

Langston Hughes. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1986) 235 pp., \$8.95 paper.

In the last ten years a number of critical studies on the Harlem Renaissance have been published, and these in turn have sparked a revival of interest in the cultural, political, and social activities that took place during the ten-year period in Afroamerican history between 1919 and 1929. There is a renewed interest in the life and writings of Renaissance figures such as Arna Bontemps, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larson, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes. Hence many of their autobiographies, first published in the 1930s and 1940s, are being reissued in response to the demand for more information on the era when "the Negro was in vogue." This latest edition of Hughes's first autobiography *The Big Sea* is part of this larger revival and follows very closely behind the reprint of his contemporary Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road* (University of Illinois Press, 1986).

Hughes's *The Big Sea* has over the years been described by critics as one of the most insightful studies of the Harlem Renaissance ever written by one who had actually lived during that time, but many have noted that it is a text that absolutely refuses to reveal very much of a personal nature about the poet himself. Until the recent publication of Arnold Rampersad's epochal biography of Hughes (*The Life of Langston Hughes*, vol. 1: 1902-1941), specific details of Hughes's early life in Kansas, his travels to live with his father in Mexico, his life as a seaman, and his involvement in the Harlem Renaissance were never known. Hughes insists on masking his interior personal world in *The Big Sea* and gives us instead a detailed study of the outer world in which he moved both in the United States and abroad. His character studies of various people he lived and worked with between 1919 and 1931 are fascinating, and his personal detachment from his narration of various scenes in *The Big Sea* emphasizes his mastery of the comic vision that pervades so much of his poetry and short stories.

Langston Hughes, like most black writers in America, mastered the art of personal disengagement from his writings out of a necessity to satisfy the demands of the white publishing industry and a white intellectual reading audience. We learn from Rampersad's study (as we did from Robert Hemenway's biography of Hurston) that Hughes (as did Hurston) struggled during his career to maintain a balance between writing what he wanted to say to black Americans and writing what his white publisher would be willing to print. Both Hughes and Hurston wrote their autobiographies during the 1940s when the United States was involved in a major world war. Patriotism ran high in white America, and though black Americans still suffered from racial discrimination in education, housing and employment, no one, especially not a black writer trying to live off publication royalties, could expect to voice dissent and survive. Hughes, therefore, made the same decision as did Hurston when faced

with a request for an autobiography; he posed as a cultural ambassador intent on describing his black world to an audience living outside of it. *The Big Sea* is valuable as a classic of American autobiography for this reason. This reprint is long overdue.

—Alice A. Deck
University of Illinois

Major J. Jones. *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Religious Thought.* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987) 160 pp., \$24.95 paper.

Covering the period from the beginning of slavery in America and up to the present, this important and powerful book demonstrates the necessity for a black theology. Major Jones provides an incisive analysis of each entity of the Godhead—God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and relates it to the oppressed African-American. Drawing on his own impressions and the findings of many other theologians, Major Jones has provided an informed up-to-date basis for black Christianity. This book is an excellent synthesis of the paucity of research on African-American theology. However, the book does not appear to meet one of its fundamental aims—black self-worth.

Jones writes, “Black Theology aims to inspire in Blacks a sense of worth, self-esteem, and ‘at-homeness’ within their own subjective blackness.” But the question arises, how can the average black layman relate to this abstract and theological discourse? Theologically, believing that “God acquired knowledge of human suffering by becoming flesh in the form of Jesus Christ” does not appear to be a source of inspiration for African-Americans; or believing that the “Holy Spirit is God and Christ fused into an external unit to bring oppressed people an internal sense of identity” seems too abstract and ideological to be of much benefit. *The Color of God* needs to incorporate ethnic pride in African-Americans by providing concrete examples. The African’s contributions to the development of Christianity seems an indispensable starting point. For example, the “fathers” of the Christian religion and church were indigenous Africans—Tertullian, St. Augustine and St. Cyperian. It was also Felicitas, Nymphamo and Perpetua, another three indigenous Africans who were the first to become martyrs of Christendom.

Finally, Jones did not mention the three African popes—Victor I, Miltiades and Gelasius I. Victor I was noted for bringing unity in the observance of the Easter festival.

Major Jones implies that Jesus Christ’s suffering is similar to African-