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Writers Forum

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William Demby: 10-07-1971

William Demby

Peter Marchant

Pat M. Ryan

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VOICE: "Brockport Writers Forum, in continuing series of discussions with leading literary figures presents: the writing of William Demby, author of two significant novels in recent years and is working on a third. A Film and T.V. writer as well who has just finished a children's film script for the U.S. Office of Education, William Demby is currently teaching English at Staten Island Community College. Discussing Mr Demby's works are Pat M. Ryan, who has written "Black Writing In The USA: A Bibliographic Guide" and has hosted conversations on black theater and the host for today's Writers Forum, Peter Marchant, director of the Writers Forum out of Brockport and author of the novel *Give Me Your Answer Do.*"

MARCHANT: "Beetlecreek seems to me, Mr. Demby, a very pessimistic book. The passage you just read, which is really very depressing, when Johnny tries to establish some sort of contact with Bill Trap and Bill Trap with Johnny, they're defeated because Johnny is weak and really prefers the company of the hoods, the Night Riders. Characters are trapped by their society, they're trapped by Beetlecreek. When David, Johnny's uncle, tries to escape at the end from Beetlecreek with Edith, you feel that it's all hopeless is the book hopeless? Is that how you feel about it?"

DEMBY: "No, as a matter of fact, I'm surprised that you find this passage pessimistic or gloomy. Now if we think of all the characters it is true that each tries to break out of his own... prison. Let's put it like that. But the choice of ways to break out of this prison, in the case of Johnny by joining the Night Crowd, Night Riders, by David and Edith going away to another place. David's wife trying to find some meaning to her life by joining the women's guild at the uh, at the, the church and. Finding her fulfillment as a housewife in this other gesture of breaking out. The fact that Bill Trap himself had left the colonel, the old man figure, the colonel and had come and tried to set up a kind of his own private Garden of Eden right near the black village. So I don't find the novel gloomy but it does perhaps talk about a certain kind of futility that exists in not choosing the correct way or the right in the sense of life, breaking out of one's prison or and it raises the problem, is it possible to go away to run away to scoop or to try and unusual ways to. To find a sense of belonging to some organism of society."

MARCHANT: "I really wanted to know what happens to Johnny. Does he make it? Does he reject the Night Riders? But then it seemed to me that it's absolutely right the way it ends. We know how Johnny feels and then the last scene is that scene with David and Edith leaving Beetlecreek and the cat getting on board the Greyhound bus and a couple of people, including David, showing tenderness. A sort of random sweetness of nature unintentional, something like sensibility [inaudible] as if this is our only hope."

DEMBY: "Well of course reality is your only hope. But I think speaking of the old man again which, which at first you thought was a Christ figure. Well, Christ figure only in the sense that the man... Society will not tolerate goodness. Society will not tolerate it. This morning we were talking at breakfast about the ecology of this little area which is you know a small society. Society will not tolerate goodness. If it upsets the spiritual ecology of a place. So of course the outsider the man had to be done with. From the point of view of those who inhabit this little village. Johnny too was an outsider you see."

RYAN: "Well, Johnny's learning that this is so John his recognition of what is going to happen to this man is a part of what we are to read and it's part of his growth as part of his growth. And I think that is what this book is about."

DEMBY: "I think this happens to the loss of innocence isn't that a worthy theme of American literature? I think so and. These things that happen really are our everyday rituals and. I don't see that it is a gloomy novel; I see that it is a realistic novel. That is, things happen in a kind of organic way and I don't think there's anything gratuitous. The characters are not exceptional enough that we are tremendously

interested in their fates purposely they have been chosen exactly for their grayness. Their lives are... will be futile. Up to the point that they do not understand the dynamics of what is happening to them. I think. In that sense I would say it's optimistic at any time that the human organisms find reality that's hopeful. Look how long it has taken American society to find reality. And we haven't found it yet, we are still living in a kind of dream world and there's no way things are more this without heroes, without dramatic."

