

# Sunday, May 1, 2011

## CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT LIBRARIES

I've enjoyed a life-long love affair with libraries all over the world. In fact, it sometimes seems to me that I've lived most of my life in the stacks. For example, as a kid I hauled home armfuls of books on drawing and the history of illustration from the Evanston Public Library. I began writing my first novel, *Faith and the Good Thing*, in 1972. For that novel I read 80 books on magic and folklore---all of them came, of course, from the library of the college I was attending. The next novel, *Oxherding Tale*, I began in 1975 when I was working on my doctorate in philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. After I finished teaching and taking my own classes, I went to the library and speed-read every book on American slavery that they had on their shelves.



When I wrote *Middle Passage*, I once again turned to the library in order to immerse myself for six years in the literature of the sea, nautical dictionaries, and even esoteric studies of Cockney slang, which helped me to individuate the language of the sailors on the 19th century slave ship I was writing about. And even before I wrote the first sentence for my last novel, *Dreamer*, I spent two years at libraries researching the history of the Civil Rights Movement, biographies of Martin Luther King Jr., and critical examinations of his speeches, his sermons, and his intellectual development.

I mention these examples because my process as a writer has always demanded massive research before and during the creation of a novel or a non-fictional book, and that would have been impossible without the institutions that preserve human culture, thought, and experience in written form.



During the last 30 years I've had the pleasure of visiting one of the oldest libraries in Europe, one located in the little Portuguese town of Coimbra, in a small building with no windows so that sunlight would not damage the rows of manuscripts that dated back well before the Middle Ages. In northern Thailand, I walked shoeless through Theravada Buddhist libraries that preserved classic works of Buddhism on palm-leaf scrolls that were at least a millennium-old. And closer to home, in the special collections section of the library at Indiana University, I had the unusual experience of holding in my hands a Buddhist scroll written on parchment. That day, in that library, I had to wear plastic gloves because the ink used a thousand years ago on that scroll had been mixed with poison. The purpose of that was to kill anyone who did not belong to the monastic hierarchy, and to keep spiritual knowledge and wisdom in the hands of a few.

Until the modern era, it was not unusual for people in the East and the West to withhold knowledge from the common man. This was especially true in the United States after slave rebellions like that of Nat Turner and the Stono Rebellion. Black people were whipped if they tried to learn how to read. Whites feared that if slaves could read, they were more likely to come across abolitionist material and rebel. They would read, reflect, and question their situation. So slaves had to be kept illiterate.



In 1832, Alabama enacted a law that fined anyone between \$250 and \$500 if they tried to educate a slave. In North Carolina in 1835, the public education of black Americans was prohibited. Whites in the slave-holding South also feared black people who could write and

therefore communicate with each other. One law in South Carolina said this: “Be it therefore Enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That all and every Person and Persons whatsoever, who shall hereafter teach or cause any slave to be taught to write, or shall use or employ any slave as a Scribe in any Manner of Writing whatsoever, hereafter taught to write, every such offense forfeit the sum of One Hundred Pounds current money.”

So I think there is an intimate relationship between literacy and democracy. Between democracy and the free public library especially, which is one of the finest achievements of this country. Like any American, I complain on April 15. But some things are so essential for a nation to call itself civilized---like libraries---that they require a community's collective support through a contribution from each of us (*i.e.*, taxes). The return on that investment, in both principle and practice (as that relates to a nation's level of literacy), is too great to be measured.



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [2:39 AM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/charles-johnson-talks-about-libraries.html>

# Monday, May 2, 2011

## CHARLES JOHNSON: STAGE AND SCREEN

Over the years some of my stories have been staged, filmed, and adapted for radio. Let me work slowly through some of these things as I look over my curriculum vitae.

The novel *Faith and the Good Thing* was adapted as a play by Keli Garrett and staged by City Lit Theater and Chicago Theater Company at Bailiwick Arts Center (March 16--April 20, 1995) and Chicago Theater Company (April 21--May 28, 1995). That play received nominations in five categories for the first annual Black Theater Alliance Awards and won the first two: Best Actress (Lydia Gartin), Best Supporting Actress (Lisa Biggs), with nominations for Best Supporting Actor, Best Lighting Design, and Best Play.

Among my short stories, "Menagerie" was performed as a play (five amateur performances) at the Ruth Taylor Theater at Trinity University in 1991, directed by Shobie Partos. It was also presented on "Short Subjects" by Symphony Space on National Public Radio, read by Gloria Foster (June 3, 1995) and included in Volume 9 of "Selected Shorts: A Celebration of the Short Story," a two-cassette audio tape sold by Symphony Space. My story "A Soldier for the Crown" was also included in 2004 in "Selected Shorts: Handsome and Lonesome," read by Ruben Santiago-Hudson. "Cultural Relativity" was made into a short, funny film entitled "In His Kiss" by David S. DeCrane and shown at the Newport Beach Film Festival on April 17, 2004.



The story "China" was adapted by film-maker Jeffrey Wray as a one-hour drama that aired on PBS. Wray wrote a fine screenplay for this, but I found his casting and directing to be disappointing so I don't talk much about this adaptation.

Regarding *Dreamer*, I've been approached by actor Jon Voight (he wanted to be involved but not to act because he didn't see a role for himself in it) and folks at a New York film company about filming that novel but, as with many Hollywood conversations, the right deal package didn't materialize.

In the early '90s I sat for four days in a Seattle studio recording the first 3-hour audio-cassette for *Middle Passage* (Penguin/Highbridge); the most recent recorded book version is narrated by Dion Graham (Griot Audio).

As for Hollywood, *Middle Passage* has been optioned three times. First by Tri-Star, then Interscope. On those occasions, first Warrington, then Reginald Hudlin were attached to the projects, and I wrote two screenplay adaptations for those studios. Tri-Star didn't work out for us because their executives wanted to remove the Allmuseri god from the novel, which Warrington and I refused to do. The screenplay for Interscope was the best since we added a whole new act in which we see the sailors on the Republic---but not Rutherford Calhoun---raid the village of the Allmuseri and, after a breathtaking battle, leave their ancestral home in smoldering ruins, then lead the survivors away (along with Rutherford) in chains. That is *not* in the novel. The third option was at Warner Brothers, where John Singleton wanted to direct it. Some years ago, he called me out of the clear blue to tell me he'd "finally" found his choice among actors to play the important role of Capt. Ebenzer Falcon, Peter Dinklage.

I think maybe one day *Middle Passage* will be filmed, perhaps during my lifetime or after my life is over. It's now 21 years old, in its 20th printing from Scribner, and is taught widely at colleges and universities each year. But Hollywood has never filmed a black epic (As one of my UW colleagues once put it, *Middle Passage* begins as a picaresque, becomes an epic, and ends as a romance.) And bear in mind this would be a *very* expensive movie to make well, at least \$100 million (and that's a 1990s estimate made before foreign financing became so important for American movies). At that cost, a studio puts itself at risk for that year. And this story presents two, difficult production challenges. First, it's a period drama, which means all costumes, props, etc., must be circa the mid-1800s. (Think of how painstakingly James Cameron worked to get that accurate, right down to the silverware in *Titanic*.) Secondly, as a sea adventure story, it has to be shot on the water, and we know how difficult the elements can be to work with during a shoot. I would *not* want to see it done badly (or cheaply) as a film.

However, as we know, once an author signs away his film rights, he has no control whatsoever over how his story will be interpreted or how the film will turn out---it helps if the author does the screenplay and/or serves in some capacity as a "producer," but even that sort of participation is no guarantee he'll be pleased with the final product, for in so many cases the story may be basically seen by a studio as a vehicle for its star or someone the studio executives want to do business with (Remember Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and how Ken Kesey had his name removed from that film?) No one ever sets out to make a bad movie, but it's rare when all the aspects of film-making involved---the right casting, a director with a literary sensibility like Stanley Kubrick, a well-written screenplay, good editing, and funding---come together in a perfect combination to create an outstanding film. To be honest, I think it's something of a miracle when that does happen.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [2:03 AM](#)  
<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/charles-johnson-stage-and-screen.html>

**Tuesday, May 3, 2011**

**CHARLES JOHNSON ON FAMILY WISDOM AND WORK**

When I was growing up in the racially segregated 1950s, there was a *very* common saying among black Americans that I heard over and over again. The saying was this: "A black person will have to work twice as hard as a white person to get half as far."



I remember that when I first heard this from family members, it struck me as being *unfair*. But then I thought, "Who says life has to be fair?" So I did the math. If I had to work twice as hard to get half as far as my white contemporaries, then I'd have to work four times as hard to break even with them, and six times as hard to truly excel. That meant no days off. No vacations. No partying. Those were luxuries the people of an embattled, oppressed race could not afford. (I recall my late chairman of English at UW, Robert Heilman, once saying to me, "You're always relaxed but you never *really* relax." I had to laugh because he was right and had figured me out.)

