Friday, July 1, 2011

THE READING LIFE

As so often has been the case in past years, my reading in 2011 has consisted largely of manuscripts and galleys that I've received from writers and publishers who requested that I provide an endorsement (blurb) for those books. I can offer a sampling of this reading material, but readers should be forewarned---some of these works are not in bookstores yet but will be published over the next few months.

ZENJU EARTHLYN MANUEL

Among the titles I much enjoyed reading was *Tell Me Something About Buddhism* by black Buddhist nun Zenju Earthlyn Manuel. (I also have on hand her 205-page novel *The Water Monarchs*, which I've yet to get to.) Other books include David Guterson's forthcoming novel *Ed King*, and *The World Is Made of Stories* by Buddhist scholar David R. Loy, a signed copy he gave me as a gift when he, Jin Y. Pak and I were featured speakers at a Buddhist Ethics Symposium sponsored by West Chester University in February. I also enjoyed reading *William Blake: On His Poetry and Paintings* by my colleague Hazard Adams; and *The Center Must Not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy*, edited by George Yancy.

The books in my study awaiting my attention are two novels by Indian writer Tarun J. Tejpal, *The Story of My Assassins* and *The Alchemy of Desire*, because I will have a conversation with him toward the middle of this month, courtesy of Elliot Bay Book Co. Added to these works is *Carambola*, the first poetry collection by Detroit writer Shayla Hawkins, which I soon plan to endorse.

And for both professional and personal reasons, I've been leisurely reading Dogen's two-volume work *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*; *The Hard SF Renaissance*, edited by David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer; and *The Year's Best Science Fiction: 27th Annual Collection*, edited by Gardner Dozois. Predictably, as an old cartoonist, I also read a big pile of graphic novels set aside for me by the owner, Gabriel, of Dreamstrands Comics in Seattle---I usually visit his well-stocked establishment twice a year to hang out and chat about comics, and load up on things he recommends as well as reprints of work by my favorite artists from the Golden Age and era of

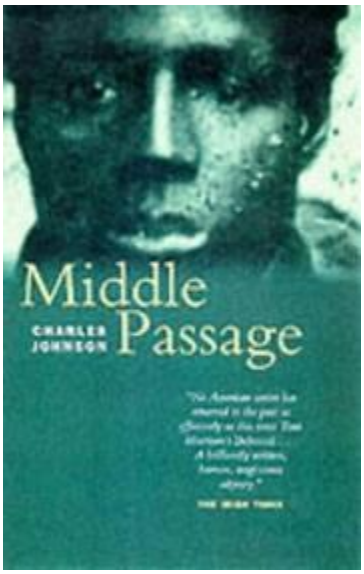
the pulps (late 1930s, early 40s).

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 5:01 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/reading-life.html

Sunday, July 3, 2011

A MAJOR QUESTION FOR CHARLES JOHNSON

E. Ethelbert Miller asks this question: "In her book, *Charles Johnson in Context,* Dr. Linda Selzer mentions the significance of you winning the National Book Award in 1990. Do you view *Middle Passage* as your major work?"



One of the problems with asking a philosopher a question is that he's likely to answer you with another question. He'll ask you to define your terms. No doubt this tendency is what makes philosophers so annoying and exasperating to other people. (And why the Athenians put Socrates to death.) It's not that I intend to be annoying. Instead, I just have to endlessly ask questions because the language we use in discussing literature often seems (to me) to be so unexamined, so riddled with presuppositions, and the lack of critical thinking.

Does a major national award make a novel a major work of fiction? Does the "recognition" of the book by a prize do that or does the book being "major" arise from the quality of its content? (And should politicking and favoritism among the judges for the prize be considered?) Would the book be "major" if it *hadn't* won a National Book Award? For example, why didn't my friend, the late Chicago novelist Leon Forrest, receive a major literary prize for his highly praised, 1,135-page Joycean novel *Divine Days*? What about all those National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize winning works that have long been out of print and forgotten? Were they not "major" after all, then?

I recall being interviewed by a reporter when I retired from teaching two years ago. She asked what I would be working on. I ticked off a couple of projects, and she said, "No, I mean what *big* things are you working on?" I paused for a moment to rethink my reply, then mentioned a couple of other projects that seemed to please her because apparently she thought they were "big."

All of this reminds me of a story told once by Nobel Prize author Isaac Bashevis Singer. He said a friend advised him to stop fooling around with short fiction and write something difficult, like

a novel. Upon hearing this, Singer said he stepped slowly into his study and, returning, brought back reams of paper, hundreds of revised pages. "So you *have* started a novel," said his friend, pleased. But Singer, shaking his head, sighed, "All this is to get one short story."

The view from *inside* the creative process, where an artist lives, strikes me as being rather different from *outside*, or the vantage point from which general readers and literary critics view that process. (I once startled a lawyer friend one morning in Seattle when, as we were talking, I mentioned I'd tossed out 3,000 pages for *Middle Passage*---his assumption, I realized, was that the book he'd read was a first draft and just sprang whole cloth from my head with no revision necessary.) When a serious artist works on something---be it a story, novel, essay, drawing, screenplay, poem or what have you---he or she invests the same energy and focus during the creative process in whatever project is at hand. Each book can be compared to, say, his children, and like any good parent, he would be loathe to describe one child as "major" and other as "minor."

The fact that I've been publishing steadily since 1965 causes me to pause when asked, "Is *Middle Passage* your major work?" Back in my student days, when I wrote six novels in two years, the fourth, fifth, and sixth books in that series were intended to be a 1,000-page trilogy---that's the kind of project that springs from a young man's ego-driven nisus to create what others would see as being a "big," "major" work. Obviously, there is a great deal of foolishness in thinking that extravagance necessarily equals excellence. An alternate way would be envisioning and executing a work of crystalline purity, poetic compression, and focused, emotional power free of *remplissage* or literary padding.

Another fact that causes me to pause is a lifetime devoted to studying Buddhism and Buddhist art, and 31 years of practicing meditation. Because the easy categories we use uncritically---"major" and "minor," "big" and "small" strike me as being as dualistic as the terms "good and bad," "right and wrong." They are relative, often arbitrary, and always problematic once we start poking at them. For an artist continually at work, moving from one creation to another, these labels and categories are simply meaningless. And for a Buddhist artist, "more" is often "less," and the artistic virtue one strives for is simply a direct, intuitive insight into truth.

I'm not sure if these reflections answer the simple question Ethelbert placed before me. Is *Middle Passage* a "major" novel? Let me conclude by just saying it quite possibly is if you, the reader, say so. It's 21-years-old now. Old enough to vote. Old enough to have been read by two generations of readers. Let's give it fifty years---approximately three generations---and revisit the question then.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 9:44 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/major-question-for-charles-johnson.html

Sunday, July 3, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON DREAMS A WORLD

Where there is no vision, the people perish. The Book of Proverbs.

E. Ethelbert Miller asks, "Knowing your interest in science-fiction what type of things do you imagine man will invent or be capable of doing? If Charles Johnson could dream a world what kind of world would it be?"

This is an answer I can keep short and simple. And I don't need to turn to speculative fiction to imagine it, because the world I would dream is one that is within our grasp right now and without any assistance from science or technology. The answer appears in my essay "Reading the Eight-Fold Path," in *Turning the Wheel: Essays on Buddhism and Writing*, page 18:

"All my life I've wondered what it would be like to live in a society where, instead of men and women insulting and tearing each other down, people in their social relations, and even in the smallest ways, held the highest intellectual, moral, creative, and spiritual expectations for one another."

In other words, I would dream a *civilized* world. No one is born civilized. That is an achievement of culture, one that is the product of a lifetime of work and a great deal of daily practice. And what we call civilization can be lost in a single generation. This will be the theme of my next novel, because it is the question I brood on every day and night, the question I most wish to explore in depth: What does it mean to be truly civilized?

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:01 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/charles-johnson-dreams-world.html

Monday, July 4, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON TALKS VISUAL

All my life, from childhood to today, I've found inspiration in the visual arts of the West and East, and had fate not pointed me in the direction of literary fiction, I would have happily attended the art school in Illinois that accepted my application in 1966.

But fate, I guess, does tie up over time a few loose ends. First, my daughter Elisheba did graduate from Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle, and I was in heaven for four years as I studied her textbooks and assignments. She is now owner and curator of Faire Gallery Cafe, which exhibits work by a new artist every month. In its first five years, Faire has had over 60 art openings, housed over 200 musical acts, hosted comedy shows, housed one play, over 15 staged readings, and featured regular open mic nights.

And, secondly, in 1994 The Art Institute of Chicago in collaboration with Bulfinch Press published a lovely, wonderful book entitled *Transforming Vision: Writers on Art.* On these pages, 46 writers and poets respond imaginatively to 40 magnificent works of art in The Art Institute of Chicago.