MARCHANT: "The Dreamworld you describe in *Beetlecreek*, in a fairly conventional novel you describe in *The Catacombs*, which is a very unconventional novel. Would you tell us what you repeat how you wrote *The Catacombs*?"

DEMBY: "Well there is definitely a connection that is part of the creative cycle. Of my going to Europe and coming back to the country. Part of the maturing process was to think about the theory of fiction. If we were to... this is valid I think would be to create... if we were to take any small world of society and examine it we would find many, many plots many things that are happening but it would not yet be a novel. I was interested, while in Europe in coming back to the country very often, that the novel was living losing its hold on reality because when *Beetle Creek* was published there was no television for example and this must tell you something about the age. That novel was it was written in a period in which there was no television or very little television. In the meantime in the years that passed, television reality had begun to substitute the reality as we perceive it. The theory of *The Catacombs* was an attempt to... to somehow you know use this reality rather than be put off by it and not write any novels. And I assure ya, in Europe these problems were being debated they did not. The novel was being questioned. In publishing for example in America all the editors would say well why don't you write a nonfiction book because that was what people were interested in. Document, documentaries. The Italian film-makers attitude toward the documentary as opposed to the well-made Hollywood story. So I tried to utilize this. We were at a - I was a member then of the European Congress of writers to which belong the Russian writers, Turkish, Yugoslavian, all those writers who lived behind the Iron Curtain as well as the London and Paris writers as well. Jean Paul Sartre was there also. Was it John Paul Sartre? OK. All of these things we were talking about. So this was taking place in a large hall in Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, Italy, where there was a large tapestry. And while we were standing there in the intervals of the speeches discussing the novel, I suddenly look at this tapestry and saw that it was a sixteenth century tapestry in which there were huge armies moving. Events were taking place, maidens and castles and great movements of people are on an enormous tapestry that was, it seemed to me very much like the large screens that our film epics are using. So it seemed to me that this movement on this this tapestry was not horizontal and in the... Horizontal sequence of events moving from the beginning horizontally to an end. No, the movement was here. The eye would have to choose from all that was happening on the screen to focus on that episode. I tried to do the same. I said at first that I would write a novel that would get out of our normal perception of time by beginning at the end moving toward the beginning. But I soon realized that this was not possible so I said that I will try to utilize all of the reality that I can perceive either in my personal life or in my movements in a social way or events that are happening in the world through newspapers, through television, and sometimes by my going there and observing it in a journalistic way. But that I would I would invent, summon into consciousness fictional characters who would then participate in the story by having their lives, their fictional lives intermeshed with real lives. Uh, this was a very dangerous thing to do mainly because you become overly perceptive and you're being constantly bombarded by things happening. So inside this novel the type of thing it was going on for example, a friend of ours, a Jamaican girl, committed suicide. I think hers was the first. Other things happen in the novel, then my brother in law committed suicide. So sitting there at the typewriter in my ivory tower, things were happening all around me which I tried to put in some kind, in order as I saw it that day. That is, you would write for one day, complete that episode and not know

what would happen the next day. Now this novel, *The Catacombs*, is written exactly like that. No going back, no correcting, no hindsight about what had happened.”

MARCHANT: “And the novel you have a character William Demby, a writer, who invents a character, Doris, who impinges on William Demby's sense of reality. Would you like to read a short passage?”

DEMBY: “Yes perhaps so I thought and I think I'll just open the book at random. There are many passages that I would like to read. I was writing this in Rome of course you have to get the picture of Rome in the 1960s. But it was like the center of a great deal of, of new ideas being released partly because of the, the meeting of the Communists and Catholics in a European situation in which the two ideologies were being consciously shifted back and forth, so there's a lot of. Not Catholic but Roman ideology in the book this is what I say.