Being a product of the 1950s, I took this "law" of black American life during the era of segregation to heart. (I recall reading an interview with Condoleezza Rice where she said she heard the exact same words from her family members.) So it had been, I knew, for all the black people I admired like Du Bois, the Tuskegee Airmen, and all my black predecessors in this country. So why should it be any different for me? The harshness of the black reality that gave rise to that formula softened in the 1960s, especially when policies supporting affirmation action were in place, but by that time the racial "law" that applied to being black in Jim Crow America had sunk into my DNA.

It became part of my make-up because I had great examples of hard-working black men in my life, starting with my father who at one point in the 1960s held down three jobs to support my mother and me---a day job doing construction, an evening job as a night watchman for the City of Evanston, and on the weekends he helped an elderly white couple do repairs on their home. Watching him work this way for our family, seeing his frugality, religious piety, and the simplicity of his pleasures as well as his good spirit as he labored, I just understood that I would always have to multi-task; to embrace the meaning of sacrifice; to work in two or three artistic and/or academic disciplines; and to hold down daily more than one job during my lifetime---and all that without complaint or whining, as he did. He was a proud man, was my father. And he took pride in his work more than anything else. (Later, I would see that formulation for his life in Sartre's phrase "Existence precedes essence" and the Buddhist concept of karma.) When I was

growing up, he wasn't my "role model." He was my hero. Both my wife and I were struck by how much he was like the character played by Morgan Freeman in the film, *Driving Miss Daisy*. All during my adult life until his death at 81 seven years ago, I thanked him for teaching me "how" to work, and for making me see that a man defines himself, first and foremost, through his deeds.



I remember when Dad and I were working together on something or doing any chore---like unloading items from a truck, for example---and we'd come to the last item that required our labor and sweat. A big smile would come across my father's face when he saw this final item; he'd take his cigar out of his mouth, and he'd say, "*That's the one I was looking for.*"

That's how I feel when I reach the last page of anything I write. Or finish the ink-work on a drawing. Or the last move in a martial form. Or the last bench-press I have to push into the air. Or the last class I taught in a career of 33 years in higher education, with my father's voice whispering up through my memory: *That's the one I was looking for.*

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [3:10 AM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/charles-johnson-on-family-wisdom-and.html>

## Wednesday, May 4, 2011

### THE UNPUBLISHED WORK OF CHARLES JOHNSON

Occasionally, I'm asked about the six unpublished novels I wrote between 1970 and 1972 before *Faith and the Good Thing*. I should use this opportunity to clarify some things about them that have raised questions in the minds of some readers, students, and literary scholars.



I came to novel-writing with a background in journalism (my bachelor's degree) and writing for newspapers in Chicago and southern Illinois. Creating copy quickly is something every journalist learns to do, and he (or she) has no problem with filing 3 or 4 stories a week. That was the training I brought to novel-writing. I knew I could write 10 pages a day, 5 days a week (taking a break on weekends to relax, do research and/or rewrite), and thereby produce a 300-page manuscript in six weeks. My master's thesis, for example, was written over five days, 10 pages a day; and, later in life, I typically held myself to a 5-page-a-day schedule when writing screen-and-teleplays.

The first of those six unpublished novels had the working title, *The Last Liberation*, and it was an exploration of Eastern philosophy set in a Chicago kung-fu school like Chi Tao Chuan of the Monastery, the *kwoon* I trained at in 1967 during the Chicago "Dojo Wars" when I was 19-years-old. The second book was an early version of *Middle Passage*, i.e., written as the log kept by a white captain on a slave ship (The research for that was done during a black history course I took as an undergraduate). The third novel was a black, family drama. The fourth, fifth and sixth novels were a 959-page trilogy (I was shooting for 1,000-pages but ended it early so my wife and I could spend some quality time together) about the childhood, young manhood, and middle-age of a black musician. He was a pianist. I took lessons on the piano around that time with a black friend who was a musician and in the Music Department at Southern Illinois University; for years we always had a piano in our home in Seattle, first so I could sometimes practice, then for my kids when they had music lessons.

All these early books were written quickly, and before I learned the proper approach for revising literary fiction. (By the way, these E-Channel Posts are, I should note, as close as I ever get to releasing first-draft material, so please be forgiving, especially for the occasional typos Ethelbert and I miss.) Yet, there is a story I can tell about Book Four in this series of what I call "apprentice novels" that might be worth sharing.

Book Four, about the childhood of a musician, was accepted in early 1973 for publication by a new, start-up publishing company in New York when I was only a couple of chapters into

writing *Faith and the Good Thing*. I was faced with a dilemma. Every young writer wants to be published. But *what* one first publishes is important for one's "career" (Yes, I just used that word even though I dislike it.) There was no certainty I would publish *Faith* when it was done (or even if I could finish it), but here with one of the earlier manuscripts was a "bird in the hand," so to speak. The publishers liked it because, as they said, it reminded them of the writing of James Baldwin. I felt torn, for with *Faith* I'd found for the first time the beginnings of my own voice and vision, as well as a way to deploy large amounts of philosophy in a work of fiction. With that still in-progress work, I'd moved far beyond the earlier six novels.

John Gardner was looking over my shoulder during the nine months (October, 1972 through June, 1973) I wrote *Faith* (He was the only creative writing teacher I had since Marie Claire Davis when I was a junior in high school), so I asked him, "What do *you* think I should do?"

His answer was wise: "If you think that later you're going to have to climb over the earlier book, don't publish it."

I say his answer was wise because a debut novel tends to define a young writer. Reviewers look at it, and think, "OK, this shows us what he can do and can't do. Here are his strengths and limitations and, rightly or wrongly, they tell us what to expect from him in the future." It's important, I believe, for a literary writer's first book to be what I call a "performance novel," a demonstration of all the skill and craft he (or she) has learned up to the time of the book's composition. Furthermore, James Baldwin had his own particular vision of life; in 1973 I was developing my individual and literary sense of the world, with its own vocabulary and grammar. I had no interest in being judged imitative. So, after taking the deepest of breaths, I wrote to the publisher and withdrew that fourth novel (yes, that *was* painful to do), gambling that *Faith* would turn out well, which I suppose it did because 37 years later it is still in print.

The world will never see those first six novels I wrote in two years. That's why I call them "apprentice novels"---they were, in my view, simply preparations for the work that would come later.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [11:06 PM](#)  
<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/unpublished-work-of-charles-johnson.html>

**Friday, May 6, 2011**

**CHARLES JOHNSON ON BIOGRAPHY AND BRIGHT MOMENTS**

*In coming, nothing is gained; in going, nothing is lost.* Those are words I have heard at Zen memorial services...*life and death are events in time with no self attached to them.*" Posted by Barbara O'Brien on About.com Guide, May 2, 2011.



E. Ethelbert Miller asks "Is anyone working on a biography about you?" I'm happy to say, "No." And I hope no one *ever* wastes their precious time doing that.

I've always enjoyed reading biographies of fiction writers, because I've learned much from them. But I see my own life as quiet, disciplined, boring---and that's exactly way I want to keep it. I've always preferred to restrict Drama to the pages of my stories and keep it out of my everyday existence; and I do love and identify with the way some people call our president "No Drama Obama."

In my teens when I first studied Taoism, I was powerfully impressed by the image in that philosophy of passing through life and "leaving no footprints." We find a similar idea in Buddhism---Shakyamuni was never himself depicted visually during the early days of Buddhism, but instead was simply represented by his footsteps on the Path (or the Way, as a Taoist would say), or so I've read. In other words, we're all just pilgrims passing through this plane. Basically, my life has always been devoted to work and family. That's not the stuff that makes for an exciting, page-turning reading experience.

However, if someone *did* squander their time on earth writing a biography of me, and wanted to know what the "defining" moments of my life were, I'd have to say there were a few. One was when I sold my first six illustrations for the catalog of a Magic Product Company in Chicago when I was 17-years-old, and finally got *paid* for doing art. (I still have one of the dollars from that assignment framed under glass and on my study wall; there were many times when I was broke and hungry and tempted to spend it, but I'm glad I didn't.)

There is also what I consider to be my "rite-of-passage" as a young man on the night of my first rank test at Chi Tao Chuan of the Monastery in 1967 when I earned a double-promotion, primarily for my sparring. (Our teacher felt my instinctive fighting style resembled *Pau Kua*.) I spent a month every night in the basement of my dorm drilling the moves I knew I we would be tested on, for example throwing 45 punches to the front, back and side in 10 seconds---the guys in the dorm used to time me with a stopwatch when I demonstrated that. And it seemed we sparred forever on the night we were tested---one against one, and three against one---all of us

pushed to exhaustion. Then *beyond* exhaustion. I thought I'd be killed in that very rough *kwoon* in the days before safety rules and regulations existed widely in American martial art schools. (Knockouts were common; one student killed a man on the streets of Chicago after only two weeks of studying there, which is why I decided that was the place for me.) I didn't care about pain because I wanted to study this. And that was the night I learned to "let go" the fear of death or injury---or the fear of anything else in this world.