The list of writers and the visual artists they are paired with is more than impressive. Here, we find Saul Bellow and Robert Hayden on Claude Monet; Delmore Schwartz on Georges Seurat; William Maxwell on Eugène Boudin; Richard Howard on Henri Fantin-Latour; Richard Wilbur on Edgar Degas; Jon Stallworthy on Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; Adam Zagajewski on Edgar Degas; Susan Mitchell on Paul Gauguin; Cynthia MacDonald on Mary Cassatt; Patricia Hampl on Henri Matisse; Jacques Dupin on Joan Miró; Francine Prose on Diane Arbus; Carl Sandburg on Auguste Rodin; Willa Cather and Amy Clampitt on Jules Breton; Guy Davenport on Grant Wood; Joyce Carol Oates on Edward Hopper; John Edgar Wideman on William Sidney Mount; Wallace Stevens on Pablo Picasso; Rita Dove and Reginald Gibbons on Ivan Albright; John Yau on Jasper Johns; Blaise Cendrars on Robert Delaunay; John Hollander on Charles Sheeler; Gerald Stern on Chaim Soutine; Susan Stewart on Francis Bacon; Susan Sontag on Francisco Goya; C.K. Williams on Leon Golub; Stanley Kunitz on Philip Guston; Mark Strand on Giorgio de Chirico; Philip Levine on Lyonel Feininger; Shelby Hearon on Wayne Thiebaud; Mina Loy

on Constantin Brancusi; Garry Wills on Thomas Eakins; Charles Wright on Piet Mondrian; John Updike on Claes Oldenburg; Li-Young Lee on Li-Lin Lee; Charles Simic on Joseph Cornell; Miroslav Holub on Paul Klee; Jorie Graham on Anselm Kiefer; Charles Baxter on John La Farge; and Ellen Bryant Voight on Georgia O'Keeffe.

My contribution to this volume is a Buddhist-themed short story entitled "The Work of the World," which is my response to Peter Blume's *The Rock* (1943), a painting that ensorcelled me every time I encountered it in The Art Institute of Chicago. I selected the one black figure in that painting, a bare-chested man lifting a slab, as my protagonist in an apocalyptic landscape, where everyone is rebuilding the world after a long-anticipated catastrophe. The story is reprinted in *I Call Myself An Artist: Writings By and About Charles Johnson*, edited by Rudolph Byrd (Indiana University Press, 1998). And I had the great pleasure of reading it on September 24, 1994 at the Bellevue Art Museum in Washington as a way of introducing the great painter Jacob Lawrence just before he was interviewed on stage by an arts reporter from New York for his exhibition "Jacob Lawrence: Thirty Years of Prints (1963-93).

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 1:50 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/charles-johnson-talks-visual.html

Tuesday, July 5, 2011

HER NAME IS ADRIAN PIPER. The card speaks for itself.

ADRIAN PIPER

In a recent post, I talked about the visual artists I've drawn inspiration from all my life. That list is way too long for me to name each artist, past and present. But I do think I should give a little attention to one of our finest and most original contemporary creators, Adrian Piper, an internationally celebrated conceptual artist and analytic philosopher. Her philosophical publications are in the areas of metaethics, Kant, and the history of ethics. Her practice of yoga and study of eastern philosophy led her to become, like Mahatma Gandhi, a *brahmacharin.* Her achievements and biography are simply too wide and deep for me to fully present in this brief post.

In "Shaivistic Reverberations: Exchanges Between Adrian Piper and Adelaide Bannerman," which was published in *The International Review of African American Art* (Fall, 2007, Vol 21, Number 3), Bannerman states that, "Piper's work has consistently examined the relationships between the individual (*atman*) and the illusions (*maya*) that constitute realities that structure and shape our experiences of this world. She has done this primarily through her concept of the 'indexical present' (i.e., self-scrutiny of behavior in the moment it occurs) and its function within her installations and performance-related works. Her intent is to mobilize the type of self-examination that can transform consciousness and evoke changes to how one perceives the world and other individuals."

I was introduced to Dr. Piper's work by my artist daughter Elisheba. In one of the collections of Piper's conceptual art, I was struck by a "business card" she created specifically to give to men who approached her in cafes and other public places when she simply wanted to be left alone. It was so appropriate, so concise, so perfect that I couldn't resist honoring her idea by doing a variation on it. I asked my daughter to take my version to a local print shop and have 500 cards made. I carry these in my wallet and briefcase everywhere I go, just waiting for the opportunity when I can whip one out, hand it to someone, and walk away. I figure it will save me a lot of needless conversation. When playwright August Wilson saw it, he approved of it, but had one

objection, which was that he wouldn't have included the final sentence. Here is what the card says:

"Dear Friend:

"With my deepest regrets, I must point out that during our conversation you made a remark about black Americans, people of color, or those different in race, gender or religion, which some observers would interpret to be insensitive, derogatory, or poorly informed. I don't have the time or energy for addressing that remark, but perhaps in the future you will consider whether you should repeat it, and also consider whom you are speaking with. I regret any discomfort this card may cause.
Charles Johnson
(Inspired by conceptual artist Adrian Piper)"

I've yet to give this card to anyone. But I'm always prepared to do so. And I'm thankful to Adrian Piper for giving me the idea.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:05 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/her-name-is-adrian-piper-card-speaks.html

Tuesday, July 5, 2011

LAWRENCE OF SEATTLE

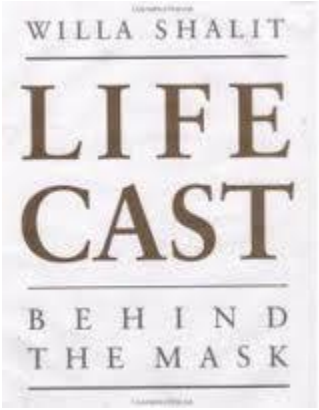
JACOB AND GWENDOLYN

Whenever I count the blessings in my life I always make sure to include the fact that I had the pleasure and privilege of knowing Jacob Lawrence, one of the greatest American artists of our time, and his wife Gwendolyn Knight, an equally outstanding painter. He arrived at the University of Washington in the early 1970s, just a few years before I was hired. Jacob and Gwen were two of the most gentle, immensely talented, unpretentious, down-to-earth, and beautiful artists I've ever known (along with Seattle artist Barbara Thomas, a former student of Jacob, who is now executive director of the Northwest African American Museum; one of her paintings is proudly displayed in my home). Just being in their presence would make you smile.

They would make you happy and thankful that two such luminous human beings walked and mingled among us.

BARBARA EARL THOMAS

I have fond memories of a night in the 1990s when Elliot Bay Book Company's Rick Simonson and Barbara Thomas invited August Wilson, me, Jacob Lawrence, our wives and one other couple over to their house for dinner. Our dialogue that night was vigorous, free-wheeling, *alive*, with the evening melting away so quickly we were surprised to see 11 PM arrive. As we gathered up our coats to leave, Gwen said, "That was a lovely seminar." Jacob agreed, adding that he felt it was "excellent."



On another occasion, the University Book Store hosted an event by Willa Shalit to promote her book *Life Cast: Behind the Mask* (Beyond Words Publishing, Inc., 1992). She has made "life casts" of the faces of Richard Nixon, Muhammad Ali, Richard Burton, Federico Fellini, Sophia Loren, Paul Newman, Sammy Davis, Jr., Marcel Marceau, Louise Nevelson, Isaac Stern, Whoopi Goldberg, Rosa Parks, Ronald Reagan, Robin Williams, Jimmy Carter, Stevie Wonder, Alvin Ailey, Clint Eastwood, the Dalai Lama, Branford Marsalis, Wynton Marsalis, Michelle Pfeiffer, Amy Tan, Ted Turner, Dizzy Gillespie, and many others.

That evening Ms. Shalit made a life cast of the faces of first Jacob (his face was already covered with alginate gel when I arrived), then me before an audience. Some months later, she sent me

the finished life casts for myself and Jacob, which I dutifully and immediately took to his apartment. My life cast hangs on the wall here in my study---an uncanny three-dimensional mold of my face (didn't we once call these "death masks"?) that gives me an idea of what I will look like, eyes closed, in my coffin. (Actually not, though. My plan is to be cremated, with my ashes strewn by plane over the Pacific Ocean.) I have no idea what happened to Jacob's life cast.

Given our admiration for Jacob Lawrence, it was natural, then, for writer John McCluskey Jr., and I to contact Francine Seders Gallery in Seattle to arrange for his artwork to appear as the introduction for each of the essays in the book we co-authored in 1997, *Black Men Speaking*. As fine as the work is by so many of our writers, that book would have been poorer without examples of the visual imagination of Jacob Lawrence.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 10:58 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/lawrence-of-seattle.html

Sunday, July 10, 2011

ALMOST AUGUST and other things.

E.Ethelbert Miller asks, "Did you and August Wilson ever discuss maybe collaborating on a project?" Initially, I was hesitant about responding to this question because I wasn't sure of exactly the best way to angle into it. But now I see that the question does provide a seed I can water a little bit until it blossoms into a bittersweet story---or at least an anecdote---about racial politics and literary prizes in America. I guess it's time to get this off my chest.

August Wilson and I did, in fact, discuss writing a play together one evening, a play we would do with Pulitzer prize author Oscar Hijuelos, author of *The Mambo Kings Sing Songs of Love.* Oscar was in Seattle that day, probably doing book promotion, and the three of us sat down for dinner. As so often happens when writers get together, they start blue-skying ideas, and getting themselves rather exercised in the process. A play we three would do together? Why the hell not?

OSCAR HIJUELOS

But I remember a different dinner I had with August, one of our 8-to-10 hour talkathons at the Broadway Bar and Grill on Seattle's Capitol Hill, and that night he revealed to me that Oscar had been one of the three nominating judges for the Pulitzer prize in fiction when my novel *Dreamer* was published in 1998. I should mention at this point that the editors at my publisher Scribner were very excited about *Dreamer* and felt it should be awarded a Pulitzer that year. I believe their enthusiasm was justified. Except for its uncompromising philosophical engagements (When he interviewed me about the novel, *Washington Post* reporter David Streitfeld asked me, "Do you think this book is too smart for general readers?"), *Dreamer* had several characteristics of Pulitzer fiction, the most important of which is that it was about the American experience and one of our most important citizens in the second half of the 20th century.

