

extravagant. To the contrary, they help explain how poetry and science intersect in the Navajo world view, and they help us to understand how, whether we yet fully realize it or not, poetry helps make a society work for those who belong to it, just as it permits the human community to coexist with the natural environment.

Modern scholarship still cannot nail down such a realization, even at a time when barriers separating the various disciplines like ethnology and poetics are allegedly breaking down. Why that is the case I cannot easily say, but perhaps the key to understanding how poetry fully meshes with other aspects of culture, or how art and technology interface in a workaday world, lies in gaining a full understanding of the tribal life of Native Americans. It is probably too late to study that life the way Matthews studied it, but he leaves an admirably clear record of his discoveries and of his openminded way of making them, as his papers indicate. Thanks to the effort that has gone into assembling those documents and producing this companion volume, we can now see as much for ourselves.

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**Trudier Harris. *Black Women in the Fiction of James Baldwin*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985) 230 pp., \$22.50.**

Trudier Harris walks a narrow line between a feminist critique of James Baldwin's shortcomings as a masculinist writer and a critical appreciation of the complexity and progression in Baldwin's fictional portrayals of black women. It is not an easy maneuver, but her balance is sure and steady.

Harris presents detailed analyses of the women characters in five books: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), *Going To Meet the Man* (1965), *Another Country* (1962), *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), and *Just Above My Head* (1979). In every case, she notes that Baldwin's women are male-oriented; that is, "they are incomplete without men or male images in their lives because wholeness without males is not a concept the majority of them have internalized." In Harris's view, this refusal to grant woman an existence independent of God or man is due to sexist shortsightedness on Baldwin's part, rather than a reflection of cultural reality.

Harris's complaint is not that the black feminine ethic of care Baldwin presents is destructive, but that Baldwin simultaneously deprives the women of the power of self. For contrast, one might look at the women characters in the fiction of Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, or Toni

Morrison. Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Celie in *The Color Purple*, and Sethe in *Beloved* all transcend their guilt and sorrow; they succeed in balancing love for others with respect for self. Harris points out that in Baldwin's work, only Julia Miller in *Just Above My Head* approaches this kind of independence; and Julia is not the main character. In none of Baldwin's relentlessly male-identified books is a woman the main character.

On the other hand, the women in Baldwin's fiction can be seen to develop over the years, a drama played out against the omnipresent backdrop of the black fundamentalist church. In her analyses of the five books, Harris displaces the central male characters to focus on the women; she reads intuitively, looking between the lines for the half-articulated stories of black women's lives. What she finds is the repeated story of woman vs. the Church—or, perhaps, woman vs. her own guilt, induced by her indoctrination in the customs, values, and theology of black Christian fundamentalism. Over time, from book to book, the female characters free themselves of their dependence upon the church, until Julia, repeating the pattern of Baldwin's fiction overall, moves from a child preacher to an independent woman, finding "a contentment that most of the other Black women in Baldwin's fiction do not!"

In addition, Harris points out admiringly, Julia has moved beyond gender, beyond the prescriptive roles of the nuclear family, and beyond sexuality. Julia and Hall "have given up each other's bodies [in exchange] for mutual respect and peaceful coexistence." While for some women this resolution may appear satisfactory or even ideal, for many in the black community it will seem woefully inadequate. Harris may be claiming too much for Baldwin in her assessment that the truce between Hall and Julia illustrates "at least one healthy pattern of resolution to the conflicts between Black men and Black women."

Harris's feminist philosophical approach to Baldwin's fiction yields fascinating and insightful interpretations of the individual books she considers. In her conclusion, she resists the temptation "to speculate on where the author will go from this point on" in his portrayal of black women. Alas, James Baldwin's death in 1987 precludes any further development of the kind Harris and other feminist readers may have been hoping to see in his work. Ironically, Harris's book, apparently intended to be provocative, may turn out to be definitive instead.

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