Two other milestones would be the night I met my wife on a hot summer evening in 1968 and a voice in my head said, "This is It, you don't have to look anymore," then the day of our marriage two years later. I count the days our children were born as two "peak experiences."

Also the day the president of SUNY-Stony Brook handed me my Ph.D. in Philosophy, the attaining of which had been my dream since I was 18-years-old. And finally, of course, there was the night I received the National Book Award in 1990 for *Middle Passage*, and had the opportunity to read a tribute to Ralph Ellison, who was at the ceremony with his wife Fanny.

You don't need a biography for those peak moments; you can do them all in one essay or a short story.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [3:37 AM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/charles-johnson-on-biography-and-bright.html>

**Friday, May 6, 2011**

## **BLACKS AND BUDDHISM/ BUDDHISM AND BLACKS**

When some Americans are in the presence of a person who is black and Buddhist, you can see the cognitive dissonance---the confusion--right there in their eyes as they struggle to process this information that so rudely unsettles their cultural and racial presuppositions.



Over forty years I've seen people react to this phenomenon with emotions that range from fear to anger, as if they had somehow been personally betrayed, insulted or threatened; and I've seen others who know something about Buddhism delight in this revelation, as if to say, *And why not?* But just as James Weldon Johnson stated in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* that, "I believe it is a fact that the colored people in this country know and understand the white people better than the white people understand them," so too, I have to say that the vast majority of Americans are *very* poorly informed about the theory and practice of Buddhism.

Over 2600 years, many branches or traditions of Buddhism have sprung from the bodhi tree. One of these that is especially attractive to black American Buddhists is Soka Gakkai (Nichiren), which claims to have approximately 15,000 black practitioners, among them Georgia Congressman Hank Johnson, Tina Turner, and the jazz great Herbie Hancock. My sister-in-law in Chicago is a practitioner of this school that also attracts a large number of Hispanics. Unlike other Buddhist traditions, Soka Gakkai is proactive and proselytizes, seeking out members in urban areas with large black populations (practitioners urge their friends to join)---this is very different from the image most convert American Buddhists have of Japanese Zen traditions where, for example, stories are told of a spiritual seeker made to sit for a full day or two outside a zendo before he is finally admitted, and then only at first as a visitor. (In other words, you need to show that you *really* need and want this.)

Soka Gakkai members chant chapters from the *Lotus Sutra*, and if you have ever been lucky enough to be in a room where they are chanting *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* in unison you will experience anew the elemental power of sound as their collective voices move like a strong, cleansing wind or an ocean wave through every cell and fibre of your body. Although I tilt toward the Theravada tradition, and took a lay person's formal vows in the Japanese Soto Zen tradition founded by Dogen, I have a deep appreciation for the way Herbie Hancock described his practice in a 2007 interview for Beliefnet:

"The idea of cause and affect, which *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* is about, made sense to me," he said. "I'm a guy that's always been attracted to science---and cause and effect is what science is

about...The cool thing is that jazz is really a wonderful example of the great characteristics of Buddhism and the great characteristics of the human spirit. Because in jazz we share, we listen to each other, we respect each other, we are creating in the moment. At our best we're non-judgmental. If we let judgment get in the way of improvising, it always screws us up. So we take whatever happens and try to make it work...At the same time---and just think about this---within the life of a human being is the universe. So, we all have the universe inside at our core."



HERBIE HANCOCK

Those words don't sound as if they are coming from a person who sees himself as a "victim," do they? Such a conceptualization poisons the mind and the human spirit. Mr. Hancock, like all Buddhists, is not mired in a past that cannot be recovered or a future that will never come, but instead works to anchor himself "in the moment." And he is not ensnared in what black Buddhist teacher Lama Rangdrol describes as the debilitation, bitter, polarized and cliched "mentality of an angry black man." Added to that, Hancock's comparison of his egoless listening and non-judgmental approach as a jazz musician to the Dharma reminds us that Buddhist practice has much in common with the process we associate with creating art, which demands an openness to all things. (Buddhism, some commentators have pointed out, *is* a form of artistic practice with your life itself being the material you are shaping.)

What unites black Buddhists, regardless of the tradition they belong to, is the desire to be free. *Truly* free. The practice of Buddhism is the practice of life itself. Last week I had the great pleasure of reading, then endorsing a book entitled *Tell Me Something about Buddhism: Questions and Answers for the Curious Beginner*, by Zenju Earthlyn Manuel, a black Soto Zen Priest.



ZENJU EARTHLYN MANUEL

Her book, which includes a foreword by Thich Nhat Hahn, will be published in October by Hampton Roads. In the future when anyone asks me questions about black people and

Buddhism, I plan to simply tell them to buy Zenju's beautiful book. She is acutely aware of how we can be enslaved by the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. By the concepts and words that obscure our experience of reality. Just reading her clear, beautiful and inspiring answers to questions about Buddhist practice quiets and calms the mind as quickly as the wood striking wood sound of a *han* calling us to awakening. (In Japanese Soto Zen a *han* is a mallet and piece of wood that are struck to summon practitioners to the zendo). Each page is rich in wisdom, as when one of her teachers points out that, "All emotions are from the past."

Meditate for just a moment on *that*.



Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [9:41 PM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/blacks-and-buddhism-buddhism-and-blacks.html>

# Sunday, May 8, 2011

## PROGRESS IN LITERATURE

"One can no longer *write* African-American literature, any more than one can currently write Elizabethan literature." Kenneth W. Warren.

"Progress in Literature" was an article I was commissioned to write for a book entitled *Making Progress: Essays in Progress and Public Policy*, edited by C. Leigh Anderson and Janet W. Looney (Lexington Books, 2002). It is reprinted in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing* (Scribner, 2003).

In that work I argue that technical and thematic progress in literature can easily be demonstrated if we trace, for example, the English novel from the 18th century work of Samuel Richardson and Daniel Defoe through later practitioners of the form such as Fielding, Sterne, and 20th century writers like Faulkner and Hemingway. The same evolution can be demonstrated for the modern short story, beginning with Poe's almost single-handed creation of the form, and tracing it through a period of formulaic writing circa 1900 to the revolt against that formalism in the work of such writers as D.H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, Katherine Anne Porter, James Joyce, Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor, and others.

There is no question that in terms of craft we are better writers today than most of our predecessors, and much credit for this progress must be given to the more than 300 writing programs that have sprung up since the end of World War II; and to writers themselves becoming teachers while at the same time democratizing and de-mystifying the creative process as it pertains to literary fiction.

But Ethelbert has asked me to tailor this question specifically to black American literature, a request that should allow me to refine and expand a bit upon "Progress in Literature."



Every teacher (or student) of black American literature discovers very early that this body of work was created largely during the periods of slavery and segregation. That is the *ground* from which so much of it---slave narratives, protest novels---arises. And how could it be otherwise? In *What is Literature?*, when Sartre discusses Richard Wright in the 1940s, he says, "if an American Negro finds that he has a vocation as a writer, he discovers his subject at the same time. He is the man who sees the whites from outside, who assimilates the white culture from the outside, and each of whose books will show the alienation of the black race within American society."

The protest novel, as Sartre indicates, was understandably taken to be the form *sine qua non* for black writing. Famous debates raged over this issue, leading to classic essays like James Baldwin's "Everybody's Protest Novel," and Ralph Ellison's "The World and the Jug." Both those black authors (and many others) wished to move beyond the narrow constraints placed upon black writing in the segregation era, although this *was* the sort of black novel liberal or progressive white readers were most interested in seeing from black authors: the kind, as Sartre says, that "gives society *a guilty conscience*; he (the black writer) is thereby in a state of perpetual antagonism toward the conservative forces which are maintaining the balance he needs to upset."

But, as I argued in a recent, widely-read essay, "The End of the Black American Narrative" (*The American Scholar*, Summer 2008), we are now over 40 years into the post-Civil Rights period. Has black American literature changed? Has it "progressed" in terms of reflecting the new 21st century realities and experiences of black Americans?

Without mentioning my essay, Kenneth W. Warren, a professor of English at the University of Chicago, published a piece entitled "Does African-American Literature Exist?" in the February 24, 2011 issue of *The Chronicle Review*. He explained that his aim was to "make a claim that runs counter to much of literary scholarship." His claim is this:

"African-American literature was the literature of a distinct historical period, namely the era of constitutionally sanctioned segregation known as Jim Crow...Like it or not, African-American literature was a Jim Crow phenomenon, which is to say, speaking from the standpoint of a post-Jim Crow world, African-American literature is history. While one can (and students of American literature certainly should) write *about* African-American literature, one can no longer *write* African-American literature, any more than one can currently write Elizabethan literature."