I make this observation from much experience. I've been on the nominating committee three times. That committee does not make the final decision on the books the nominating judges select. Rather, a board, which generally doesn't involve any literary artist, selects the winner. According to August, when Oscar served on the nominating committee, he asked, "What about *Dreamer*?" And he was told, "We're not looking at any black books this year."
This is a story I'm relating second-hand, perhaps even third-hand (since August says he heard it from Oscar). But I don't doubt its veracity. For my own first two experiences of serving on the nominating committee were frustrating---the board selected our second and even third choices

rather than our first choices, though that was not the case in 2009 when they selected our first choice, *Tinkers* by Paul Harding.

As *Salon* book editor Laura Miller reported in her 2000 article on literary prizes, "David Kipen, book review editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, says, 'The Pulitzer is judged and approved by journalists, who tend to be smart people and unimpeachable in their opinions on journalists and critics, but when it comes to the writing of fiction or poetry I'm a little more skeptical about them than I would be of the National Book Foundation'."
Miller also says in her article that "the prize for fiction has always been the most controversial of the Pulitzers...The postmodern novelist William Gass denounced the Pulitzer in a notoriously dyspeptic 1985 essay, charging that the prize 'takes dead aim at mediocrity and almost never misses,' and complaining that it caters to 'a large, affluent, mildly educated middle class which has fundamentally the same tastes as the popular culture it grew up with, yet with pretensions to something more, something higher, something better suited to its half-opened eyes and spongy mind.' Although Gass' jeremiad prompted immediate cries of sour grapes, it's true that the Pulitzer is seen as the most middlebrow American literary prize."

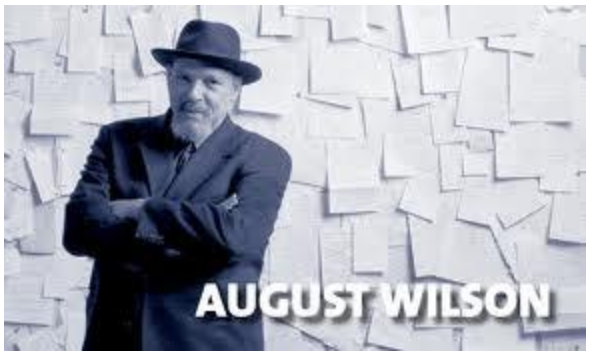
And she also says this:
"The most important thing readers should keep in mind about the Pulitzer Prize is that it's awarded by a board of journalists, and that journalism is the primary focus of the Pulitzer Prizes. Some publishers feel that the Pulitzer gets better publicity than the NBA because when the prizes are announced, they make the front page of newspapers nationwide...The press may be Pulitzer-crazy, but they're mostly interested in the awards they're eligible for themselves...The fiction jury and the board often haven't seen eye to eye, though it's hard to say who's got a better record for picking real winners. In 1941, the board rejected all three unmemorable titles recommended by the jury in favor of Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which the chair of the jury had faulted for 'a style so mannered and eccentric as to be frequently absurd.' In 1974, a jury of formidable literary cred -- Elizabeth Hardwick, Alfred Kazin and Benjamin DeMott -- enthusiastically endorsed Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, but the board hated the book so much they decided not to award a prize at all that year. So, a rule of thumb: The journalism-oriented Pulitzer Board shows much better judgment when the novelist in question writes like a journalist."

Laura Miller's candid discussion of the Pulitzer judging process rings true for two of the three times I've been a nominating judge, and apparently the time Oscar did, too.

OK, now back to Ethelbert's question.

Over dinner we talked up a story outline for the play and August, feeling playful, decided he would poke me in the ribs by saying, "I'll write about the poor black people, Chuck can write about the middle class ones." *Ouch*. (I was tempted to throw a salt shaker on the table at him.) And so the evening ended. But the very next day I discovered in my fax machine five pages of the play August had written overnight. They were good and he was serious about this collaboration. But, alas, neither Oscar or I ever got our acts together.

So somewhere in my files there are five August Wilson pages for a play that almost was. I'm willing to bet there is a copy of those pages among August's papers, too.



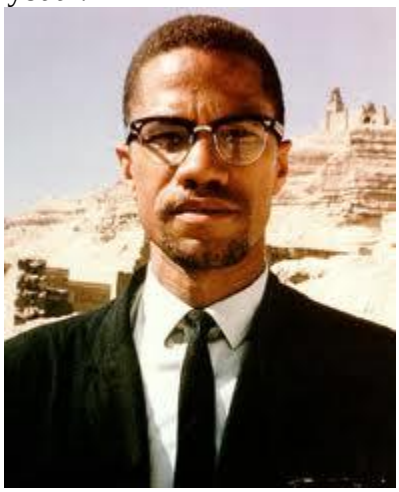
Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 4:50 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/almost-august-and-other-things.html

Monday, July 11, 2011

DOES EVERYBODY LOVE MALCOLM?

As E. Ethelbert Miller notes, I don't write often about Malcolm X. But that doesn't mean I don't appreciate some of the things he said. For example, I always find myself asking the question that he once put to a reporter about some issue: "Is it good for black people?" If so, then he was for it. I feel the same way.

To be honest, though, I don't relate to or identify with Malcolm during his years with the Nation of Islam when he relentlessly caricatured and criticized black people who were Christians, and publicly represented the racial separatism of Elijah Muhammad. Nor do I identify with the criminal behavior of his pre-NOI youth.



After his pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm says in his autobiography made available to us by Alex Haley that his understanding of Islam, namely the Ummah, broadened to include Muslims of all backgrounds and races. This, I feel, was a positive step forward in his spiritual evolution, which was tragically cut short by a rain of assassins's bullets. If he had lived, I like to think that he would have moved in the direction of W. Deen Mohammed, leader of the Muslim American Society, and a person I admired. Or perhaps he would have adopted the stance of one of my old college friends from the 1960s, Omar Abdul-Malik, who was a student leader during the heady days of Black Studies creation at the undergraduate college we attended.

When I last spoke with Omar he was writing a book on Islam, a work he hoped would clarify many misunderstandings. (That book may well be published by now.)Among these, he said, is that our division of cultural experiences into “East” and “West” is yet another false dualism. “Theologically, there isn’t enough difference between Christianity and Islam to even talk about.” When I asked him why *he*---a college student I knew as a Catholic, then a Methodist back in the 1960s---converted to Islam, he said that if he told people he was Methodist in the 1960s when many young black Americans were leaving the church, they thought he was square; but given the respect that Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam had in the 1960s, when Omar said he was a Muslim, people were impressed. “Islam,” Omar told me, “made it easier for me to be the square my Christian parents wanted me to be.” He said Islam gave him a moral life. Ninety-five percent

of what his Christian parents taught him was *in* Islam. So he became a Muslim, a word that literally means, “one who submits to the will of God.” Thus, before the birth of the prophet Muhammad, Jews and Christians often called themselves “Muslims.” At the heart of Islam---Omar said---we find the ideal of brotherhood, and judging others by their deeds. Although the term “jihad” has been twisted by fundamentalists, my friend informed me that what it means is “inner struggle,” a critical self-examination aimed at the goal of achieving peace.

These are spiritual ideals he lives in his own life. Omar put matters this way in a brief sermon he delivered in the Memorial Church at Harvard, entitled, "Christianity and Islam: Two Arrows Shot from the Same Bow":

"As a Methodist convert to Islam, the son of Catholic parents, having a Jewish brother and a sister who is a Pentecostal, born-again Christian minister, I have been forced by necessity to look for points of agreement regarding faith, if for no other reason than to survive Thanksgiving and the occasional family reunion. My siblings and I agree that our chosen spiritual orientations reflect our individual longings to advance along the road to enlightenment that our parents directed us to as children, and that was extolled by our teachers during our youth at Asbury Methodist Church…Perhaps by retracing the trajectories of our personal religious arrows we can realize the Unity of Faith and discover the Spirituality in Mankind.”

That is the vision I hope Malcolm X, as a Muslim, would have expressed had he lived.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:21 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/does-everybody-love-malcolm.html

Tuesday, July 12, 2011

THE OUTSIDER BY RICHARD WRIGHT

E. Ethelbert Miller asks, "Might you consider *The Outsider* by Richard Wright to be overlooked because of the success and attention given to *Native Son*? Is *The Outsider* a more challenging book?

One of the criticisms that Ralph Ellison made of his mentor was that Richard Wright never wrote a story with a protagonist as complex as himself. With *The Outsider,* Wright corrected this problem (if indeed it was a problem) in his character Cross Damon (that name is just freighted with symbolism; and it's where I got the name for Faith Cross in *Faith and the Good Thing*). It's my understanding that with this novel Wright hoped to recreate the success he had with *Native Son.*

Now, it's been a long time since I read *The Outsider*, but I will never forget its first 90 to 100 pages because they are a perfect example of a compelling premise or "ground situation," and of "organic story flow," which every writer strives to achieve.
When the story opens Cross, an intellectual who works at the post office in Chicago (a job Wright hated and described often with contempt), is mired in problems that range from being a black man in the racist era of segregation to being married and having a pregnant, teenaged girlfriend he met at a liquor store. He is as alienated as a man could possibly be, and reads dense, canonical works of philosophy secretly because his less educated black coworkers would see him as being strange for doing so. All the black misery of *Native Son* and *Lawd Today* (the original title for which was "Cesspool") is here in Cross's life. But when he is riding on the subway, a freak accident occurs on the train (that symbol of modernity), killing many around him. He escapes the carnage and realizes that he is assumed to be among the dead. In one stroke, he is freed from his former life, is *tabula rasa*, and can recreate himself as he pleases. (Or so he thinks.)

From a creative writing standpoint, and from that of existentialism (Wright was pals with Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in Paris when he wrote the novel, and was studying Husserl's *Phenomenology*), these first 90 pages are what John Gardner would call "a vivid and continuous dream." Everything one could want in a story is there. Ideas crackle and hum beneath concrete action.

