

infinite and relentlessness of nature's forms and processes after a day of fishing, the speaker switches from the way of action to the way of submission, even closing his eyes in order to take part in that awesome transformation:

I must come and learn to stutter once again
while all around me empty snails and clams
are taking in and letting go
their viscid selves which wane
and bloat over the many ages
until they are something not one of us can see.

Only this process of "taking in and letting go," which mimics the movements of the ocean, frees all creatures to grow beyond the limits of the known. Eventually it may even reconcile us to the deaths of fathers and nations.

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Bernard W. Bell. *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987) 424 pp., \$25.00.

According to Bell, his book is "a comprehensive sociopsychological, sociocultural interpretive history of the Afro-American novel. It seeks to unearth, identify, describe, and analyze some of the major thematic, stylistic, and structural characteristics of the Afro-American novel from its beginning in 1853 to 1983." This quotation about the book's scope and intention, as well as its title, are indicative of the strengths and weaknesses (mainly the latter) of the entire study. For one thing, it is an understood fact that just as there are African-American experiences, there are also literary traditions. Whereas one study of *one* tradition (such as Barbara Christian's on black wimmin novelists) would be another much needed work, Bell's title, alone, suggests that he has homogenized Afro-American literature. Then, the scope and intention of the above quotation are entirely too grandiose, too all-encompassing, for one book (maybe a multi-volume work could, eventually, cover all these angles). In short, the book unfortunately attempts to live up to its goals. Bell tries to address all the issues he raises, but in the process, only raises more concerns and questions.

Since the scope of the work is so broad, it includes several general flaws. Derived from a discussion of "more than 150 novels by approximately one hundred representative novelists, giving close attention to forty-one—most of whom have published at least two novels and all of whom

are historically and aesthetically important to [his] thesis," the analyses necessarily become thin, strained and superficial at several points. The discussions of individual novels are not only questionable, they frequently deteriorate into plot summaries which weakly, if at all, substantiate the book's thesis. Then, Bell makes many strange, over-generalizing statements, like "[Ann] Petry's vision of black personality is not only different from that of Himes and Wright, it is also more faithful to the complexities and varieties of black women...."

Being over-ambitious, too general, overly subjective and un-original in one's assessments all seem to be a part of being a scholar—sometimes. Yet, it DOES seem that by now, anyone who writes on/about black wimmin's literature would know better than to say or do certain things. Not Bell. Predictably, he not only discusses Petry as a subsidiary of Wright, he also devotes excessive time and space to Ellison, and superficially discusses Brooks's *Maud Martha*. Additionally, there is a very suspect discussion of black wimmin's feminism (including a discussion of Morrison's novels under "Poetic Realism and the Gothic Fable"). Then too, the last two chapters, on aspects of the contemporary novel, are peculiarly organized, with overlapping and contradictory labels and discussions. And, ironically, there seems to be, throughout the book, a peculiar internalization (and application) of Euro-American critical standards. In the last chapter, for instance, Bell asks "...how do the dominant themes, structures, and styles in the tradition of the Afro-American novel contrast with the Euro-American?" Yet that question was not one of the *major* overt concerns of the work. That question is secondary (or fifteenth, or nonexistent) among most scholars of Afro-American literature.

According to one such scholar, all literary cynics are disappointed idealists. Hence, the tone of this review. Bell's book would necessarily disappoint any but "beginners" in the area. The plot summaries and the bibliographies might be useful to students just starting out with a study of Afro-American literature. Besides that, chapter one, on "The Roots of the Early Afro-American Novel" is the most useful or original one. Finally, Bell's work might be instructive as a warning to other scholars—not to be quite so ambitious, and to be more humble when it comes to describing *the* Afro-American novel (or poem or whatever).

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