

groups as the United States House of Representatives, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees; the national conference of the American Anthropology Association; and the TESOL International Bilingual Educators' Conference.

The film is suitable for a variety of audiences such as secondary and college social science and education classes, public library groups, and civic and religious organizations. It delivers a forceful message about human survival. Those who view the film will, no doubt, begin to develop a sense of understanding and empathy for refugees who are victims of circumstances beyond their control. It is a thoughtful and warm presentation which speaks with eloquence on behalf of the many displaced persons trying to survive in a new cultural environment. The film is highly recommended for viewing and reflection.

There is a study guide to accompany the documentary which includes helpful background information, a teacher's guide, several illustrative questions to initiate a follow-up discussion, a glossary of unfamiliar terms, and an annotated bibliography for additional reading and study by members of the viewing audience.

— Margaret Laughlin  
University of Wisconsin, Green Bay

**Nellie Y. McKay, *Jean Toomer, Artist*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) xv, 262 pp., \$27.00.**

Nellie Y. McKay's *Jean Toomer, Artist* is an account of Toomer's life and work from his birth in 1894 to the publication of his long poem "Blue Meridian" in 1936. McKay's is the most complete biography of Toomer published thus far, and it also includes the most extensive analysis to date of Toomer's literary work. For the biographical material, McKay has made heavy use of the Jean Toomer Special Collection at Fisk University, especially the autobiographical manuscripts and the manuscript letters therein. A detailed scholarly investigation of Toomer has been sorely needed now that his important place in the canon of American literature has been recognized. Unfortunately, though this book has much to commend it, it is not the definitive study one would have hoped for.

The principal focus of the book is properly upon *Cane*, for *Cane* is clearly Toomer's major literary contribution—a work that, since its

“rediscovery” in 1969, has become widely accepted as at least a minor classic. The account of Toomer’s career prior to the publication of *Cane* is particularly well handled, especially the chapter on *Balo* and *Natalie Mann*, Toomer’s little-read, early plays, which are fully analyzed and convincingly presented as natural precursors of themes and strains which Toomer handled so much more successfully in *Cane*. And the account of the genesis of *Cane* is equally interesting. Following that, McKay provides an analysis of *Cane* that in sheer length and detail is easily the most complete we have had. Unfortunately, that analysis is not as successful as we might wish. The introductory section on *Cane* (in Chapter Four) states essentially what has been said by others about the structure of *Cane* and its dominant imagery. The discussion of the individual sketches, stories, and poems offers little in the way of new insights (compared, for example, to the far briefer and more limited discussion in Roger Rosenblatt’s *Black Fiction*). McKay too often dwells, quite redundantly, on matters that should be fairly obvious to a reasonably discerning reader. She imposes upon *Cane* a tighter structure than I think it really has. The appeal and success of *Cane* depend in some measure on the relative looseness of its structure which in its own way lends a greater and clearer purposefulness to the work.

Following her analysis of *Cane*, McKay turns to an informative account of Gurdjieff’s influence on Toomer. (The book might have profited from a more complete description of Gurdjieff’s philosophy than the text and a few endnotes provide.) Then, here, as occasionally elsewhere in the book, she runs into difficulty in attempting to resolve issues for which material apparently is not available; and she alters her critical approach, as a way of suggesting solutions that the evidence has not yielded. For example, following a solid factual account of Gurdjieff’s influence on Toomer, she concludes by raising the following rhetorical questions: “Had Gurdjieff and his philosophy offered the framework of a father’s discipline to Toomer? Was Jean Toomer’s lifelong search for a ‘system’ . . . a journey in search of the father he never had?” (p. 198).

In final analysis, then, McKay’s book is a worthwhile venture, for it does provide a much needed, detailed account of Toomer’s life and work. The regret is that despite McKay’s thorough investigation, the biographical material still seems incomplete, and that the critical analysis of *Cane* is not more cogent. Consequently, the reader does not come away with sufficiently new insights into Toomer’s literary career. The principal questions which have been most often asked about Toomer remain unresolved.

— Richard L. Herrnstadt  
Iowa State University