But when Cross checks into a hotel to ponder his new freedom, he encounters someone who knows him (if memory serves), and he commits the first of many murders, thus inscribing into his new "essence" (the meaning of his life) the worst of all possible actions. It's at this point, I believe, that Wright's novel begins to fall apart. The story and most imaginative possibilities slip away from him with that first murder. Wright cut his teeth as a child in Mississippi on violent stories in the pulps, and nearly all his stories resort to some form of violence to move the plot along, which prompted James Baldwin to remark that in Wright's fiction violence takes the place where sex would normally be.

Worse, as *The Outsider* progresses, Wright falls into didactic, essayist dialogue---long, tedious speeches---which is one of the things that simply ruins a philosophical fiction. That is, the abstract ideas (and lecturing the reader) overwhelm character and event. The perfect embodiment of ideas *in* character and situation in the opening 90 pages is lost, giving way to Cross talking for pages and pages *about* ideas, which Wright fails to imaginatively dramatize. What is the principle here? Ideas must be given *flesh*, incarnated in character, setting, props, even in the weather and, most important of all, by showing us characters revealed through action.

The old saying about novelists, "heroes in the beginning, cowards at the end," applies, sadly, to *The Outsider*. It happens often that a writer begins with a powerful premise in Act One of a story, but fails to make the best choices in developing it in Act Two, then toward the end simply *wills* the story forward in order to finish it (This happens, sad to say, in Andre Dubus III's *House of Sand and Fog*, which is wonderful until the last third of the story), manipulating his (or her) characters like puppets and putting into their mouths exposition instead of speeches they would naturally make. To a degree we see this problem in *Native Son.* The first two books are all dramatization, *showing* not *telling.* (It's all scene after scene, as in a well-made play.) However, in the third book, much time is taken with explanatory speeches by Bigger's lawyer. Max *tells* us what we've already powerfully experienced. There, didactic, essayist dialogue is perhaps less offensive than in *The Outsider* because---well, because lawyers in fiction and film *do* give windy speeches. But in *The Outsider*, that approach is less forgivable.

I think I understand the problem Wright faced. I wrote a quick, first draft of *Middle Passage*. Things worked well through the mutiny when the Allmueri take over the ship, the Republic. But after that, I lost control of the story. I had the remaining crew and Africans stop at an island during their wanderings, where they meet an entirely new tribe of people (I was still thinking at that time of *Gulliver's Travels* since the novel's working title was *Rutherford's Travels*), and First Mate Peter Cringle stays with these newly introduced people in that version. The others wander on, encounter a ghost ship, and it is the cabin boy Tommy (not cook Josiah Squibb) who returns to New Orleans with Rutherford, where after a year they discover Isadora has married Rutherford's very spiritual brother Jackson (Think about it; he's far better suited for her than Rutherford, and in this version came to New Orleans looking for him), and they have a child they name after Rutherford, who they believe was lost at sea. Rather than let these two people he loves most in the world know he is alive, and thereby disrupt their apparently happy lives, he and Tommy go back to sea. He is, after all, a true sailor by that time.

But that plotting of the second half of the novel, while fun to play around with, was wrong. Just *wrong.* A mistake. (But one can't really know it's a mistake until one sees it on the page.) The unfolding of events in a story should feel, not arbitrary, but inexorable and relentless and driven

by cause and effect. (And an episodic plot, which would be perfectly fine for, say, comedy, would also have been wrong for a rousing sea adventure story.) So I ditched all those pages and decided that after the slave ship leaves Africa, Rutherford would not again set foot on land for the rest of the story. That little excursion to the aforementioned island broke the suspense that comes from knowing at any moment the characters might all wind up at the bottom of the briny. And as I re-plotted the story, I discovered the parallel mutiny against Captain Falcon brewing among the white crew. Furthermore, I decided Rutherford and Isadora *had* to be reunited by the novel's end, like Odysseus and Penelope, because they deserved that reconciliation.

All of this is simply to point out (I'm wearing my creative writing teacher hat now) that plot, as John Gardner once wrote, is the novelist's equivalent to the philosopher's argument. Plot must have internal coherence. And developing that takes time (time to be surprised by the characters, time to be ambushed by possibilities not in one's original outline for the story) and often several false starts. (For example, Hermann Hesse put *Siddhartha* aside for a year because he wasn't sure how to end the story.) *The Outsider*, in my view, was a promising novel that simply needed more time for creative incubation. It was written too quickly (perhaps because Wright was eager to recreate his success with *Native Son*) and thus it fails to fully realize its dramatic and imaginative possibilities. But, believe me, those first 90 pages are so pure a novelist would gladly give his first-born child to have imagined them.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 1:08 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/outsider-by-richard-wright.html

Friday, July 15, 2011

THE PATH, THE 10 PRECEPTS, THE LIFE...

E. Ethelbert Miller asked, "What is the major distraction that often finds people 'straying from the path'?"

I can best answer this on the basis of my personal experience. In my last post, I mentioned the 10 Precepts, which are commonly found among many Buddhist traditions. They are taken by laity and monks alike, and I took them as a layperson or *upasaka* in the Soto Zen school with mendicant monk and peace activist Claude AnShin Thomas. The first ten Precepts I took are as follows:

1). Do not kill.

2). Do not steal.

3). Do not engage in improper sexual conduct.

4). Do not lie.

5). Do not indulge in intoxicating substances.

6). Do not speak of other's errors and faults.

7). Do not elevate self and blame others.

8). Do not be withholding, but instead generous.

9). Do not give way to anger.

10). Do not defame the Buddha, the Dharma, or the Sangha.

(In Thailand, the last five Theravada Precepts my guide Uthai took when he *lived* in the monastery---where young boys go if they want to continue their education---and before he briefly became a monk, were: 6). Only two meals a day, and none taken after mid-day; 7). No wearing of make-up or jewelry; 8). No amusements, no movies but TV was okay; 9). No sleeping on a "high" bed; and 10). No touching of gold (or money). In general, monks take over 240 vows.)

I knew the Precepts long before I engaged in the formal ceremony, because all my adult life I've tried to live most of them. But the ceremony *does* make a difference in one's attitude---I experienced the same seriousness that I did forty-one years ago when I made my marriage vows. The ceremony made the Precepts feel as if they were truly a part of me.

Whenever I describe these Precepts to American friends in the academic and art worlds, many of them balk and say, "I can't *do* that" when they hear #5 ("Do not indulge in intoxicating substances"), #6 and #7 ("Do not speak of other's errors and faults," and "Do not elevate self and blame others"), and especially #9 ("Do not give way to anger").

In their honesty, they admit how difficult it is to be non-judgmental in our society---a society that encourages our being trigger-happy with snap judgments; a society that so often portrays the angry person as a powerful person, and regards finding fault as a proper intellectual activity that demonstrates our critical acumen, shows our intellectual superiority and, by virtue of that, feeds our egos. In this culture, then, it is difficult to let go of pride (*naama*), and anger, which is a form of violence and one of the three defilements, along with greed and ignorance. In *Buddhist Ethics*, Saddhatissa points out that, "By allowing anger to arise I am like one who wants to hit another and picks up a burning ember or excrement and by so doing either burn or soil myself." Although simple and straightforward (and, of course, demanding), the Precepts embody the spirit of the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the *paramitas*, and in them we can see the distillation of Buddhist metaphysics.

And for me the Precept I must work most often on is anger. An anger that ever so often---but far less often these days after over thirty years of meditation--- arises from my (dualistic) conditioning to see things as "right" or "wrong," and then to judge things on that basis. Fortunately, I'm able to see my anger the instantly it arises, to know that anger is present in my mind, that it is impermanent and not me, and to psychically take a step back and study it until its energy dissipates and it disappears. That process takes place in a matter of seconds. And then I can act on a situation without anger, selfish desire, or attachment to results.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:45 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/path-10-precepts-life.html

Friday, July 15, 2011

CHARLES JOHNSON ON BUDDHISM

E. Ethelbert Miller asks several questions: "Did you have long conversations with anyone prior to becoming a Buddhist? When should a person take his/her vows? How important is it to belong to a community? In your life have you ever experienced a moment of 'increased' awareness or enlightenment? What is the major distraction that often finds people 'straying' from the path?"

I will need two posts to address all these questions.

In this post, let me start by saying that I've been in conversations with Buddhists all over America since 1967, first with my teachers in the Asian martial arts, then with my professors, white, Chinese and Japanese, who taught the undergraduate and graduate courses I took on eastern philosophy (Hinduism and Taoism), and with others in the American Buddhist community such as Robert Thurman, a spokesman for the Dalai Lama, who I have lectured for twice at Columbia University and the Tibet House in NYC; mendicant monk Claude AnShin Thomas, with whom I took the ceremony for embracing the Precepts (I will discuss these in the next post); the publishers and editors for publications I write for like *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review, Shambhala Sun,* and *Buddhadharma*; and many others during the course of my sixty years of living.

Probably one of the most moving, transformative encounters I had was in December, 1997 with a young abbot in the town of Phrae, who was building a meditation center in northern Thailand. I was there on a Microsoft-sponsored research trip to write an article on "The Asian Sense of Beauty" for their now-defunct on-line travel magazine *Mungo Park*. (My editor asked me to see if the rumor was true that Thai women are the most beautiful in the world; a comparable rumor among world-travelers is that Turks are supposed to be the most handsome men.) Let me talk first about my experience of that country---a poor, developing nation in need of jobs and education for its people, a place that is not free of political corruption and has feudal conditions yet is spiritually rich like India---before I discuss the abbot.