“But it is spring and I would like to laugh and be happy. (This is Bill Demby, the author inside the novel and I am Bill Demby, the author now in a T.V. station reading about what was happening then.) But it is spring and I would like to laugh and be happy I would like to flirt with the pretty green legged girls would like to touch their revolutionary breasts or something of that other place. Something about the office where I spend my work hours remains impressed on the retinas of my eyes and their inviting smiles paid. They are right when I do not love myself but I do respect and admire this Bill helm man who has stepped out of his place in line and strides purposely backward. (You see that is going again to that this shaking up of our concept perception of time) And purposely strides purposely backward, passing outraged twitching noses and scandalised eyes toward the memory of a pool. Something forgotten in the billion year ago past. Something having to do with uncatalogued sea creatures suddenly appearing on beaches their blubbery flesh stinking in the summer heat, terrifying photographers reminding bikini teenage flesh that perhaps Earth is not sex. That even though perfumed sex like birth does indeed persist. Orchestrini play on the leaders of the world. Summer waiters dream of becoming dukes, white gloves touch the decaying flesh of, not the teenage bikini capsule of flesh, that mysterious uncatalogued dying sea creature suddenly appearing on the beach. While I the only one present able to translate the code-like whistles and cork-like grunts torn cold with love and recognition as the creatures words take shape I have reached the shore. I have come home at last. You human creatures should forget the Sea Why must I, a stinking rotting dying fish creature, have to remind you? Learn to love this shore, this earth, this land. Forget the sea you are not fish, you are men and women.

And this is at the time of the novel then you must realize how events outside of... My own perceiving of things would happen so you did not know. About the next time I'm sitting at the typewriter this is what happened no, it's three weeks passed.

And now three weeks have passed and here I am standing on the silk smooth stones of St Peter's Square gazing up at the window of the dying pope. Five years ago I stood in almost the exact spot gazing up at the chimney waiting for the puff of white smoke that would announce to the world that a new pope had been chosen at last. It is noon this Pentecost Sunday again it begins to rain and always, always there comes this gift of soft menstrual rain to embroider this unfinished tapestry of timeless, changeless change. And Shiloh Walsh, a freckled girl reporter for the United Press sidles up to me for a spot interview.

“What do you think of it all?” she asks

“What do you mean what do I think it?”

“The scene, everything.”

I do not think she was satisfied with my muttered reply. I told her that I was a writer myself and that for the moment I am in no mood for writing. And finally she goes off to interview someone else and again I am alone with my thoughts. The shame and guilt and anger of these three weeks where those terrifying news pics from Birmingham. Of fierce, gum-chewing police dogs enforcing the law with Nazi efficiency. Gazing up at the window of the dying pope wondering why I am here."

I think that gives you a feeling of the events crashing into your consciousness from I think as the children that bombed church in Birmingham, Alabama and the police dogs."

MARCHANT: "Pat, you were saying that you found a connection between *Beetlecreek* and *The Catacombs* are first sight they're entirely different."

RYAN: "Well I did in certain configurations of characters but the more important I think there are connections structurally. And critics at first confrontation took exception to what they thought was a formlessness or a lack of focus in *Beetlecreek* and then some of them really ripped *The Catacombs*. I don't have that difficulty. I think there's an intentional density. You, however, tease us by having your William Demby novelist character make manifestos along the way. We're not quite sure are you, is this real? And at the end, again there's an ambiguity is there a birth? The passage that you just read has the image of birthing. You seem to be moving away from death and toward birth. What happens at the end of *The Catacombs* can you decode it for us?"