Warren also points out that, "Writing in 1942 in the short-lived journal *Negro Quarterly: A Review of Negro Life and Culture*, edited by Angelo Herndon and Ralph Ellison, for example, the upstart young black critic Edward Bland lamented the lack of literary accomplishment among Harlem Renaissance authors in the 1920s: 'One of the outstanding features of the Negro novels that appeared during the twenties was their literary incompetence'."

Obviously, that complaint about *techné* and craft has been finally put to rest by a very large number of award-winning black authors who are master craftsmen and craftswomen. But the larger issue raised by Warren remains: Is there "progress" in the content of black literary fiction? And, more to point, is it even possible to write "black" literature anymore? As Warren says,

"Sever that connection (to slavery and Jim Crow), and works, however accomplished, would settle into the literary universe according to style, theme, genre, or whatever."

In other words, "black" literature in the early 21st century, the era of President Barack Obama, America's first black president, can be said to have progressed to the stage of being seen now as simply *human* literature. It was that before, of course, but today it is neither limited to the protest novel, nor does it bear the burden of having to somehow represent and speak for the experiences of an entire people in their liberation struggle. Do John Updike, Stephen King, John Gardner, or Joyce Carol Oates speak for all white people? Obviously not. Nor can it be said today that John Edgar Wideman, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Terry McMillan, Charles Johnson, Walter Mosley or any black writer working in 2011 speaks in an all-inclusive, exhaustive way about the so-called "black experience" which, as writer Reginald McKnight once put it, is "as polymorphous as the dance of Shiva."

All American writers, then, can only be approached today in terms of their individual voices and visions. And the quality of their literary and intellectual performances. That is the basis on which each will be experienced and judged. And isn't *that* the dangerous freedom---the progress---that writers during the Harlem Renaissance dreamed of having?

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [3:06 AM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/progress-in-literature.html>

**Tuesday, May 10, 2011**

**THE REAL FAITH AND THE GOOD THING**



*I will praise thee for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalms 139:14*

I'm a practicing Buddhist, but I grew up as an only child in a quietly pious Christian home and within the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest independent denomination among black churches, founded in 1816 by Rev. Richard Allen in Philadelphia. Faith was simply part of the fibre of our black American lives in the 1950s. The central *lived* "locations" of my early childhood were three: home, where I had loving, supportive, and unselfish parents; Ebenezer A.M.E. Church, where I embraced a religion that was two millennia old and shaped every aspect of Western civilization; and Noyes Elementary School, where the teachers in that integrated institution were first-rate, as they would be when I went to Evanston Township High School (it was often rated in the 1960s as the #1 public high school in America.) All three of these places were within short walking distance, and symbiotically nurtured each other.

Naturally, home was the foundation, a location my parents made a fun place to be, especially my Mom because she aspired to be a teacher and had an artistic sensibility (and sometimes taught Sunday school.) The black church provided a clear moral and spiritual vision as well as a community of people with shared values. And the school offered exciting knowledge about the wider world. This basic triad was essential for forming my values in the 1950s and a major influence on my future as a liberal humanist. No one point on this triad could adequately do all the work of the others. All three working together were necessary. I believe that if *one* of those elements in the triad had been removed, my early life would have been poorer for that, and less complete.

Never a night passed when I did not see my father, a strong black man who loved black people, on his knees in prayer before bedtime. (And my own kids can say that about me.) He was reliable, solid as a rock, a *guru* (the Sanskrit word means "too heavy to be moved"). When he died at age 81, he had *five* preachers at his funeral in rural South Carolina, and what one said in his eulogy let me know he knew my father very well. He said Dad was never in the choir, nor did he volunteer to be a deacon or on different committees. But he was *there* every Sunday (and apologized to the pastor if for some reason he couldn't make it), smiling as he absorbed the

sermons and loving it when the choir sang. (Some of my southern relatives have their own traveling gospel group and sell CDs of their work.) This pastor said my Dad never talked scripture or spoke of his faith. It was simply an integral part of his life. He'd work three jobs a week sometimes, but I remember that he told his white employers that he'd *never* work on Sunday because, as he put it, "Sunday was for church."

Given this background, I can confess---now that I'm retired----that my movement through the secular (and often anti-religious) academic and art worlds was sometimes less than easy. Indeed, sometimes it was downright hard, spiritually. I kept my liberal Christian background to myself when in college during the late 1960s, and during my 33 years in higher education (I do wear a cross, and once one of my now successful students, novelist Gary Hawkes, said to me after class, "That must be awfully *heavy* around your neck"). For me, there was always a moral "bright line" that I was conditioned not to cross, so often in the art and academic worlds I felt "*in* it but not *of* it." I'm sure my easy relationship with John Gardner had something to do with his being, as one critic put it, "shyly Christian."

My being a Buddhist was always much more "acceptable" in academic and artistic circles, especially to atheists, because that spiritual path makes no reference to God, and for that reason was originally classified as a "philosophy" not a religion by Christians when they first encountered it. (I think this initial Western classification has much truth to it.) Inwardly, I've always cringed whenever I found myself in the company of people who dump on or trash Christianity, and I've promised myself these days to politely---or maybe not so politely---leave the room whenever that kind of myopic intolerance rears its head. (Yet in my youth I often found myself arguing passionately, angrily, with dogmatic, fundamentalist Christians---who get on my *last* nerve---because they were dismissive of science and philosophy.) I probably pray silently a hundred times a day. When I tell a sick or suffering friend or former student that they will be in my prayers and meditations, I *mean* it. They will be in them *that* night.

So, like Dr. Jan Willis, who calls herself a "Baptist/Buddhist," and Thich Nhat Hahn, who has an image of Jesus on his meditation shrine in France and authored the best-selling book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, I'm really a product of two spiritual traditions, and I would never deny or reject my past. In Asia, you'll find quite a bit of spiritual blendings of this kind. And, of course, Buddhists are ontologically non-dualistic, and believe in the interdependence of all things.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [1:03 PM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/real-faith-and-good-thing.html>

**Friday, May 13, 2011**

**CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS ABOUT THE E-CHANNEL**



I'm trying to make sure with my answers that I provide information and details *not* present in the 6 critical books literary scholars have published about my work, or in the book of interviews that Jim McWilliams published.

For me, this has been---and still is---a great, rare opportunity to get "said" some things never said before, to set the record straight and clear up any misconceptions. In NYC, Nathaniel Nesmith gave to his students the post on "Progress in Literature" (I spoke with his students last Friday on Skype). So these posts are useful, not just for literary scholars, but also for students. Others have given to their students the "Craft and Revision" post.

I think you've started something original here that has potential. One of my agents says she enjoys seeing them every day when she gets up, because she's never before had this kind of look into a writer's life and thought. I know others must feel that way. Literary scholar Robert Abrams also told me that he enjoys them, especially the one on dogs.

If you line up people in future years to do this, I think you'll create a great deal of excitement. A historian. A poet. A film-maker. An actor. The sky is the limit. But you might want to get someone who is an old man like me with a lifetime of experience in his or her field. Can you imagine the kinds of questions you might ask Albert Murray? Or bell hooks? Or Jan Willis? Or an older black actor?

They could open up cultural history for readers. But they need to be people who can write and deliver copy---a brief essay---fast. I don't think this is the kind of feature where someone should labor on their prose as they would a novel, story or essay. That's why I said in a recent post that these brief essays are as close as I get to releasing first-draft material. You need to select people

who are motor-mouths. Conversationalists. Talky and chatty. But---and here's one last point--- the answers people give shouldn't be like diary entries. The answers should clarify some subject.

You'll notice how I try often to refer readers to books that relate to the subject of the question I'm trying to answer. I quote from others as often as I can. I DO ground many pieces in my biography, something that happened to me, but I always try to nudge the autobiographical into a larger cultural or philosophical context so the answer isn't just about me since that wouldn't, in my opinion, serve the greater good.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [10:06 PM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/charles-johnson-talks-about-e-channel.html>

**Sunday, May 15, 2011**

**CONSTRUCTING FICTION: THE WRITING OF "DR.KING'S REFRIGERATOR."**

My stories are often the result of the serendipity that occurs when several ideas are brought together in a thought-experiment. I know from much personal experience that I always need at least *three* good ideas in order for me to conceive, then execute a story---one potentially fertile idea at the beginning for the premise or conflict or what John Barth once called the "ground situation"; a second good idea in the middle that develops or complicates the conflict, often taking it in unexpected directions that surprise me; and, lastly, a good idea that arises in either Act One or Two that at last brings the story to rest.

An example of this kind of serendipitous discovery is "Dr. King's Refrigerator," one of my most reprinted stories. It was composed in 2002 for Humanities Washington's annual "Bedtime Stories" fund-raiser. The idea given to those of us who wrote a new story for the event that year was "a midnight snack."

I started writing the story---about 300 words---clumsily and uncertainly, having only a vague idea about a man awakening hungry at midnight. But who was this man? What was his biography or background? I didn't have answers for those questions (in fact, I didn't even have a "story" yet) so I decided to go to bed and start the story over again from scratch the next day.