I knew as soon as my plane landed in Thailand, a country the size of Texas, that I was spiritually "home." It was like a trip to the Holy Land, one I didn't know I was making. But as I stepped off the plane, I felt a peace and calm descend upon me. I felt that so powerfully that during my first three days there I only slept two hours a day, because everything I saw manifested all the things I'd been studying about Theravada Buddhism since the 1960s. At Bangkok airport, I asked a young Thai taxi driver pushing a cart of luggage for directions, and he said to me, "You American? Welcome, soul brother," and he slapped my palm.

Thais date their history from the Buddha's birth---B.E., the "Buddha Era." In America we have posters of rock stars everywhere; in Chiang Mai ("New City") all the posters I saw were of revered Buddhist monks. There, we find as many statues of revered monks as we do the Buddha. At Doi Sutherp mountain temple, a Thai artist as he was working looked at me and my Scottish guide (I also had a young Thai guide named Uthai who spent 11 years in a monastery and was a

monk for 9 days), and said, "You black, he white---you friends," and he seemed enormously pleased by that.

For two weeks I traveled to elephant training camps (100 years ago, there were 500 majestic elephants---which date back to end of the dinosaur age---for every person in Thailand, but in 1997 there were about 1300; there were once many species of elephants, now there are two, Indian and African) and to out-of-the-way locations most visitors never see (an illegal, wild animal market, for example, where I could not take pictures; I will not describe the things for sale there); to a Hmong New Year's house blessings conducted by a shaman, and the home of a Hmong opium-eater, who demonstrated for me how he took his drug. I interviewed the Thai people about their sense of beauty, performed many rituals and made many donations. In the journal I kept, I wrote, "Seeing Thailand, I realize what I've missed in America for 49 years, and why I was so powerfully drawn to Buddhism in my teens. This is a 'way of life' where the spirit and a worldly existence have not been separated---they are *riabroi*."

That Thai term has no English equivalent. *Riabroi* means "Everything together at once, complete, sensible, beautiful, perfect and natural." When the plane I took from an area near the Laos border (I spent a few days not only with Hmong hill tribesmen but also the Mabri "Yellow Leaf" forest dwellers who work for them) returned to Chiang Mai, the flight attendant said, "We have landed and everything is *riabroi*." A woman I interviewed said rather than having a handsome man, she'd much prefer being with one who was *riabroi*.
In my journal I also wrote: "It is as if the momentary 'home' I experience inwardly during meditation is all around me, externalized, outside and public everywhere I turn or gaze: the inner is outer, the Buddhist spirit manifested in the material world---in custom, ritual, objects for sale, paintings in my Empress Hotel room, in women (gasp!), in the greetings of hotel workers....I haven't met anyone here who is desperately trying to be funny or clever...There is something amazing about being in a culture, a country, where people aren't constantly criticizing and putting each other down, as we do in America. "Face' is lost if you disrespect another..'Respect' seems to permeate this culture---for the royal family, the spirits of the dead (animism) as seen in their spirit-houses, for foreigners, visitors, for monks. So far I have seen nothing disrespected. A young singer/showgirl I interviewed in a garden restaurant was asked by my Scottish guide if she'd ever seen a black person before. She said, yes, and she felt the ones she'd met had 'a good heart.'

"This culture is old, steeped in the compassionate spirit of the Dharma (and commingled with the animism that preceded Buddhism). Thais are always smiling, making themselves smile as a way to minimize conflict...It is as if the best of religion's principles (Buddhism) texture this society from top to bottom. The traditional crafts are here---from weaving to elephant training---and the modern is here, from computers to Latin music in the garden restaurant. But Thais value most a 'character' based on the model provided by the Buddhist monks....Perhaps, just perhaps, this journey was placed before me now, on the eve of my fiftieth birthday, for a reason; that is, so that I might find the energy and the resolve for the last stretch of living a life fully committed to the spirit. Question: in early 1998, should I join a Buddhist temple in Seattle? I *know* beyond all doubt after this trip, that Buddhism has been, and will be central to my life. Isn't it time, at age 50, to go yet another step along the Way? If that decision is made, the next ten years can be truly something thrilling to look forward to. Years of practice and meaning, greater perfection of the Dharma, and preparation for the final acts of this incarnation."

(A few years later, I *was* enrolled as one of the first members of Daigo-ji Temple in Japan by my friend, the late Zen priest Martin Hughes, one of the only two white abbots in Osaka, Japan in the early '90s; he once trained in the kung-fu studio my friends and I operated in Seattle, but died during a trip to the Philippines where he went to do work helping street kids---he ate something and died from food poisoning---and his temple closed.)

I could go on and on about Thailand, but now I should talk about the abbot.

Our two-hour encounter was inspiring. I came prepared with twelve Dharma questions for him. When we were introduced his first remark was about how my hair was curly like that of the Buddha. (Women at the wild animal market also found my hair fascinating and asked me what I did to make it curly.) Normally, he spoke to visitors for only thirty minutes. But we hit it off immediately. He told me he would never be part of the religious hierarchy because it is drenched in politics. Instead of being involved with that, he was devoting himself to building a meditation center for the common people. We talked for two hours about a great many things: the nature of merit (karma), how Buddhism is about freedom even from Buddhist concepts, texts, and traditions. He showed me a 200-year-old palm-leaf manuscript, and one on paper that was 100-years old. These texts (he said) were just bridges that (like rituals) must one day be left behind. He emphasized the mind's development, the necessity of its freedom from illusion. His focus was on mindfulness at all times, *i.e.*, knowing where one's mind is, on awareness during breathing exercises. And he valued meditation, which is something not true for everyone in Thailand. He studied me and predicted I would realize Buddha-nature.

For this abbot, truth was found in a free mind that is completely aware of the moment, of itself, and what it is doing, and of the body. He saw the many rituals he was called upon to perform as simply being "bridges" to Buddhism's deeper truths, merely "shadows" of the truth, but he dutifully met the laity where they lived, doing the rituals they asked for ---blessing a home, etc. He told me that some would understand the Dharma in 7 days, others would take 7 months, and still others wouldn't understand after 7 years, if at all. I performed one ritual with him; he gave me a meditation rosary, then he tied a string around my wrist and instructed me to wear it until it fell off, which I did---for several months and during the 6-week book tour I did

the following year for *Dreamer*. He told me when his meditation center was completed, I could stay there anytime.

Lastly, the abbot expressed the view that Buddhism would be good for Americans. Why? Because America is a developed country, he said, one where people were free, and had the leisure time to study Buddhism and practice meditation. That was not true for the average person in Thailand. The American political system is admired world-wise, and especially in this country, where next door in Burma (Thai and Burmese cultures overlap) Aung San Suu Kyi was kept in house arrest for so long.

I was filled to overflowing on my flight back to America. (I returned with a begging bowl and monk's robe, which is still in its plastic wrapping, items I purchased at a place where monks shop, and I'd *never* dare put on that robe, but these items rest near one of my places for meditation and are reminders for me of the life I would probably lead if I was not a householder and writer/artist with worldly duties.) However, before my plane landed at Sea-Tac airport, the on-line magazine *Mungo Park* was canceled and its editors reassigned. In other words, Microsoft paid me for a glorious, life-altering, $5,000. research trip and an article that I no longer was expected to write (but I still have a notebook full of material I may some day use).

So to answer Ethelbert's question: yes, community---the *Sangha*---and communing with others is important, one of the Three Jewels of Buddhism in which we take refuge (along with the Buddha and the Dharma). But as the abbot of Phrae told me, one progresses alone, what one experiences can not be shared by another, and nothing can interfere with one's progress to liberation.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:45 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/charles-johnson-on-buddhism.html

Sunday, July 17, 2011

DEATH IS A BRIDGE WE ALL MUST CROSS

E. Ethelbert Millers asks, "How has your life been changed by the deaths of family members and friends over the years? How does a Buddhist deal with actual loss and not simply the philosophical understanding of it?"

The first and most important thing to say is that the Buddhist experience is simply the *human* experience. So there is nothing "special" that differentiates it from everyday living. It is ordinary life, right *here*, right *now*, lived mindfully. (And why, pray, isn't the "philosophical understanding" of something adequate for "dealing" with it? Do I detect a bit of anti-intellectual bias here?)

Let me consider the question in terms of my personal experience.

Travel back to late summer, 1981. (Shift to present tense.) I'm sitting in a conference room at WGBH/Boston with actor Glynn Turman and my two friends, film-makers Fred Barzyk and Olivia Tappan with whom I worked on the 1978 docu-drama "Charlie Smith and the Fritter Tree" (That was Olivia's title for the movie, which I always disliked, but we voted on titles and she won) We're there to discuss a new script I agreed to write for Glynn and his (at the time) wife Aretha Franklin, a version of the "Frankie and Johnny Story."I'm on my first sabbatical from the University of Washington. This is the summer when I lived for half a year alone in a small studio unit at John Muir Apartments in Daley City, and took BART every day to KQED, where I worked as one of two writer/producers for the second season of the black family drama, "Up and Coming." The other writer/producer was my buddy Art Washington. Back in Seattle, my wife Joan is pregnant with our daughter, and when I'm not doing teleplays I'm training in the evening at the Choy Li Fut school of grandmaster Doc Fai Wong and immersing myself in the theory and practice of meditation. This will be a year full of transitions: birth, death, several screen-writing gigs, and day and night spiritual practice.

We've just begun discussing the "Frankie and Johnny" project when the phone rings. Fred Barzyk picks it up. He looks at me, a bit surprised, and says, "It's for you." The room becomes silent. Everyone's eyes focus on me. I take the phone and discover it's my best friend on the other end. My wife. I hear her say, *Your mother died this morning*. I close my eyes. I nod. This news

is not entirely unexpected. My mother had gone into the hospital for a surgery (which she would not survive). I'd been by her bed side in Evanston Hospital just a few weeks earlier. Slowly and softly, I thank my wife for telling me. I say, "I'm leaving right now." I hand the phone back to Fred, feeling a bit dazed, even disembodied. Two or three seconds pass before I can speak, and everyone is wondering what is going on. I say, "My mother... died...this morning." As soon as the last syllable leaves my lips, Glynn Turman is flying across the conference room---so fast it's like he teleported himself---throwing his arms around me in a tight hug. He knows what I'm feeling.