DEMBY: "Yes I can. First of all the technique of writing that is what happens exactly here and now as you are seated or are here. That is one thing. And that is Bill Demby, the author talking about Bill Demby, the character in the novel, sitting down to write a novel. Now, we did not know... it seemed to me that accumulating there was a great hope for the Western world, especially and for peace with all that was going on at the time. The Algerian revolution, which could have been the victory of fascism or something like that in Europe at the time. The great hope and I don't know how it was in the United States but in Rome at the time in Europe there was tremendous hope for the last acts of Pope John and I just read his death in St Peter's Square, which went across ideological lines. That there was a great hope for civilization at the same time we were it seemed to us many of us that we were on the verge of war or a great cataclysm. A little later we have then the election of Kennedy was president at the time. But little by little it seemed that this great hope, which is the catacomb type of hope, for change in the world had been aborted so. Whether or not Doris's baby would live was also a metaphor for the living of this great hope. Which is Vatican II when other things were happening. Gestures toward the east and all this sort of thing was happening, in which there was a great deal of hope. But it seemed it was, soon, right away this hope was aborted. And Doris's baby perhaps is aborted. We don't know. We come to the assassination of Kennedy which is, again, a strike against. What all had been hoped. Doris does not resolve. The writer continues writing his novel but is forced to be aware again the abortion of this this feeling of hope that was in the western world. That is. That is the why things were done I guess."

MARCHANT: "I know that time is coming to an end could we have ten extra minutes? Is that possible? Because I want Pat to get his question to you about you as a black writer. Is that...?"

RYAN: "Well I wanted to do I want to put a question about the so-called black aesthetic and we were talking earlier I proposed a holy trinity of so called white experts of [inaudible] all of whom have given a kind of stamp of white approval and correspondingly black critics, if there is such a group, have not taken a very keen interest in your work and I wondered why? Is there some reason of things happening, of a change in the world of criticism that might account for that?"

DEMBY: "I think so, yes, but one must be realistic about this. We all know I guess that that there is such a thing as a literary establishment. And it has been dominated more or less in the American letters."

Certain groups have been powerful, others have not. In the 30's when Richard Wright was writing, and no one will deny that he is a black writer, he is a black writer. Uh, he, having moved from Mississippi to Chicago, absorbed some of that sociological interest in things that happened, which was typical with him. But what he did in depicting a sociological... reality. The Southern young man going to the urban centers of the north. What he wrote was satisfactory to the critics at that moment because that was the period of post-depression."

RYAN: "And they were white critics."

DEMBY: "Yes."

RYAN: "Uniformally."

DEMBY: "They were white critics because the Black critics at the time, there was no difference in them."

RYAN: "No."

DEMBY: "That is they were not pushing black books but what has happened now. The literary establishment has been... has been threatened. That is, for a long time their judgment about books if it were they are the group of [inaudible] Warren and what's the other critic down near Nashville? They had their Southern view as the urban ones in the north, especially in Chicago had another point of view. And that was another establishment in New York, it was the Jewish, you know, literary thing after... Post-War too, that produces [inaudible]. The blacks did not have this. We were required to get published to move in one of the other directions which none of us thought was tremendously healthy. What then are the young critics of the blacks today looking for? They are rightly trying to create their autonomous standards of criticism. A kind of community control, or kind of establishment control. They are trying to create their own standards of what is good and what is bad, rightfully I think. If they had not given attention to this book it was because as in the 30's no one would give much attention to a book by Carson McCullough because that was a big deal then of sociological emphasis and that sort of thing. No more mademoiselle type books you know with haziness and. Today that's something else is going on. I think the black aesthetic was an attempt, a rightful attempt to try to establish a critical criteria that would take into consideration in the literature of spoken, written, and... and... expressed through music. That the young blacks who are trying to give expression to a very vital and revolutionary period in American life, as well as in the life of blacks. That these critical, new critics would give them the attention that is due and it's happening of course in theater. And black theater is something that is a reality now. Not. Porgy and Best type of thing of the 20's and 30's period that answer your question I mean --"

RYAN: "Yes, it does."

DEMBY: "You know it was a battle between --"

[Inaudible]

DEMBY: "Establishment infighting in a way. And I think that's what the blacks mean when they talk of a black aesthetic. I've tried to define it and try to have my black students define it in the class that I teach at Staten Island Community College. I'll give my school a plug. Where we talked about the things that we have not come up with a definition. And this is the second year that I'm teaching black literature we have not come up with a definition of what a black writer is and we always get into different areas of thinking I'm still thinking about it and when I know I'll write something about it."