On the second day I decided to take a phenomenological step back from the theme or prompt of "a midnight snack" by bracketing or setting aside my own assumptions and presuppositions about the subject. I wanted to regain what Buddhists call "Beginners Mind," with my cup (mind) emptied of what I thought I knew about food. I wanted an attitude of innocence. I asked myself, "What *is* a snack?" Well, obviously, it's food. But what is *food*? On my bookshelf I have a memento from my childhood, a complete set of *The World Book Encyclopedia* from 1956, which my parents bought for me. I grew up with them and as a kid I could lose myself for hours reading the entries. So I pulled from the bookshelf the volume marked "F," and began reading its ten pages on Food as Trade, Transportation of Food, Food Through the Ages, Religion and Food, etc. And what struck me more powerfully than anything else was how a meditation on food forced one to see the interconnectness of all life, and what Buddhists call dependent origination or *pratitya samputpada*.

So now I had a fresh perception of "food." But who would be the story's protagonist having such a perception? Suddenly, I knew. After more than a decade of immersing myself in studying Martin Luther King Jr., who believed that all life was "a network of mutuality," with all beings "tied in a single garment of destiny," I realized he was the perfect candidate for this. But *not* when he was a world-historical figure changing America during his 14 years as the nation's preacher and gadfly of the state. Rather, I saw him earlier in life, exactly a year before Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat, when he and his wife Coretta were newly married, and he was still a Ph.D. candidate, ABD (all but dissertation) and trying to make a good impression on his first job at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church.



MARTIN AND CORETTA

When the story opens he is enveloped by what one of my students once called a quotidian "chronic tension"---that unfinished dissertation and weekly sermons to write, a strangulation-tight schedule, and a nagging sense of guilt that his work is keeping him away from his wife (the conflict or story's first good idea). The second good idea is his epiphany about food when he opens his refrigerator. And the third arises at the story's end, which turns way from a meditation on the metaphysics of food to a more tender moment when the protagonist prioritizes his wife over his work.

All in all, this is one of the "quietest" (and for me most satisfying) philosophical fictions that I've published, one that offers an imagined version of King *before* he became internationally famous, politically powerful, and found himself at the white-hot center of America's racial agonies, which is the way he is portrayed in my novel *Dreamer*. Why do I like this story so much? Well, for the same reason I've always admired James Joyce's "The Dead" and Gabriel Conroy's revelation about his wife Gretta. Profound, perception-altering epiphanies that forever change our lives happen not exclusively during big public events recorded by the world's cameras, like the electrifying Birmingham campaign, but also and perhaps most often in the quieter, private spaces we move through---a Dublin hotel room, say, or a kitchen in Montgomery, Alabama at midnight.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [5:38 AM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/constructing-fiction-writing-of-drkings.html>

**Monday, May 16, 2011**

**ELLISON: STILL VISIBLE AFTER ALL THESE YEARS**



RALPH ELLISON

Let me talk a little bit about Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Sometimes I feel I know this book as well as I do my own work. I've been reading and teaching and writing about it since the late 1960s. Last year Intiman theater in Seattle was planning on having me adapt it for the stage. So I spent all of May, 2010 and part of June once again taking that novel apart page by page (I also did that in 1978 when WGBH in Boston hoped to adapt it as a series for PBS), image by image (Ellison, I realized for the first time, had a great affection for doll imagery: automatons that represented life lived inauthentically or artificially), scene by scene (it *is* a very violent story, with seven fight scenes plus a Harlem riot at the end), speech by speech, then putting it back together as a play (3 acts, 19 scenes). In addition to doing a 20-page, single-spaced Scene Outline and Synopsis, I also wrote with the help of dramaturge Marvin McAlister a 10-page, single-spaced outline for just the director, focusing on physical and psychological actions for all the characters in each scene. Unfortunately, Intiman theater lost the rights to do this novel as a stage adaptation, and because of financial problems recently canceled the rest of its season for 2011. A stage adaptation for the novel---or at least a workshop for a production that must be approved by trustees of the Ellison estate---will apparently be done now by Classic Theater of Harlem.

Clearly, *Invisible Man* is a segregation-era novel, but one that is distinguished from other fiction by black authors in the first half of the 20th century by its muscular exploration of ideas. Ellison himself in an interview some years after its publication expressed the feeling that it became socially and politically "dated" after the Civil Rights Movement swept away the experiential world of Jim Crow in which it is set. I can only agree with the author's assessment of his own work. But I don't think the adventurous engagement with perennially important questions in the novel has been tarnished by time. For more than 50 years *Invisible Man* has had a powerful influence on three generations of American writers and readers. Its place and importance in the canon of American literature is, like that of equally classic novels by Mark Twain and William Faulkner, secure.

But should it be the standard by which we measure black American writing in 2011? My answer is, no. And, yes. (Pardon me for being dialectical, and giving an answer that "boomerangs," as Ellison would say.) I would not tell writers today that they should embrace Ellison's *Invisible Man* as the *only* standard for literary excellence in black letters. But they would do well to embrace the underlying vision that inspires his reflections on the demanding enterprise we call serious literature, especially when he says, "The thing that Americans have to learn over and over again is that they are individuals and have the responsibility of individual vision."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [9:49 PM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/ellison-still-visible-after-all-these.html>

**Wednesday, May 18, 2011**

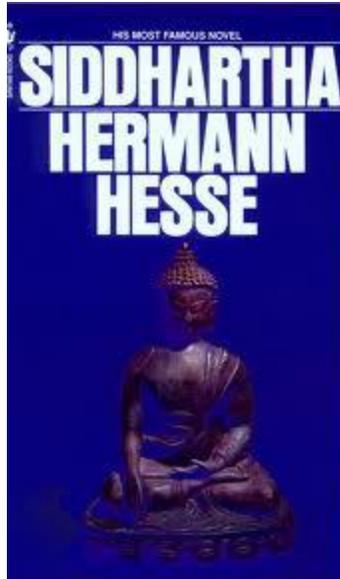
**HERMANN HESSE AND CHARLES JOHNSON**



The work of Hermann Hesse has been more influential on my fiction than I sometimes publicly admit. Literary scholars seldom recognize this connection, and I've never bothered to fully explain it, allowing them to emphasize instead the influence of my black American predecessors like Ellison (or John Gardner), as they wished to do.

However, during my student days, whenever I became interested in a writer, I binged on his work, buying and reading everything in print with his name on it. So in my library I have everything published by and about John Gardner, the complete works of Charles Dickens (an edition from the 1920s), all the published work of Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Jean Toomer, a full set of works by Mark Twain, and everything by D.H. Lawrence---the novels, short stories, essays, correspondence, poetry, and critical studies of those writers. Immersing myself in a single writer's entire *oeuvre* that way allowed me to see their performances at their best and not so best, and that's a good way for a young writer to unlock the mysteries of their techniques, style, and their individual visions. It also serves one well when called upon to write critically about their work.

So it was with Hermann Hesse when I was an undergraduate and translations of his work were very popular with young people on college campuses in the 1960s and '70s. A friend in philosophy gave me a copy of *Demian*, which I found to be only mildly interesting at the time. But that led me to *Siddhartha*, which connected perfectly with my own passion for Buddhism and eastern thought. It was a novel that haunted me because Hesse was working with one of the greatest philosophical stories ever told in human experience, in the East or the West: the life of Shakyamuni Buddha, an archetypal, spiritual adventure and quest for liberation. (Thomas Mann, Hesse's friend, also attempted an imaginative "journey to the east" in his story *The Transposed Heads: A Tale of India*, but I found this foray into eastern thought far less satisfactory than Hesse's work.) *Siddhartha* haunted me for years and years. I knew I had to respond to it from a black American perspective, and so I did in *Oxherding Tale*.



But *Siddhartha* is only one expression of Hesse's vision, albeit the most famous for American readers along with *Steppenwolf*; I found the others equally fascinating, and realized much of his spiritual probings (and sources) were similar to my own, in addition to his interest in exploring different literary forms like the *bundesroman* in *The Journey to the East*, and *künstlerroman*, the novel of an artist's growth to maturity in *Narcissus and Goldmund*. (As a younger man, I read and reread the excellent critical study by Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Novels of Hermann Hesse: A Study in Theme and Structure*, and often refer to it today.)

For example, in *Faith and the Good Thing*, when the protagonist Faith Cross contrasts the "magical thinking" of her storytelling father Todd to the materialistic and deterministic visions of the other men she encounters in that novel, "magical thinking" is a direct reference to a phrase by Hesse. And "magical thinking," an alternative to the reductive scientism that so troubled phenomenologist Edmund Husserl and others in the early 20th century, lead Hesse---as it did me---to the possibilities of the tale as one of the ancestral forms of fiction that free writers and readers from the constraints of a naive naturalism (*Faith*, for example, is told as a black American folk tale), a form that permits greater exploration of spiritual questions. (See *The Fairy Tales of Hermann Hesse*, trans. by Jack Zipes, Bantam Books, 1995.)