(Shift now to past tense.) Barzyk and Tappan wasted no time in arranging my flight from Logan airport to O'Hare. I was back in Evanston that evening, the flight feeling as if it had taken place in a dream. Using a telephone in the kitchen that night, my father fielded an unbroken stream of calls, explaining to my mother's friends and our relatives in the Midwest and South all the details of her death. Over and over he did that. Then, during the ninth or tenth call, as he recounted his experience of her last hours for the umpteenth time, his voice shattered. He turned his head away and held the phone toward me. "Chuck," he said, "you finish this." My father hurried from the kitchen. It was the first time I had ever seen this strong man in tears. I took a deep breath and completed the phone call for him. My mother's death would only deepen our bond as father and son.

Black Americans raised in the South in the 1920s, like my father, aunts and uncles, know how to deal with death. They are *always* prepared to send off the deceased with dignity. The bereaved don't have to do much because one's kinfolk know every detail required for the ritual of transitions such as this one. And don't let me forget to mention all that food people bring by the house after the funeral, that way we have of affirming life for those still among the living. My father's house was packed with family and friends (and food), all sharing memories of my mother, and doing for both of us whatever they could do. Two women told me how I didn't have to worry about my Dad, because they would "take care" of him. I knew exactly what they meant. During all his years of marriage, my father was never unfaithful. Not once. Even though a few women (according to my Mom) expressed their willingness. But now, with Mom gone, he was in their eyes...available.

Standing at the pulpit during my mother's funeral, I read a tribute for her, one I knew all my adult life I would some day have to deliver (one of those dreaded duties a colleague of mine once said was the part of being a grown-up that's not much fun), detailing with every skill I'd learned as a literary writer and could muster at that moment how it was *her* artistic and intellectual interests that became my own when I was a child---and were responsible for my being a writer and someone congenitally curious about all aspects of the world, East and West, that enveloped us. How she was a bibliophile with the soul of an actress, a woman who was wonderfully ironic, occasionally cynical, and capable of devastating scorn for whatever she saw as hypocritical or phony. (Those literary skills, I daresay, were honed not just to serve book publishers and readers I would never meet, but more importantly for *this* long-anticipated moment when my mother deserved a praise song that would capture the essence of her days on this earth.) When I sat down again next to my father, always a man of few words, he said, "Chuck, that was beautiful." I patted his hand. I promised him that, of course, when *his* time came, I would be there to do the same for him. He could count on that.

What I'm saying, I guess, is that we deal with "loss"---especially the loss of a parent or loved one---by meticulously and mindfully doing the filial duties required to honor them and celebrate their lives one last time. Love lives in every little detail we bring to the time-honored rituals used to send them on their way. (All my life, I tried to be a good Confucian son so I knew what I had to do.) There is simply no time to dwell on oneself. Or to give in to grief. That comes later.

And so it did, two weeks after my mother was buried and I went back to work on "Up and Coming." (My buddy Art covered for me---had my back, as we say---during my time away from KQED; I never returned to the "Frankie and Johnny" project.) One night I went to the supermarket a couple of miles from John Muir Apartments. I found myself walking back to my lonely studio unit filled with works of philosophy, grocery bags in my arms, on a long stretch of road where all of a sudden there were no cars. Or people. Or streetlights. For a few minutes I was alone in darkness for as far ahead and behind as I could see, the clack of my boot heels on concrete the only sound in my ears. Almost involuntarily I stopped walking and stood motionless. My wife and Evanston kinfolk were far, far away. The enormity of the night sky overwhelmed me, its indifference to the hopes, cares, and suffering of those living on our little speck of light in the Milky Way galaxy. Right then, right there on that shadow-swept California street, my mother's voice, a flicker flash vision of her, filled my mind---as did a flood of thirty-three years of remembered experiences we shared---and for the first time in my life I felt (or believed I felt) what it was like to be orphaned. (August Wilson nodded with recognition when I described it that way to him one evening.) To *know* in my bones there would never be another person in this world who would give me a mother's unconditional, selfless love. No one who would ever care for me in quite the way this black woman did. The world, I felt, was poorer for her passing. And I was poorer, too. Alone in the darkness, I fully surrendered to that wrenching feeling of abandonment, let it be in all its prismatic shades and hues and emotionally variegated colors---I neither rejected nor ran from it---and cried until I felt cleansed. Emptied. It was a moment of pain that deserved to be experienced in all its singular, exquisite fullness. And then, miraculously, the pain transformed into thanksgiving. Into a profound gratitude for all she had given to me. Then, taking a deep breath, picking up my bags of groceries, I "let go" of that experience; and let her go, too, so that she might continue on her journey.

And I walked on.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 11:01 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/death-is-bridge-we-all-must-cross.html

Tuesday, July 19, 2011

CARTOONS AS VISUAL POEMS

E.Ethelbert Miller asks, "How does one create good political cartoons without being offensive? When is one man's joke another man's curse? Does laughter bring us together as a community or does it simply reflect the lasting pain of our scars? Are cartoons visual poems?"

I absolutely *love* the idea that cartoons are"visual poems." In the hands of our best comic artists, a beautifully rendered, elegant drawing is just that. Even so, it's likely *some*one will take offense when the imagination is distilled into powerful images. Let me give you an example.

All during my undergraduate years in college, I drew every kind of assignment for my college newspaper *The Daily Egyptian*, and for the local paper, *The Southern Illinoisan*, from 1966 to 1972. I remember drawing in 1967 when I was 19-years-old what I thought was a completely innocent, even bland cartoon about campus life for the *Egyptian*. It was just a panel cartoon, not a political one intended for the editorial page. Just a run-of-the-mill gag involving two couples doing something students typically do. But here's the trick: to keep myself from becoming bored with it, I let my imagination go where it would, and tried something I'd never done before. Then I dropped the drawing off at the newspaper's office, and thought no more about it.

But a day or so later, I received a phone call in my dormitory room from the secretary of the chairman for the Department of Journalism, a seasoned old newsman who started that department. She said he wanted to talk to me, but she wouldn't say why. I was baffled. (I *hate* it when people do that to me---say they want to talk about something in a mysterious tone, but won't tell me why until later. It's a maddeningly rude and annoying thing to do to someone, and these days I refuse to meet with anyone until they tell me what they want to talk about.) He was a fan of my work---I knew that---and years later he would give me an award in 1977, saying he'd only known two geniuses in his life, and both were cartoonists. So what the hell, I wondered, was wrong?

When I entered his office, he asked me to take a seat. He looked frustrated and uncomfortable, as if he was about to perform a very distasteful chore. He lifted my cartoon from his desk and said, sadly, "We can't run this. Not in *this* part of Illinois."

What was the problem? Well, it was simply this: I had drawn two integrated couples in that cartoon. A white boy dating a black girl, and a black boy dating a white girl. There were people in southern Illinois, which sided with the Confederacy during the Civil War, and where outside town there still stood an old barn from which slaves had once been sold, who would be enraged by that drawing in 1967. This experience was my introduction to media censorship. My initial reaction as an artist, my first gut response, was two-fold: I felt anger *and* the desire to push the envelope even farther, and if someone got offended, then so be it. Over the decades I would---both as a professional cartoonist and a writer---experience other situations like the one I just described. So where am I going with this?

It all comes down, I think, to whose ox is being gored. Today, if a young cartoonist did a variation on the one I drew in 1967 and showed a gay or lesbian couple, some readers would be outraged. I say, *let* them be outraged. If someone is so thin-skinned and insecure that a simple drawing---a visual poem---can send them into a tailspin, then perhaps they *need* that cold splash of water in the face when they're sipping their morning coffee and looking at their newspaper.

Our nation's cartoonists, whose ancestry reaches back to the first one (Ben Franklin with his "Join, or Die" drawing in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* on May 9, 1745) and Thomas Nast, are protected by the First Amendment, and are always more than happy to perform that public service. At this very moment, Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard is under constant police protection because he published a drawing of the prophet Muhammad wearing a bomb in his turban. Westergaard knew what he was doing. His drawing is elegant and perfectly captures the point he wishes to make about how terrorists use religion. At the moment he probably feels a little bit like Socrates when the Athenians handed him the hemlock to drink. Whether one is a philosopher or a political cartoonist, one understands that the ire of some readers or listeners simply comes with the territory. Our job is to shake people up. Especially smug ones.

In 1871, the very corrupt William "Boss" Tweed is accredited with saying, "Stop them damn pictures!" when he saw one of Thomas Nast's' anti-Trust cartoons. "I don't care what the papers write about me. My constituency can't read. But, damn it, they can see pictures."

That, I believe, says all one needs to say on this subject.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 12:17 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/cartoons-as-visual-poems.html

Wednesday, July 20, 2011

BUDDHIST FICTION: A COMMENT BY CHARLES JOHNSON

E. Ethelbert Miller asks a series of linked questions: "There have been a number of books published that collect "Buddhist" stories. How original can these stories be? For example, your story "Prince of the Ascetics" is a retelling of the Buddha's life. Do these types of stories simply offer pleasure to the reader? Are they didactic and convey the principles a Buddhist should follow? How risky is it to begin a story with - 'Once upon a time...' and not be seen as just writing for children?"

