

tion, strength, and development of an authentic identity in the character of Avey Johnson. Marshall has given us a powerful and moving portrait of an older Afroamerican woman that is truly, in Deck's term, multi-dimensional. May she be a model for many others.

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Notes

¹Joseph Boskin. "The Life and Death of Sambo: Overview of an Historical Hang-Up." *Journal of Popular Culture*. Vol. 4, No. 4 (Winter 1971) 648.

²Ibid., 650-651, 655.

³Gilbert Osofsky, comp. *Puttin' on Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northrup*. (N. Y.: Harper & Row, 1969).

⁴Paule Marshall. *Praisesong for the Widow*. (N.Y.: Putnam, 1983).

Critique

Deck's critical essay is a thoughtful and welcome commentary on the interrelationship between age, generational conflict and changing social standards as portrayed in literature about or by American blacks. The author discusses several important ways in which elderly are represented as mythic figures who embody personal experiential wisdom and a community's cultural and historical heritage; as advisors, story tellers or sages who have acquired an air of reverence, the ability to endure and the means to impart the wisdom of the ages, and as the sometimes difficult, infirm or hostile representatives of another generation who would impose different, if not conflicting, social or moral standards upon the young. While these characteristics are attributed commonly, if not

universally, to the elderly in North American society, Deck's analysis of elderly blacks in literature seems to be equally concerned with the status of the total black community, both within itself, and as it interacts with or is perceived by whites.

Deck is uncomfortable and has a self-conscious concern with the ways in which elderly blacks are perceived by whites. This is highlighted by the division in the essay between mythical, unrealistic figures, such as Uncle Remus and Dilsey, and the more realistic slice of life characters, as described in modern black literature. Certainly, Uncle Remus and Dilsey represent what Joel Chandler Harris and William Faulkner wanted to portray and not what elderly blacks really are. A more comprehensive view of elderly black personalities and of whole black communities would be welcome. (Indeed, these past omissions present opportunities for contemporary black authors writing from within and about black personalities and communities.) Although the characters are incomplete and despite being reminded of unpleasant relationships between blacks and whites or of outdated social behavior, Harris and Faulkner have made important and permanent contributions to American literature as a whole. This literature, as part of the accumulative cultural baggage in North America, may be criticized, reinterpreted or forgotten; but it cannot be revised.

What began as black literature or folklore, by or about blacks, has become the wider property of American popular culture as Deck points out. The role of this black literature will vary depending upon the context of its use, nonetheless. For example: The bushes had no thorns during my first visit to the briepatch. Uncle Remus and Br'er Rabbit were American folklore characters from the rural antebellum South associated more with pleasant, humorous and slightly moralistic stories in the trickster tradition than they were identified with slavery, black submissiveness or devotion to whites, or with Southern white nostalgia during the Reconstruction Period. The stories I heard were told by Walt Disney, not Joel Chandler Harris. Growing up in rural California, where the antebellum and postbellum South and the American Civil War were temporally and spatially remote, and where no personal contacts with blacks existed, I could not have and did not respond to Harris's stories as Alice Deck does or as the white readers of the "Atlanta Constitution" did. If I had grown up black in rural Georgia, then Walt Disney's version of Br'er Rabbit and the original folktales might have been viewed with the racial connotations that the author suggests. Instead, Uncle Remus was an American story teller whose age and race were unimportant or unnoticed.

Years later, of course, I have a more sophisticated and comprehensive

understanding of American history and of ethnic relations. Nevertheless, my primary image of Uncle Remus has not changed; again, black adults in rural Georgia are welcome to disagree. I understand better now how and why they might.

Uncle Remus, Aunt Jemima, and the loyal house servant, Mammy in "Gone with the Wind" have passed into a wider American cultural milieu without mandatory racial or historical connotations. I can eat pancakes without guilt. The humane, effective and loyal servant, Mammy, is superior in many ways to her master as many English servants in literature are also; she is clearly a more worthy human being than Scarlett O'Hara. Nothing in black American literature or history is necessarily diminished or misinterpreted by this transformation.

At the same time, this general transformation from a black to a more universal North American context does not necessarily negate Deck's analysis of the depiction of elderly blacks in American literature. The question remains, however, when or if the more realistic, slice of life black literature described in her article will make a similar transformation to become more widely read throughout the United States.

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