Thus at the end of *Magister Ludi* (aka "The Glass Bead Game"), which locked down Hesse's Noble prize for literature, we find poems and stories supposedly written by that novel's protagonist. One final, longish story, "The Indian Life," was inspired by a Hindu legend. Since I figured Hesse did not *own* that legend, I wrote my own version of it in "The Gift of the Osuo."

I could go on and on with these deliberate comparisons: for example, an existentialist speech by Chaym Smith in Chapter Five of *Dreamer* that echoes one in *Demian*; or one by the character Wendy Barnes in my story "Alethia" that is indebted to Hesse. But I've always been content to let literary scholars make these discoveries on their own. And if they don't? Well, that's OK, too.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [9:07 PM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/hermann-hesse-and-charles-johnson.html>

**Sunday, May 22, 2011**

**CHARLES JOHNSON IN TRANSLATION**



According to my records, my work has been translated into Dutch, French, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Spanish, Greek, South Korean, and Russian (with U.K. editions, too, of course). And I was recently contacted by someone who wants to translate them into Chinese. Predictably, the book most often translated is *Middle Passage*.

I've seldom had the opportunity to work with foreign translators of my books. A couple of times, but not many. That fact led to some foreign editions that are, to put this politely, problematic. For example, in 1986 the French publisher Flammarion did a translation of my novel *Oxherding Tale* as *Le Conte du bouvier*. They brought me to Paris for a week of book promotion, and at that time I had the pleasure of speaking with the delightful young woman, H el ene Devaux-Mini e, who did the translation. She explained to me that the novel's final chapter, entitled *Moksha*, had given her much trouble. (In Sanskrit, it means "liberation from the cycle of birth and death, complete freedom, salvation.") She couldn't find, she said, that Hindu word in any of the French dictionaries she consulted. So instead for that chapter title she substituted the word *Mokry*, which means "mockery." That word-choice, sad to say, is entirely wrong and misleading.

And I have one other translation "war story" I can share.

Before I retired, I lined up on the bookshelves on one wall in my office at the University of Washington all the American and foreign editions of my books (Just in case we ever had a fire at our house and my other copies were destroyed). One was an Italian edition of *Oxherding Tale* entitled *Il Racconto del Mandriano*, published by Edizioni E/O in 1990. One day a student came into my office for a conference, sat down in a chair, and looked at that edition's cover. Then he asked, "Why is Langston Hughes on the cover of your book?"

Yes, that's right: Edizioni E/O had used as the novel's cover art an illustration based on a well-known photo of a young Langston Hughes. What were they thinking? Your guess is as good as mine. If only that publisher so far away had contacted me about their plans for the cover! But

such was not the case. Moral of the story? If you *can* work with a foreign publisher and translator for one of your titles, I highly recommend that you do so.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [4:23 PM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/charles-johnson-in-translation.html>

**Sunday, May 22, 2011**

**DRAGON SLAYERS**



JERALD WALKER

*I told him that black literature is often approached as records of oppression, but that my students don't focus on white cruelty but rather its flip side: black courage. Jerald Walker, "Dragon Slayers."*

In the future, whenever we talk about the black American narrative or story, I hope that my 2008 essay in *American Scholar* entitled "The End of the Black American Narrative" will be part of that discussion (It has been reprinted often, used in classes and by one think tank, and I did interviews for this with radio programs from Los Angeles to Australia). But what I *really* want to talk about, and have other people talk about, is Jerald Walker's brilliant essay "Dragon Slayers," originally published in *Iowa Review*.

Walker says that in his courses on black American literature, he betrays "the belief that blacks are primarily victims...a common view held by both races. I, too, held it for many years. When I was in my early twenties and making my first crude attempts at writing fiction, I'd sit at my word processor and pound out stories brimming with blacks who understood only anger and pain. My settings were always ghettos, because that was what I knew, and the plots centered on hardship and suffering, because I knew that, too."

It was one of his distinguished teachers in the Iowa Writers Workshop, Pulitzer-prize author James Alan McPherson, who helped Walker see that what he was doing was *easy* art, as I've often called it since 1988 when I published *Being and Race: Black Writing Since 1970*: a form of writing that is as false as gangster rap written by rappers who live in wealthy white suburbs and send their children to private schools. McPherson said, "What some gangster rappers are doing is using black stereotypes because white people eat that stuff up. But these images are false, they're dishonest. Some rappers are selling out their race for personal gain...That's what this writer is doing with his work." Later, McPherson added, "Less time needs to be spent on the dragons, and more on our ability to forge swords for battle, and the skill with which we've used them."



Initially, says Walker, he was crushed by this brutally honest critique in a creative writing workshop. But then he realized this was a long overdue awakening.

"I had become my own stereotype," writes Walker, "a character in one of my short stories who insisted on seeing himself primarily as a repository of pain and defeat, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The very people with whom I had been raised and whom I had dedicated myself to rendering in prose had become victims of my myopia. My stories showed people being affected by drug addiction, racism, poverty, murder, crime, violence, but they said nothing about the spirit that, despite being confronted with what often amounted to certain defeat, would continue to struggle and aspire for something better. That old slave song 'We Shall Overcome' pretty much says it all."

Jerald Walker, in my view, has published an essay that provides for a younger generation of writers (and some older writers, I would add) an aesthetic statement as important as Richard Wright's 1938 manifesto "A Blueprint for Negro Writing" or Ralph Ellison's "The World and the Jug." It is reprinted in *The Best American Essays, 2007*. Please read it.

And let it be a touchstone for all your future conversations about the black American narrative or story.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [4:43 PM](#)  
<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/dragon-slayers.html>

# Monday, May 23, 2011

## WORDS FOR OUR FATHERS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks if Buddhism, Christianity, Islam or any spiritual tradition can help black men overcome the difficulty they have being good fathers. I don't need to recite the dire statistics. You know what he's talking about.

I'd like to angle in on this question by introducing E-Channel readers to the work of a man I have long admired and learned from, the late, great meditation teacher Eknath Easwaran. After a career as an English teacher in India, Eknath Easwaran came to America in 1959 on the Fulbright exchange program, and once he established himself in California he founded the Blue Mountain Center of Meditation in Berkeley in 1960. He was a remarkably prolific writer, one very literary and with a delicious sense of humor, as you might expect from a retired English professor. Like his hero Gandhi, Easwaran embraced and taught those things that are positive and valuable in all spiritual traditions.



EKNATH EASWARAN

I began reading Easwaran's works in 1981, *all* his books and translations of Hindu classics, and every issue of his journal *The Little Lamp* (that was the pet name given to him in Kerala by his grandmother, Eknath Chippu Kunchi Ammal, whom Easwaran saw as his most important spiritual teacher). And I have long been in the habit of giving to friends and former students either interested in meditation or experiencing suffering his concise, compressed, 16-page pamphlet *Instructions in Meditation* (1972), available through a press he founded, Nilgiri Press.

That little instruction manual summarizes the eight-point program for meditation and leading a spiritual life that we find in Easwaran's other books. I trust it completely. The first thing I came to realize when I became a father at 27-years-old in 1975, is that when you have a child you must cease being a child *yourself*. You must put aside childish things and childish ways, and this can be especially hard for some people in America's infantile, narcissistic "youth culture" that seems to trap so many people in prolonged adolescence. You must become a practicing grown-up because you have brought into the world a helpless, completely vulnerable life that depends on your care and unselfish devotion 24/7 for at least 18 years (but usually longer) until you empower him or her to become self-reliant. Parenting is the *most* important job any human being can have. And as someone once said, it *does* involve a "life-time sentence." Easwaran's *Instructions in Meditation* is an infallible guide for being such a parent and a grown-up.

The eight points of his program are as follows:

1). *Meditation*. "Most of us have grasshopper minds dispersing our attention, energy, and desires in multitudinous directions, and depriving us of the power to draw deeper and richer resources for creative living," Easwaran writes. Meditation is the antidote for those characteristics of what Vivekananda famously called the ever agitated and out of control "monkey mind."

2). *Japam*. This is "repetition of the *mantram* or holy name." In Sanskrit, *mantram* literally means "mind refuge," or "mind protection." Think of this in terms of how you've seen elephants swinging their trunks wildly until a mahout gives the elephant a stick to curl its trunk around. This always calms the elephant. The mind is like that and during times of emotional turmoil simply needs something to hold onto in order to steady itself. *Japam* is that stick and serves that purpose. (Just before I have to give a reading or a lecture, I always find myself silently doing *japam* as I sit listening to someone introduce me to an audience.)

3). *Slow down*. Easwaran quotes British poet John Donne when he says, "*Be your own home and therein dwell*. Let us find our center of gravity within ourselves by simplifying and slowing down our life."