First, before I settle down to business, let me recommend to readers a lovely, recent book that collects contemporary Buddhist stories. The title is *Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction*, edited by Kate Wheeler (Wisdom Publications, 2004). This work includes my foreword, which is a reflection on Buddhism and the aesthetic experience.

As for the story under discussion today, "Prince of the Ascetics," it was, like so many of my stories for the last 13 years, originally written for the yearly Bedtime Stories fund-raiser for Humanities Washington. Our theme that year was "night watch," so the story's title at that time was *Night Watch, 500 BCE*, because when he achieved awakening the Buddha sat through three watches of the night. It was first published in *StoryQuarterly*. Since then it has been reprinted in *18 Lies and 3 Truths*, the *StoryQuarterly* Annual in 2007; in the popular Buddhist magazine *Shambhala Sun* in 2008; in *The Best Buddhist Writing, 2008*, edited by Melvin McLeod; *The Best Spiritual Writing 2010*, edited by Philip Zaleski; and in *Philosophy: An Innovative Introduction: Fictive Narrative, Primary Texts, and Responsive Writing* co-authored by Michael Boylan and myself. Naturally, I hope all my stories bring a reader some degree of pleasure, and that none are experienced as didactic.

It's true that for the last 2,600 years there have been countless stories told about Shakyamuni Buddha. And there is, of course, an important *reason* for that. In all of human history, this is one of the greatest stories every told. It has proven itself worthy of being retold over and over for two millennia. Like an old, old coin that has traversed continents and many cultures, picking up something from each one, and being passed down through centuries, it bears the sweat and palm oil of billions who've handled it. *As* a narrative, it must be regarded as a story that contains the collective experience of mankind. It is universal. It is timeless. It is, one might say, an essential part of our human inheritance. Of our very humanness.

But something I noticed is that in all the accounts of Prince Gautama Siddhartha's journey from a life of privilege and sensual pleasure in his father Shuddodana's palace to his night of awakening, very little time was spent describing or imagining the six, difficult years he spent *between* those two periods as an ascetic practicing life-threatening austerities in the traditional Hindu manner with five followers. Across southeast Asia, there are statues of him during this period that depict the future Buddha as being emaciated, gaunt, and skeletal. In some he looks like a corpse that just crawled out of its grave. My friend John Whalen-Bridge at the National University of Singapore, a Buddhist and a scholar of Buddhism, and I see this section of the story differently. I think that for JWB, this period of Shakyamuni's journey represents failure and for that reason humanizes him, *i.e.*, that it brings him and his journey closer to us mere mortals because we all can relate to the experience of falling short of our goals and being fallible. My interpretation of those years is different, as readers of this tale will see. But I'm open to accepting JWB's interpretation, too, and I think it's good for us to argue, debate, and disagree about the meaning of those years.

And, yes, this is a *tale* that begins with "Once upon a time," because I always prefer to write in the yarn-and-tale-telling tradition. That phrase, *Once upon a time*, far from being words that limit a story to children, performs something like the phenomenological *epoche*. It invites us to "bracket" the Natural Attitude, as Husserl called it, and set momentarily aside our assumptions, prejudices, presuppositions, and what we *think* we know so that we can experience the world anew, and often with a sense of enchantment. If you like, think of *Once upon a time* as a phrase that speaks to the child in all of us, one who is listening to the tale as it is told by a beloved parent or grandparent, a child who has not yet fallen into cynicism, pessimism, suspicion, bitterness, negativism, and *Schadenfreude*.

Yet, ironically, the narrator of this story, one of the Buddha's followers named Mahanama, is a miserable man who suffers from exactly those all-too-familiar attitudes. He is jealous of the privileges young Shakyamuni enjoyed and abandoned, and he *wants* him to fail in his quest for liberation and awakening. (I used artistic license in characterizing the Buddha's followers in this chapter of his life because so little of what I've read presents them in detail. We know their names but almost nothing about them as individuals.) This story is very much about class and caste. It is about a man who pushes himself to death's door for six hard years in order to find an alternative to egotism, selfishness, greed, illusion, dualism, lust and ignorance.

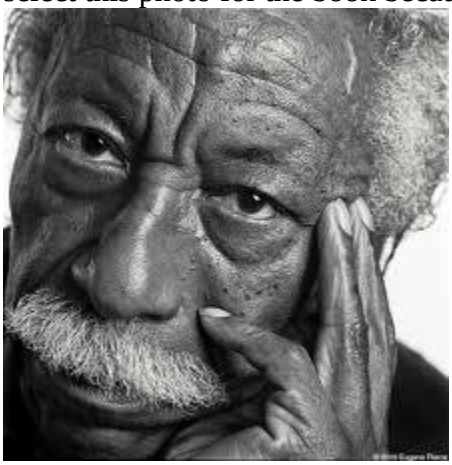
That is the period in the Buddha's story that I wanted to imaginatively inhabit---when he discovers the Middle Way---and with the hope that it would help readers experience the tale from a different (and rather modern) viewpoint, and possibly with new meanings that rise to the surface based on this specific, dramatic rendition.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:43 PM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/buddhist-fiction-comment-by-charles.html

Friday, July 22, 2011

PARKS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

E. Ethelbert Miller asks, "You recently wrote the introduction to THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF GORDON PARKS, a book published by The Library of Congress. How were you selected for this project? What was your opinion of Parks before you wrote your short essay? Did it change as you learned more about his career? Do you feel his work as a photographer overshadows his other contributions to African American culture? One notices on the cover of THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF GORDON PARKS, a picture of a black woman in Harlem looking out a window with her dog. Did you select this photo for the book because of your love for dogs?



Success is filled with the agony of how and why---in the flesh, nerves and conscience. It takes you down a lonely road and you feel at times, that you are traveling it alone. You can only keep walking. Gordon Parks, *Voices in the Mirror.*

All my life, I've admired and been inspired by Gordon Parks. As is the case with James Weldon Johnson, when we read about Parks's life, it feels as if we are looking at the robust biography of four men, or perhaps five. Both men gave new meaning to the term "Renaissance Man." Although he never finished high school and had a rough-and-tumble youth, during his relentlessly prolific ninety-four year passage among us, Gordon Parks received forty honorary doctorates and awards, among them the National Medal of Arts, Spingarn Medal, the NAACP Image Award, and the PGA Oscar Micheaux Award.

He was a writer, musician, poet, composer, photojournalist, and a motion picture director. As a black American in the era of racial segregation, he was distinguished by a number of significant "firsts": the first black fashion photographer for *Vogue*, the first black, staff photographer for *Life* magazine, and the first black director in Hollywood, one who opened the door for younger directors like Spike Lee and John Singleton. His films *The Learning Tree*, based on his autobiographical novel, and *Shaft*, are preserved in the United States National Film Registry. Furthermore, he served as the first editorial director for *Essence* magazine, and made respected contributions to the fields of ballet and opera, as well as technical books on photography. Today, schools across the nation are named after him, and the Library of Congress preserves his papers

and artistic collection. In a word, Gordon Parks realized the dream of every artist: namely, to see his work and its influence become inescapable in the culture.

The key for unlocking the logic, vision, and specific challenges of this remarkable life that documented American history even as he participated in its making can be found in Parks's inspiring autobiography, *Voices in the Mirror*, which I reviewed for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* on November 4, 1990. There, we encounter not only a person of color's dramatic journey across the twentieth century landscape of this country, from youthful dreams to artistic triumph, but also a digest of black American themes for survival, and an algorithm for achieving professional excellence in a hostile world.

When W. Ralph Eubanks, Director of Publishing at the Library of Congress, asked me to write the introduction for *The Photographs of Gordon Parks* for their Fields of Vision series that honors great photographers, I decided the first thing I should do is re-read *Voices in the Mirror*. Once again, I was powerfully impressed by all that he had to overcome as a young man before he bought his first camera for $7.50 in a Seattle pawnshop. He was washed by all waters. Living on his own by age 15, Parks worked as a bus boy and a waiter on trains; he played blues as a self-taught musician in bawdy houses, cleaned the filthiest flophouses in Chicago, "washed a million dishes every weekend," traveled as a singer for white orchestra leader Larry Funk, played basketball as a semi-professional, and was in the Civil Conservation Corps in 1933. During those years, he says he felt like he was "serving out a sentence in hell."

But his parents in Fort Scott, Kansas (he calls them his "heroes") had given Parks such a strong moral foundation (his mother urged him to reach for "a nobler kind of success" than fame and fortune) that he was always "on a search for pride." Furthermore, he believed that "nothing is more noble than a good try." He learned from every experience that came his way (and there were so many!), read the great works of literature voraciously, and whenever possible studied the works of the best artists and photographers. A Julius Rosenwald Fellowship for his photos of impoverished areas of Chicago earned him a place on the staff of the Farm Security Administration, and from that moment forward his life consisted of one bold and memorable achievement after another across several artistic disciplines.

This new, gorgeous book from the Library of Congress presents the work Gordon Parks did during his time with the FSA. I love the cover photo of the black woman and a dog looking out a window, but I simply wrote the book's introduction and had no say-so over the selection of photographs.

If E-Channel readers want to treat themselves, or give to a friend a book of stunning images that capture the American experience in the 1930s and '40s, I highly recommend *The Photographs of Gordon Parks.*

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 8:19 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/parks-and-photographs.html

Monday, July 25, 2011

MEDITATION MEDITATION MEDITATION

As a student wrote: If one is trying to do something really well, one becomes, first of all, interested in it, and later absorbed in it, which means that one forgets oneself in concentration on what one is doing. But when one forgets oneself, one ceases to exist, since oneself is the only thing which causes oneself to exist. Christmas Humphreys, *Concentration and Meditation*

E. Ethelbert Miller asks, "How difficult was it for you to begin the practice of meditation? Is this something one can learn on their own or does it require a teacher and community? Can one be a Buddhist without practicing meditation? Is meditation a key to unlocking a door? If so, what's on the other side of the door?"

