

Ellesee Sutherland. *Let the Lion Eat Straw*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1979) 164 pp., \$1.95.

This novella covers the life of Abeba Williams Torch from her childhood in North Carolina to her death at a fairly young age in Harlem. The potential for a fully realized novel is everywhere in this book, but because the author chose not to include the detail which would make it so, the effect is unsatisfying.

The events of Abeba's life are dramatic. She is left shortly after birth with an old midwife who lovingly cares for her until her mother reclaims her to live in Harlem. Her relationship with her mother is marked by duty, not love, and as a consequence, Abeba marries early and subsequently has a large and happy family. In the process, she abandons a potential career as a concert pianist.

Though Abeba is the central character, only occasionally does the reader learn how she feels about what happens to her. The reader never learns whether or not Abeba feels conflict about the choice between career and family, nor how she felt about her marriage. The trials of rearing a large family are also not dealt with in any detail.

Other characters are not drawn with enough clarity for the reader to know them well. Daniel Torch, Abeba's husband, goes mad, but the reasons for his madness are left to the reader's uninformed speculation. Daniel's family is introduced, but only briefly, and without definition.

There are, however, some passages of credible dialogue which contribute to the exposition of the cultural life of Afro-Americans:

"Where Abeba?"
"I told you they went to town, Jackson.
Calm Yourself."
"She not home. I was just fixin to stop
by but she not home."
His mother kept washing.
"She gone north?"
"Jackson, don't worry me today."
"Where she at? She gone north?"
"Not yet, Jackson."
"When she going?"
"At the end of summer."
"How come Abeba going north?"

There are also some aphoristic statements which will likely be repeated by those who read this book, for

example: "Music for the people who prayed first for the Promised Land and settled for the projects."

In trying to place this book within a genre so that it might be reviewed in a meaningful context, I was at a loss. It is not a novel. The conflict of the protagonist is not clear and the only antagonist seems to be "life," which is not specific enough for that role. There is no subplot to help delineate the major plot. The author's point of view is nebulous. Though the story is told from an omniscient perspective, that omniscience is unable to reveal everything. The phrases from songs which occur regularly throughout the story are the only unifying element in the book.

This seems to be a form of oral story telling in the African and Afro-American tradition of call and response. What is missing, however, is the listener's ability to interrupt and say, "But what happened to. . . ?"

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