4). *Ekagratha*. Or one-pointedness. "Everywhere in the modern world we see people splitting their attention in many ways." In Sanskrit, *ekagratha* is translated as *eka* which means "one" and *gratha*, meaning "to hold or grasp." Thus, concentration is a single-grasping by consciousness of an activity or object.

5). *Sense Restraint*. Easwaran writes, "Sense stimulation is the slogan of the network of mass media all around us. A Western historian goes to the extent of calling modern civilization a sensate one. Therefore we have to be extremely vigilant to ensure that we do not come under its tyranny...In order to train our senses we have to exercise discriminating restraint over the food we eat, the books we read, the movies we see, the music we listen to, and the places we frequent. Gandhiji was fond of pointing out that control of the palate helps in controlling the mind."

6). *Putting Others First*. To answer the question put to me today, I would like to quote at length what Easwaran says about putting others first:  
"Our emphasis on the family context is because it gives us countless opportunities every day for expanding our consciousness by reducing our self-will or separateness. When we are dwelling on ourselves we are constricting our consciousness. To the extent that we put the welfare of others first, we are able to break out of the prison of our own separateness.  
"This need not mean following the wishes of the other person always, but when it seems necessary to differ, it must be done tenderly and without the slightest trace of resentment or retaliation."

7). *Reading the Scriptures*. "We need to benefit from all the sources of inspiration we can find and the sacred scriptures of all religions should come first on our list."

8). *Satsang*. "Association with spiritually oriented people. We need companionship and support when we are changing the very basis of our life by changing our old ways."

Most of us are house-holders, not monks. We are the laity and have not renounced the world by entering the monastery (yet). By following Easwaran's *Instructions in Meditation*, we all can be

better fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, students and teachers, employees and employers. The context of the family, and fatherhood (or motherhood), are fertile ground for daily spiritual practice and refining our ability to give generously and unselfishly.

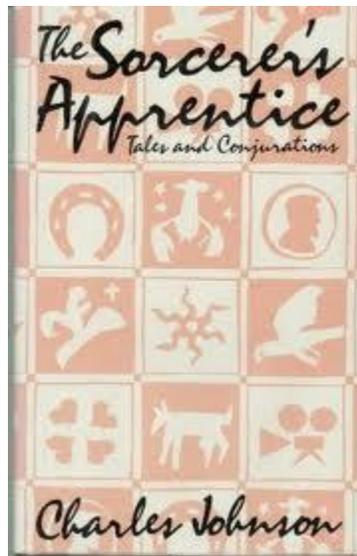
Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [10:28 PM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/words-for-our-fathers.html>

**Wednesday, May 25, 2011**

**"POPPER'S DISEASE" BY CHARLES JOHNSON**

As I compose these words, writer Tom Williams, an associate editor of the *American Book Review*, is working to finish by the end of May a commentary on the philosophical, science fiction story "Popper's Disease." That commentary will be published in the online literary magazine *The Collagist*, which Williams tells me reprints "a classic story with commentary by an admirer of that story." I haven't seen Tom's commentary yet. Since I don't want to influence or interfere in any way with his interpretation of that tale (which I am very thankful for), I think it's best for me to keep this statement about the story, originally published in *Callaloo* and reprinted in my first collection *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, brief.



If memory serves, I wrote that story during the summer of 1978 and, believe it or not, it was the first story I composed on an electric typewriter, everything prior to that having been written on a manual. (And I didn't start writing on a word processor until 1989.) Partly inspired by Kafka's "A Country Doctor" (which inspired John Gardner's sci-fi story about clones, "The Ravages of Spring"), "Popper's Disease" is about a black physician in southern Illinois who witnesses the crash of an alien spacecraft. The doctor is a man who has "integrated" into the white world in the post-Civil Rights period, but with a certain social uneasiness due to the fact that blacks and whites so often misunderstand each other---indeed, they are often opaque and mysterious to one another. He enters the wreckage to help its occupant and discovers that this alien, called the Creature, is suffering from a fatal affliction and has been exiled by its species to the Earth where that disease is common. The hope is that perhaps earthlings, who are familiar with this sickness, can find a cure.

I hope readers find this story to be as funny as I intended it to be. When the telepathic Creature describes the symptoms of his illness to Dr. Popper (whimsically named after philosopher Karl Popper), it's clear that what he is suffering from is a severe case of Sartrean existentialism as it is

presented in *Being and Nothingness*. The alien senses that he is *pour soi* or "being for itself," an individual and separate consciousness, but everything else is *en soi* or Being-in-itself, which is intrinsically opaque and massive. As philosopher Herbert Spiegelberg explains in *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction* (Vol. Two), "Consciousness as such, beginning with its questioning behavior...proves to be the opening wedge for the 'nothing'; without it there would be no place for the 'nothing' in the universe of Being...Consciousness sets itself off against Being by a fundamental act of negation..."

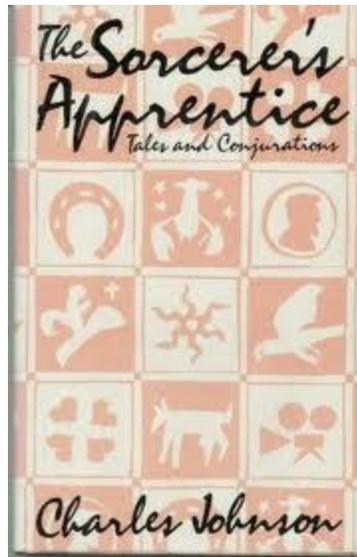
And so our poor suffering space traveler says:

"Well," he said, touching the tips of his tentacles, looking away, "for no apparent reason, and without the slightest warning, I experience feelings of first a tightness in the cerebral area, a tremor or unpleasant quiver, then a shock of dislocation, cold sweat, followed by vomiting, vertigo---the sense of falling, the inability to ascertain precisely what things mean, and the peculiar sense that I am somehow dependent upon everything in my perceptual field: *xlanthia*, *hbeds*, or *sploks*, which have a curious opacity, a marvelous beauty"---here he burst into tears---yet threaten to absorb me, engulf me, annihilate me complete, because I am, in a word, deeply and inexorably different from them." His anguish exploded in my mind. "It's *nauseating*, do you see?"

(Remember Sartre's 1938 novel *La Nausée*?)

Ah, but those are just the annoying, surface symptoms of his disease. As the tale progresses, Dr. Popper sees to his shock that he is being cuckolded by his white wife (that vision appears on a surveillance screen/computer called the Telecipher in the creature's ship). Like the alien from beyond the stars, he feels all at once that he, as a black man, exists as an alien in his own social world in America. He also realizes that he is now trapped in the wreckage of the downed space craft, and his extra-terrestrial patient is dying.

The story eases away from Sartrean existentialism to Buddhist metaphysics. On the Creature's home world, ontological dualism does not exist. There is only the appearance of "difference" and a separate identity, which are illusions. Everything is interdependent. The Aristotelian logical rules of identity are overturned, as they are in quantum physics where a quanta of energy can be either a particle ( $A=A$ ) or a wave ( $A=\text{not-}A$ ), depending upon where and when you glimpse it. Trapped inside the ship, frantically working with the Telecipher to unlock the mystery of the disease, Dr. Popper is startled when the machine suddenly and surprisingly diagnoses the sickness: *It's the Self* and *There is no cure*.



Do I believe in the existence of aliens? Well, I'd love to see an extra-terrestrial spacecraft land on the White House lawn at noon with all the world's cameras recording that event. But we don't have, I'm afraid, a single shred of empirical evidence so far to support the existence of life anywhere except on Earth. We may be alone in the universe, an accident of evolution on our little, blue-green planet in its Goldilocks orbit around the sun. (A huge amount of evidence supports that thesis.) On the other hand, the probability of something similar to that "accident" happening elsewhere in a universe with stars as numerous as grains of sand on a beach should not be dismissed.

I've longed believed that aliens in our popular imagination serve much the same purpose that angels did during the Middle Ages. Like angels, they descend from the heavens, usually shrouded in light. Their science and technology border on resembling the supernatural. Aliens, then, are a metaphor---and that is how so many science-fiction writers have depicted them. (We really can't imagine an alien precisely because it *is* alien to everything we know.) In a sense, then, they are our projections of an apparently deep-seated human need for an encounter with mystery and wonder.

And what could be wrong with that?

P.S. I guess I didn't keep this "brief" after all.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [3:53 PM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/poppers-disease-by-charles-johnson.html>

# Thursday, May 26, 2011

## THE FIRST TRIBE OF CHARLES JOHNSON

At the peak of the intense and thoroughly enjoyable seven years I spent as a professional cartoonist and illustrator (starting when I was 17-years-old), and before I became a "writer," I would produce five finished drawings a day, Monday through Friday, for a total of 25 by week's end. I was in early graduate school then (1971), and I would usually sell 5 of the 25, and that was enough for my wife and I to buy groceries every week. More even than the comic idea, I prided myself on my draftsmanship, which was at its best between 1970-73.