I first sat in meditation, a version of *vipassana* (also called "insight meditation"), which the Buddha taught in the *Mahasatipatthana Sutra*, when I was 14-years-old. It wasn't difficult at all. Perhaps this was so because as a teenager I was so obsessed with art and drawing, which involves concentration (*dharana*), the first stage in formal meditation (*dhyana*).

That first formal sitting was the most peaceful and renewing 30 minutes I'd every known, an experience that radically slowed down my sense of time and cleared away the background noise always at the edge of my consciousness. My mind, from surface to seabed, was suddenly quieted. I was seeing without judgment. Without judgment, there were no distinctions. Without distinctions, there was no desire. Without desire, there was only clarity and compassion. After meditation, I was suddenly no longer squandering my energy and consciousness by worrying about things in the past that could not be recovered or changed, nor was I pre-living in a future that would never come. Rather, all my attention rested peacefully in the present moment, a total immersion in the *here* and *now* very similar to the state of self-forgetting artists know well from focused moments of creation.

To my astonishment, I felt capable of infinite patience with and empathy for my parents, teachers and friends. Within me, I detected not the slightest trace of fear or anger or anxiety about anything. Nor was I conscious of myself, only of what was in my field of awareness, and *that*, of course, was indeed an unusual event in the life of a 14-year-old American boy in 1962.

As Eknath Easwaran said often, most of us usually invest no more than thirty percent of ourselves in the *here* and *now*. Where is the rest? Well, around thirty percent is wasted by dwelling on the past, on our habit of replaying experiences long gone, which we cannot change, and thinking, "I woulda coulda shoulda." Another thirty percent is frittered away by dwelling on a future that always recedes like the horizon. Remember how Article 1, Section 2, Paragraph 3 of the Constitution determined that slaves would count as three-fifths of a person? Ironically, at any moment in *Samsara* (another form of slavery) we tend to live with only one-third of our lives in the present moment, and at a fraction of our full capabilities. Try, if you can, to focus on your breath and nothing else for five minutes. I doubt you can do this. After a few seconds the labile mind will wander from following the breath to memories, projections for future plans, thoughts, reveries and the entire "mental panorama" that leaves only thirty percent of our lives in the present moment.

Put simply, we seldom live 100 percent in the present. Vivekananda describes this state of mind beautifully with his metaphor of the drunken monkey:

"There was a monkey, restless by its own nature, as all monkeys are. As if that were not enough, someone made him drink freely of wine, so that the monkey became still more restless. Then a scorpion stung him. When a man is stung by a scorpion, he jumps about for a whole day; so the poor monkey found his condition worse than ever. To complete his misery a demon entered into him. What language can describe the uncontrollable restlessness of that monkey? The human mind is like that monkey, incessantly active by its own nature; then it becomes drunk with the wine of desire, thus increasing its turbulence. After desire takes possession comes the sting of the

scorpion of jealousy of the success of others, and last of all the demon of pride enters the mind, making it think itself of all importance. How hard to control such a mind."

But the operations of the mind, through the practice of meditation, can be---and *should* be---mastered. For this reason, I have long believed that meditation practice should be taught from K-12, and especially when young people reach that tempestuous stage known as puberty. As educators, we try to fill their heads with intellectual content, but we never give them the means for controlling the instrument---the mind---that is taking in that content. Let me give you an example of what I mean.

In 2010, researchers at the University of Cambridge took 155 boys from two schools in the UK, and put them on a crash course in mindfulness training. After the trial period, the 14- and 15-year-old boys were "found to have increased well-being, defined as the combination of feeling good (including positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, interest and affection) and functioning well." The researcher behind this project, Professor Felicia Huppert, said, "We believe that the effects of mindfulness training can enhance well-being in a number of ways. ..calming the mind and observing experiences with curiosity and acceptance not only reduces stress but helps with attention control and emotion regulation---skills which are valuable both inside and outside the classroom."

And what is on the other side of the "door" of meditation?

The answer is peace, skillfulness, and compassion. Meditation, specifically *vipassana*, has also proven itself to be affective at the William G. Donaldson Correction Facility, an overcrowded prison in Alabama. There, one third of the 1500 inmates convicted of murder, sex offenses and robbery are on Death Row, or serving sentences of life without parole. The inmates at this facility were the subject of a 2007 documentary called *The Dhamma Brothers*, and what they have done has become a model for other prisons. In 2002, 40 inmates met four times a year in the prison gym for an intense 10-day course in mindfulness training. Dr. Ronald Cavanaugh, the prison's treatment director, reported that after this experience, "the inmates are less angry, better able to conduct themselves, they're more mindful of themselves and others, and overall there has been a 20% reduction of disciplinary action for those who have completed the course."

As I said in my July 15th post, where I described my meeting with a Buddhist abbot in Thailand, not all Buddhists meditate. There are, of course, many techniques and approaches to meditation, from chanting like Soka Gakkai practitioners to meditation "with seed" (spiritual content intended to change or improve aspects of ourselves, such as *metta* or "lovingkindness" meditations for opening up our hearts to others) and "without seed" (I see most Zen meditation to be in this category). As the abbot in Thailand said, it is a bridge, a tool, and not something we should cling to when it has served its purpose. But, personally, for the last three decades I've never left my house to do a speaking engagement or an important public event in the social world (or even a radio interview at my house) until after I've sat in formal meditation. I do this because I feel I owe it to myself and others to be fully present when I am with them, which means getting my "self" out of the way and giving them 100 percent of my best thought, best feeling, and best awareness of the unique, unrepeatable moment we are sharing in our journey through life.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 1:58 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/meditation-meditation-meditation.html

Tuesday, July 26, 2011

ARE WE READING HIGH ON THE HOG?

E. Ethelbert Miller asks: "In 'Night Hawks' August Wilson mentions how black people didn't go see his plays. Do you feel sometimes that because of your style of writing your black reading audience might not be as large as you would like? I once coined the expression "literary pork" to describe the type of books being consumed by black readers. Do you have any concern about this matter?

I believe that Ethelbert and I both feel that Americans do not read enough. That includes black Americans. And when Americans *do* read, the works they select are seldom (if ever) intellectually challenging. "Literary pork" has always been---and most likely will always be---more popular than literary works that liberate our perception and challenge our presuppositions. One of my editors at the *New York Times Book Review* once put it to me this way: When motion pictures came along, literary culture had real competition, and by the time televisions were in most American homes, anything we might want to call literary culture was all but finished. We simply do not have a literary culture anymore---what we have instead is a widely shared pop culture provided by movies and television.

Don't forget, 1 out of 5 Americans is functionally illiterate (that's an old estimate from the '90s so it's probably worse than that now); that is, they cannot read a newspaper op-ed with comprehension (which is true of far too many college students)or the directions on their bottle of prescription medicine. According to a report in May of this year, the National Institute of Literacy discovered that "roughly 47 percent of adults in Detroit, Michigan---200,000 total" were functionally illiterate, "meaning they have trouble with reading, speaking, writing and computational skills." Even worse, the Detroit Regional Workforce found that "half of that illiterate population has obtained a high school degree."

During one of my family's reunions in South Carolina, a young woman who married a relative of mine told me she "didn't like to read," but was making herself do so for the sake of her young son. In other words, to set a good example for him. And I remember, painfully, signing one of my books for a young black man after I gave a reading somewhere, and him saying to me, "I want to be a writer but, you know, I don't like to read." When I did an event in Detroit a few years ago, the young, black woman who introduced me said one of her friends told her she was just "giving up" on trying to read Charles Johnson because she had to look up in the dictionary too many words she didn't know. And who can forget Alice Walker's memorable reply to an interviewer who asked her what her relatives thought of her books. She said, "What makes you think they read?" I could give you a thousand examples of this kind of tragic intellectual laziness among American readers, black, white and otherwise.

Like any writer, I've thought about this sad state of affairs since 1970 when I wrote my first novel. But remember my background is in philosophy, a field where the canonical texts (to say nothing of second-and-third tier works) are "invisible" to the vast majority of general readers. Since my undergraduate days, I've never read pop books or "literary pork" for pleasure. (And I just don't have the time or interest for watching 99% of what is on television.) Naturally, then, I've never had any interest in writing fluff---what writer Fred Pfeil once called "industrial fiction." The thought of "dumbing down" what I write is something I'm simply congenitally unable to do, because I write, first and foremost, in order to discover and clarify things for myself. (And that's why I write a lot; there are countless subjects I want to explore in this vast, mysterious universe we inhabit.) If I couldn't do that, then I wouldn't write. From the beginning, rather than desiring a lot of readers, I instead just wanted to have smart ones (the kind of readers who appreciate philosophical explorations and literary invention), regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion or background. *I.e.*, people who have a background in what Matthew Arnold referred to as "the best that has been known and said in the world." Those are my ideal readers, and have been since I first put pen to paper. But I've never been critical of writers who write for sales. They have to pay their bills and put their kids through college, too. If they can do that with "pork," then I say more power to them, but the likelihood of my reading that dreck is very, very low.

Ethelbert's Complaint (apologies to Phillip Roth), as I will call it, is a lament heard throughout the community of American poets and writers of literary fiction. And it has *always* been with us---this feeling that we, as literary writers, are culturally going against the grain. Melville and his associates said the same thing about "literary pork" in their day. So I don't expect the popularity of works aimed at the lowest common denominator to change in our lifetime. And I'm profoundly thankful for the literate, intelligent readers I do have.

Posted by Ethelbert Miller at 7:55 AM
http://ethelbert-miller.blogspot.com/2011/07/are-we-reading-high-on-hog.html