MARCHANT: "Is there anything about it in the novel you're working on, *The Journal of A Black Revolutionary In Exile*?"

DEMBY: "Yes, *The Journal of A Black Revolutionary In Exile* tries to come to grips with this problem. The black revolutionary - Is he a kind of Cuban-type revolutionary? Is he - what kind of black man is he? What are - is he again following into a kind of prepared scenario? I sometimes suspect that Cleaver is in in the. In Algeria. You know that he's had his embassy he is the kind... but is that not just a public relations? Seems to me I'm trying to face the problem of a black revolutionary, not Cleaver, because I chose the title before he went to Algeria. Who is forced to revolt not only against society but against people who are trying to create his image in the image that they want. The black revolution you see that I have on my urban revolutionary teacher's uniform. But I think that's what this novel is going to be about. It's it has to do really with the searching again for identity and seeing what exactly all of this is about and who is being used by who."

RYAN: "You're waiting for the novel to tell you really are not going to tell it."

DEMBY: "To a large extent yes."

MARCHANT: "But it seems to me that *Beetlecreek* and *The Catacombs*, they're black people and they're white people and neither of these novels have much to do with the race question. They're just people and they have social problems and it seems to me that the central problem of *Beetlecreek* is isolation."

DEMBY: "Well, at the same time that *Beetlecreek* was being written, people were beginning to talk about the futility, the alienation, and the disenchantment with the American seeing the kind of middle class thing that was happening. And this was written before for example the racial outbreaks in riots and in New York and in Newark. And yet we see the same forces being... Coming to the floor. You know, the this could have been this was many years before these riots but it is certain sense it kind of gives you the feeling of what was going to happen. I don't think that any of the black experience is totally black. It is a kind of American thing that is happening which the blacks are involved very, we're very involved. The same time, we're moving a little bit like the black author in the novel that is myself in that novel. We are at once trying to shape reality but also being acted upon by reality."

RYAN: "Well you've said that you're playing around with cubistic time that's what Bill Demby the novelist in the novel says. I think what you're talking about is the commitment, the necessity of playing around with cubistic time because you said that you don't trust history, history hasn't given us the truth."

DEMBY: "No."

RYAN: "And through the novel you still works for you still think that it's possible to tell some truths and it's a mission and it's a mandate."

MARCHANT: "You spent twenty years in Italy and from the point of view of these last, most painful ten years, Rome looks like a very attractive place to be. And I think you said that it was easy to be black in Italy but. There's not the pressure that there is here but you come back to the States and you come back to Staten Island. Why?"

DEMBY: "[Italian] That's the answer. [laughter] But I do really don't feel this division of being here or there, I think it would be more traumatic for me to have gone to let's say, Los Angeles. From where I'm from, from Pittsburgh, you know all of these things are just moving. We have this tremendous mobility not only physically by jetting back and forth but also the mobility that comes from our perceptions of images so forth over the T.V. screen. The Vietnam War has to compete with Budweiser beer for the attention of Americans in their homes. I don't feel really being there, that I don't think the cultural

things are like they were when Henry James went to Rome in some kind of an attempt to capture the culture of the old land. I don't think it's like that anymore. I was astonished when people place importance on where I was when I was writing.”

MARCHANT: “But you wanted to - you didn't want to be an expatriate, you wanted to come back to your roots.”

DEMBY: “Well I think all of us now accept the fact that to many, many, many Americans and writers are expatriates in their own country in America so. You know I mean in the real sense I don't think these are cliches about expatriates. It was something invented a little bit by literary establishment before World War or... the Second World War. I don't think they're valid anymore. Everyone moves from here to there and does his work when and how he can. Our commitment to what is happening now is not only in a commitment to America. This is the beauty of the age we are living in. Our commitment now is to humanity.”

MARCHANT: “Thank you and I'd like to thank you very much for coming along and discussing this with us. Pat Ryan, I'd like to thank you for joining in.”

RYAN: “Thanks Peter and Bill.”

DEMBY: “I was you know it was very nice.”