and shrewdest special police cadres in Africa left Ngugi free to publish *Petals of Blood*... but swooped quickly and selectively when at length he turned to rouse his own people through drama in an indigenous language. They knew their business: and by that time Ngugi knew his.” Early in 1977 *Petals of Blood* was released. On December 31 of that year Ngugi was taken into custody for “questioning.” He remained in prison for nearly twelve months. He was not reinstated at the university and no longer lives in Kenya.

Ngugi, according to this study, is a dramatist as well as novelist, “who has dared challenge our established assumptions about literary genres,” and “seems at all times to have sought the ultimate goals of any committed writer: to harness the ‘laws’ of art to the dictates of his own conscience.”

—Jean Bright
Greensboro, NC

---


John R. Cooley’s *Savages and Naturals* is a critical analysis of the ways in which “modern” American writers have depicted black characters. His thesis, briefly stated, is that in their fiction white American writers portray black Americans as primitives—as “savages” or as “naturals.” “Savages” are those who are perceived as intrinsically evil and who consequently represent a threat to civilized society. “Naturals” are those who are simple, essentially rustic folk (the term is only roughly synonymous to the traditional “noble savage”).

The eight writers Cooley has chosen for his study represent varied literary schools and genres. Some are not really a part of the standard literary canon (Waldo Frank); some remain firmly entrenched among the masters of American literature (Eugene O’Neill, William Faulkner); some are major writers represented through lesser known works (Stephen Crane’s “The Monster”). But they are all writers with intellectual and artistic reputations for developing three-dimensional, lifelike characters. The fact, then, that even foremost writers (such as Faulkner) almost invariably produce fictional black American characters who lack real-life complexity confirms Cooley’s sense of the depth of cultural racism in America. Indeed, he concludes his detailed analysis of Faulkner with the comment that “Nowhere in his writing is there a black character who is

*Explorations in Sights and Sounds. No. 4 (Summer 1984)*
articulate enough to express his or her life from inside out, to speak for black people in some larger or comprehensive sense.” White writers, Cooley contends, have been unable to visualize black characters in other than generally accepted stereotypical ways. “Whites create their blacks to fit their own scenarios.” White writers “have seldom really looked at blacks as individuals . . . [They] have been more interested in blacks as symbols or mirrors than as human entities.”

Of the writers Cooley discusses, only Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut attempt “to replace stereotyped naturals with more complex and lifelike black portraits.” But Mailer, he feels, “has always been more interested in an intellectual conception of black life than in blacks themselves.” In Cat’s Cradle he believes Vonnegut has produced “one of the few white novels in which there is some real sense of a black mind at work.” Yet even here the praise is somewhat muted by the assertion that Vonnegut keeps his reader from genuinely “direct contact with black characters.”

Both a major strength and a weakness of the book is Cooley’s heavy reliance on a classification of black characters as savages and naturals. That categorization is marked by the especially careful definitions Cooley has developed. Certainly such an ordering of things is useful in organizing his discussion. But it also has an important and inherent weakness: Except in a few of the works, the black characters he has analyzed do not fit neatly into the either-or categories of savages or naturals. Rather, they overlap, sometimes significantly. Nevertheless, Cooley’s method remains useful, for his concern is not ultimately with a mere classification, but with a detailed examination of how well white writers have managed to depict black characters. And he properly finds that their portrayals have severe limitations.

Savages and Naturals is an interesting and clearly written book. It is, I think, largely a “preliminary” investigation of a subject that is distinctly worthy of further, more comprehensive examination.

—Richard L. Herrnstadt
Iowa State University