms of appealing to a mass audience. I identified with the protagonist, Robert Conway, sick of his Western life in London, who after a rescue mission in an Asian country unexpectedly finds himself (and his shallow brother George) kidnapped to Shangri-la, a lamasery where the residents (devoted to inner peace and kindness) are preserving the greatest works of humankind because another devastating, world war that will likely destroy civilization is coming. But Conway loses that utopia during a moment of doubt (instigated by his brother) that an unselfish, spiritual life is actually possible. After leaving Shangri-la, he has to put his life on the line---really struggle and almost die---to regain it. (Or so we hope at the movie's end.) This is easily my favorite film of all time.

A second movie that burned itself into the emulsion of my mind was the film version of Paddy Chayefsky's "Marty" (1955) about two of society's rejects, both ugly duckings (by this society's standards), who are fine people, and find each other. Marty's family and crude male buddies all oppose his love for Clara, the plain schoolteacher. Ernest Borgnine delivered a performance so emotionally pained in Act One---a one-way phone conversation in which he tries to set up a date and is rejected three times (we watch him just fall apart before our eyes)--that the scene's stark simplicity and the purity of Marty's anguish shocked and moved me when I was a kid; it sensitized me to how cruel, indifferent, and insensitive the social world can be. (I also love the first film version of "The Glass Menagerie" in 1950). "Marty" includes a truly hilarious, wonderful send-up of Mickey Spillane's hard-boiled, macho, (and at the time popular) pulp fiction.

A third film that struck me deeply when I was 12-years-old was "All The Young Men" (1960), starring Sidney Poitier as Sergeant Eddie Towler, a black soldier in Korea who has to take over the leadership of a battered, decimated, all-white platoon, some of whose members are outright racists. In other words, he has to do two extremely difficult things: (1) Finish the dangerous mission, And (2) protect his men, even though one of them is a stereotypical, southern paleo-racist---he even saves the life of that Neanderthal and shatters his prejudices. What's at stake here, of course, is the integration of the United States's armed forces, so the burden on Towler's shoulders---as one of the first shock troops for integration---is to acquit himself with honor,

dignity, even nobility for the sake of his people, regardless of the outrageous obstacles placed in his way. (For 33 years, I kept Towler in mind when I taught at the University of Washington.) In some scenes, young Towler is struggling with the racial and military burden placed on him, with a statue of the Buddha in the background. After seeing that movie, I walked out of the theater in 1960 thinking Towler in that story was who I wanted to be when I grew up. (And maybe in this description of the film you can hear echoes of Rutherford Calhoun after the Africans revolt on the slave ship, *The Republic*, in *Middle Passage*).

I could list scores of movies that I, as a screen-and-teleplay writer for 20 years, admire for both professional and personal reasons: "Unforgiven" (1992) for the relentless intelligence of its screenplay; "Amadeus" (1984) for F. Murray Abraham's portrayal of composer Antonio Salieri; "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" (1969) for its use of a Depression-era dance marathon as a powerful metaphor for capitalism (Jane Fonda is memorable in this film: strong, cynical, and doomed). I should probably add two Sam Peckinpaw films, "The Wild Bunch" (1969) and "Straw Dogs" (1971)---OK, I admit it: I like a lot of well-done guy movies---Ang Lee's "Pushing Hands" (1992), which is about an elderly Tai Chi Chuan master and his family problems when he comes to America (Believe me, it's hard to write a good, character-driven martial arts story, but this film achieves that); and a big library of great science fiction films that have been my guilty (well, maybe not so guilty) pleasure since childhood because that sub-genre at its best can tilt toward the philosophical, the imaginative, and remind us of the great mystery of the universe that envelops us.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [5:04 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/at-movies-with-charles-johnson.html>

Saturday, January 29, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON AND THE BEATS



GARY SNYDER AND ALLEN GINSBERG

I have always had the greatest respect and admiration for Gary Snyder, who is our iconic Buddhist American poet. In my opinion, he is the genuine article, unique, a person of pioneering courage, who is of great importance for the East-West dialogue. My respect for some of the other well-known Beats who said they were Buddhist is slightly more cautious. They were certainly pioneers, too, the first American writers to inject Buddhism into the popular consciousness at a time, the 1950s, when this country did not have the wealth of first-rate Dharma teachers and reliable translations of canonical texts that arrived over the next half a century. So for their ground-breaking effort we must thank them. But after a lifetime of studying Buddhism, and practicing on my cushion for thirty years, I think some of the Beats were not quite as rigorous and clear about what it means to live the daily life of a lay Buddhist who has taken the 10 Precepts (or vows), an *upasaka* or *upasika*, or as an ordained monk, as I might want them to be. But this is often a problem with the first wave of any new movement: it can be raw, requiring refinement; it is a first utterance that needs the dialectic of other voices and dialogue to sort out the initial mistakes or misinterpretations that may have been made.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [3:36 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/charles-johnson-and-beats.html>

Sunday, January 30, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON IN SAN FRANCISCO



In 1981, I lived in San Francisco from mid-June through mid-December (I was on my first sabbatical from UW that year, after receiving early tenure and promotion in three years), working as one of two writer/producers hired for the second season of KQED's dramatic series about a black family, "Up and Coming" (a sort of precursor to the later "Cosby" show.) I lived alone in a small, efficiency unit at John Muir Apartments---they had a terrific weight room for the residents---with the barest of essentials (no television, a fold-out bed/sofa, a dinner table that doubled as my writing desk, and my typewriter). Those were transformative months that saw my mother's death, my daughter's birth, and also the death of Lawrence Lariar, who helped me to become a professional, prolific cartoonist in my teens. When not at KQED, writing episodes or rewriting those we farmed out to free-lancers (as well as two scripts I was writing for WGBH in Boston, one of which was a version of the Frankie and Johnnie story intended to be a vehicle for Aretha Franklin and Glynn Turman), I trained religiously in the evenings at the main Choy Li Fut kung-fu school of grandmaster Doc Fai Wong, immersed myself deeply in the daily practice of meditation, and the study each night of a small library's worth of Buddhist texts and other works of Eastern philosophy. It was like being on an intense, spiritual retreat for six months, or living as a hermit.