But sadly (for me), this is an important side of my life and work that literary scholars and other writers usually ignore because their training is in English (words), not art. They don't know how to talk about the work of cartoonists and illustrators, though so many Americans have been both writers and visual artists, for example, James Thurber and John Updike. If you want to blow your mind and see just how many writers have been excellent artists, look at *The Writer's Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers*, edited by Donald Friedman with essays by William Gass and John Updike (Mid-List Press, 2007). I was very pleased that work from that book was on exhibit in two galleries on the east coast shortly after its publication, and that my humble offerings were included. To be honest, I often talk about writing and aesthetics in terms of the grammar of the visual arts, because that was the first professional Tribe I belonged to.

These days when I have a drawing assignment, I prefer to spend eight hours on just one composition. Since my childhood I've immersed my mind in the visual arts of the world, comic art especially, everything from Zen drawings to Honoré Daumier, Thomas Rolanson, Thomas Nast, George Cruikshank, the late great black editorial cartoonist Ollie Harrington (a friend of Richard Wright) who I had the pleasure of meeting at a cafe in Berlin in 1989, everything. This wide-ranging interest in visual art is, I suspect, the basis for my similar interest in world literature, and in the possibilities of formal variations, for a journeyman artist must learn to work in many styles and have many approaches for solving a particular creative problem.

My first published article was on this subject, "Creating the Political Cartoon" in *Scholastic Editor/Communications and Graphics* (1973), and for that I did both the text and illustrations. The hope for any artist is to create something worthy of being reprinted over the years. But I also love writing about cartoonists. See my introductions for *Black Images in the Comics: A Visual History*, by Fredrik Strömberg (Fantagraphics Books, 2003), and *Still I Rise: A Cartoon History of African Americans*, by Roland Owen Laird, Jr (W.W. Norton & Co., 1997).

First comes the idea. Then I do some research on the costuming and the setting I want to use. After that, I play with sketches to arrive at a composition that I feel is balanced. The pencil work takes the most time, but since I was a kid I've loved the *ekagratha* (*Sk.* for "one-pointedness") of focused attention to detail (every line, every stroke), and the total absorption I experience at this stage.

Then comes the fun part, the inking. As when doing calligraphy, you must feel free and flexible when the ink pen is in your hand. I prefer bold strokes and strong outlines. (You can identify

every cartoonist by his style; and that was the premise of one of my teacher Lawrence Lariar's detective novels.) Your whole body is involved, not just the mind. Indeed, drawing is a right-brained activity, and I relax into this final stage like a man easing into a warm bath, with music from a Seattle soft jazz station playing in the background on my radio. After that comes shading by using wash, half-tone screens, or Photoshop (which I'm still learning how to use). In other words, I'm in heaven. Truth to tell, like John Updike, I'd rather draw than write on most days. I love the feel of the paper, the ink sometimes staining my fingertips, the wholeness that comes from the experience of drawing. (Words are symbols, so abstract and cerebral by comparison.)

If readers would care to see a portfolio of what I think is some of my best work, please go to my author's website at [oxherdingtale.com](http://oxherdingtale.com). Look toward the left and you'll see "Cartoons 1970-2004." Click on that. It also has a publicity photo from my 1970 PBS how-to-draw series, "Charlie's Pad." (To this day---even just two weeks ago---I hear from people who tell me they learned how to draw from watching that show when they were kids.)

For one of the best articles written on my work in this area, check out cartoonist Tim Kreider's essay on my first published book, "Brighter in Hindsight: Black Humor by Charles Johnson," posted in *The Comics Journal*, Jan. 18, 2010. The link for this is [Brighter in Hindsight: Black Humor by Charles R. Johnson « The Comics Journal](#).

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [8:13 PM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/first-tribe-of-charles-johnson.html>

# Saturday, May 28, 2011

## CHARLES JOHNSON ON CRITICS, THEMES AND THINGS

There are a couple of different but related questions on the table to answer today. Things that need to be tidied up.

Between 1969 and 1972, I did several book-length cartoon manuscripts. Johnson Publications in Chicago (the *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Black World* people) published the first one, *Black Humor* (1970), which I drew in one intense week after hearing a campus lecture by Amiri Baraka; and a fly-by-night west coast publisher, Aware Press, did the second, *Half-Past-Nation Time* (1972), but after that book came out, its publisher disappeared into thin air with a third book-length manuscript of drawings I did devoted entirely to the subject of slavery. (This second book from 1972 is extremely hard to find and I only have one copy of it myself.) Yet another book-length manuscript (unpublished) was on meditation and Eastern philosophy---some of those appear in a little book called *Buddha Laughing* (Bell Tower, 1999), which the editors at *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* put together. (These drawings were published in that volume shortly before I started writing essays for *Tricycle* and later was selected to be one of their contributing editors by publisher Helen Tworokov just before she stepped down from running that magazine.)

The two published cartoon volumes deal a lot with black cultural nationalism, which was very much with us (tyrannical so, in my opinion) in the late 1960s and early '70s. Critics are right to point out that emphasis in the drawings, and to note the absence of that now dated subject in my fiction and non-fiction.

In addition to asking for the above clarifications, Ethelbert asks, "What themes do you feel critics overlook in your work? What order would you suggest your work be taught? Is it important to study the cartoons, too?"

I suspect one underlying, general theme critics often overlook in my work is the question raised in my story about Plato and Diogenes, called "The Cynic": How does one live a life of moral and spiritual integrity in a broken, corrupt society? That is a question that drives Faith Cross, Andrew Hawkins, Rutherford Calhoun, and Matthew Bishop.

From my days as an undergraduate forward, my work has always been very inter-disciplinary. One form of artistic and intellectual expression nurtures and feeds the others. Whatever it is we call creativity and the imagination--those two great mysteries---can be for some creators experienced as "global" in their lives, not localized in a single form of expression, but rather spreading or spilling from one genre to another, one artistic or intellectual discipline to another, for all the humanities (along with the sciences) are related, interconnected. When some people wake up each day they're as liable to pick up a drawing pen as begin a new story on their word processor, as likely to grapple with a philosophical essay about the mind/body problem as they are with the first stanza of a poem. (Frankly, for a Buddhist, one's daily life itself can be seen as a canvas, a work-in-progress shaped by each and every one of our creative and rational deeds until the day of our death.) Or see creative imagination as the roots and trunk of a tree that shoots forth many branches of expression that arise from the same mysterious, inexhaustible source.

(And isn't there something very quintessentially American, even Emersonian and Ellisonian, about an individual artist---or any person---who embodies the Many in the One, who is creatively free in a democratic republic to do *this* and *this* and, naturally, *that*, too?)

However, for the sake of convenience people in general---and not just critics---always feel they need to label and categorize an artist.(This is especially true for artists of color.) We like to put things in neat, little boxes. After his or her name, they'll say "novelist," and ignore the others fields in which that individual works.

Or they'll say,"poet." Or "screenwriter." All of this speaks to the natural, inevitable and annoying human tendency to oversimplify people and things (or any phenomenon) to make them manageable. But a polymorphous creator doesn't want, of course, to see any of his children slighted or ignored. (However, that's a situation he or she may simply have to learn to live with.) A sort of *ars poetica* statement I was asked to write for the Academy of Arts and Letters when I received their Academy Award in Literature in 2002 best expresses, metaphorically, how I see this situation in respect to my own body of work. Here is a slightly abbreviated version of that statement:

"I see my body of work as being like a mansion with many rooms. The foundation for the mansion is the novel *Oxherding Tale*. Inside this imaginative "house" are rooms you can wander through or dwell in for awhile. One has novels. Another has short fiction. A third has 295 interviews from radio and television, in newspapers, and scholarly journals. In the fourth you'll find screen-and-teleplays. A fifth has philosophical essays such as "Reading the Eightfold Path." A sub-room of that has essays on many subjects---on Indonesia, how to draw political cartoons,the craft of storytelling, a pedagogy for writing workshops, the history of black cartoonists, an overview of black literature since the Harlem Renaissance, film critiques, and critical appreciations of many writers. Yet another room is devoted to book reviews. Other rooms have editorial and panel cartoons, comic strips, texts for studio photo books, and many public addresses and lectures. On and on through this house, from the basement to the attic, you'll find prose and visual art in numerous aesthetic forms (the slave narrative, the sea adventure story, the folktale, the animal fable, the fabliau, and political novel). There is fiction and non-fiction on the martial arts, affirmative-action, "exchange value," Dr. Martin Luther King's refrigerator, and a future in which the government taxes people's dreams as well as traditional fables and parables in a sub-room of the bigger room devoted to short stories. This is my conception of what a *total* body of work should be, one that is evolved over a lifetime, is generous in form and content, and offers a variety of different aesthetic experiences."

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at [10:53 AM](#)

<http://www.ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/05/charles-johnson-on-critics-themes-and-28.html>