And since then I've always liked San Francisco, which in so many ways is similar to Seattle: both are built on seven hills, both once burned to the ground, and both have populations that are racially and culturally diverse. Furthermore, it's a beautiful city. I did make a trip to City Lights Bookstore (I had no car and always took public transportation) but, as I said, I generally retreated from the social world for that half a year to work on PBS teleplays, and work on my(self).

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [3:13 AM](#)

<http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/01/charles-johnson-in-san-francisco.html>

Monday, January 31, 2011

THE WOMEN AND MR. JOHNSON



I've been an avid, unconditional supporter of the Women's Movement since the 1960s. Furthermore, I'm the father of an artist daughter who is also a business woman, owner and operator of Faire Gallery/Cafe in Seattle, which I support by putting my money where my mouth is. In my first published novel, *Faith and the Good Thing* (1974), the protagonist is Faith Cross, a beautiful, idealistic, Candide-like seeker of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful; and the Swamp Woman in that novel knows Western philosophy like Bill Gates knows computers. I suspect Faith is probably the first heroine in a very robust black, philosophical novel. (I wrote that book while finishing my master's degree in philosophy.) In fact, the feel or spirit of that early novel is one of misandry, or hatred of men.

But like the men in my later novels and stories, the women range the full gamut from wise to not wise, enlightened to unenlightened, attractive to repulsive, noble to petty, mature to immature--- just like people in the real world. You have the protagonist in "A Soldier for the Crown" in *Soulcatcher and Other Stories*, a character black women tell me they like; and Amy Griffith in *Dreamer* is a paragon of strength and virtue, as is Isadora Bailey in *Middle Passage* (who is overweight when that novel opens, yes, and I do get criticized for that detail, but is anyone going to argue that obesity isn't a problem for Americans, black and white, male and female?) By contrast, Flo Hatfield in *Oxherding Tale* (1982) is my version of the courtesan Kamala in Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha* (*kama* means desire in Sanskrit): a slave-owner who sexually exploits the black men she keeps in bondage. A person who, a Buddhist would say, is herself enslaved to hedonism, vanity, and selfishness, just as any man in a position of (white) privilege

and power might be. Yet Flo has her scars from living in a patriarchal society, *i.e.*, a humanity that has been denied, and reasons for being as she is.

I never create characters, male or female, on the basis of ideology, or political agendas, or pre-established meanings. My novels are not political tracts or agitprop, nor are my characters one-dimensional, one-note creations. I don't flinch from realistic details that deliver the individuality and uniqueness of my characters in their emotional nakedness, warts and all. To write well is to explore all the dimensions, "good" and "bad," of a character, the same way a good biographer (or scientist) explores his or her subject. So I can't really say what a feminist scholar will think about the women in my fiction. But I *will* say, as a literary artist and teacher of the craft of fiction-writing for thirty-three years, that character is the engine of storytelling, and *fidelity* to individual characters in all their complexity, ambiguity, contradictions, and granularity of detail is the antidote to mediocre fiction in which characters are no more than emblematic of a pre-fabricated, abstract idea.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [2:54 AM](#)

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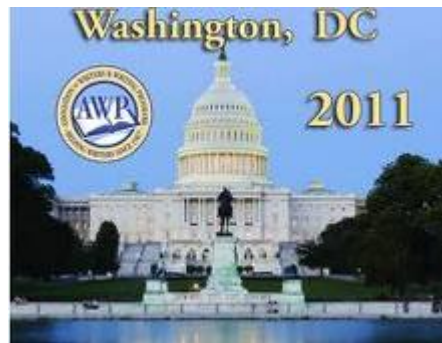
Monday, January 31, 2011

CJ remembers AWP

I worked quite extensively over the years with the Associated Writing Programs, the organization for creative writers at our universities and colleges. I served as director for AWP's Award Series in Fiction (1979-81); was editor for INTRO 10 (August, 1979), one of their yearly collections; and was also a board member (1983-86). And last year (in Denver) one of my talented and hard-working former MFA students, Zachary Watterson, arranged a beautiful tribute for my work as a teacher of writing for over thirty years.

Artists tend to be lone wolves, especially writers like me. But I know from experience that writer's organizations like AWP (or the Writer's Guild) tremendously help those of us who are literary artists in the academic world, where people in the arts are often misunderstood by administrators and their colleagues devoted exclusively to scholarship.

We come together at the annual AWP conference and share approaches to pedagogy, listen to readings and lectures by America's most distinguished writers, support small press publications, encourage new and emerging talent, and also enjoy social gatherings with friends we haven't seen in awhile. In addition to that, an organization allows us to accomplish things too big for us to do individually.



For those reasons, I have been and will continue to be a supporter of writer's groups, organizations, and any institution that nurtures the humanities, willing to contribute my time and energy *gratis* to help them in whatever way I can serve.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [10:44 AM](#)

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