

Read before the Summer
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By Aud

Some RECENT LITERATURE ABOUT NEGROES

By
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Introduction

Literature about the Negro has achieved new and great proportions, and that written by the Negro is especially notable for its development. It is a long cry since 1773 when Phillis Wheatley, the first American Negro poet, was compelled to secure a certificate⁽⁵⁾ from persons of known integrity in order to re-assure a doubting public that her poems were really the work of an African born former slave. ⁽¹⁾ Today, there are able Negro authors in most of the fields of literary endeavor and no one questions either their ability or the authenticity of their work.

Not only is this true, but a large number of distinguished white writers are using some phase of the Negro theme as the media for literary expression. ~~There are~~ many more books ^{are} written by white persons about Negroes than there are books written exclusively by Negroes. I do not wish to say that all of the books written about the Negro are first class literature. This would be a mis-statement, but many of them stand up with the best books produced ~~in America or elsewhere.~~

The life and history of the Negro present rich fields of study for ~~the~~ social scientists, as well as writers of fiction. Educational institutions are encouraging scholars to undertake study in these fields; and publishers and foundations are giving grants, fellowships, and awards to the talented for work on the Negro theme.

So important have Negro books become, that the well-established Book Clubs, such as the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild choose them as the ^{ir} book of the month selections. And ~~there have~~ recently ~~grown up~~ two new book clubs ^{have been organized} which deal specially with books by and about Negroes, the Negro Book Club, and the One-World Book Club, which distributes books on the life and activities of minority groups.

~~Because of the time at my disposal,~~ It is necessary to limit this discourse to mentioning only some of the outstanding books by both Negro and white authors and to discuss a few of the more important ones ~~appearing~~ since 1940, ~~These will be drawn~~ from the fields of social commentary, biography and autobiography, poetry, history and fiction.

(1) The Poems of Phillis Wheatley, edited by Charlotte Ruth Wright. Philadelphia. The Wrights. 1930, p. IV.

Social Commentary Books

The most important and numerous books are those listed under the general heading, "Social Commentary," ~~which~~ ^{ing} cover aspects of the race problem and ~~in~~ the fields of sociology, anthropology, labor and general social conditions. have appeared:

In the field of labor, ~~there are~~ several outstanding volumes: Negro Labor by Dr. Robert C. Weaver (1946); Organized Labor and the Negro by Dr. Herbert R. Northrup (1944); The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters by Dr. Brai^Aford R. Brazeal (1946); and They Seek a City by Arna Bontemps and Jack Conroy (1945).

~~That~~ The most recent of the four, The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters by Dr. Brazeal, Professor of Economics at Morehouse College, traces the history of the Pullman porter from the creation of the sleeping car industry down to the present. Barred from affiliation with other railroad unions, it was not until twelve years after the present union was organized, 1937, that a contract was signed giving to the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters jurisdiction over porters, maids and attendants in Pullman service throughout the United States and Canada.

The personality of A. Philip Randolph has been the largest single factor in the success of the porters' drive for organization. ~~Born in Florida~~ ^{Born in Florida} this son of a Protestant minister, ~~speaks~~ ^{speaks} with broad a's and has platform gestures very foreign to the historic mannerisms of a menial servant. ~~Speaks~~ ^{Talking} with precision, ~~and~~ ^{and} possessing unusual dignity himself, Mr. Randolph has succeeded in imbuing the Pullman porter with a degree of this same dignity and self-reliance. To anyone interested in the labor movement, reading this volume is imperative.

~~Several~~ ^{Several} very powerful books on the race problem have been released. They are authoritative, well written, scholarly. Among the best of these are: An American Dilemma (1944) by St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton (1946); Black Metropolis (1944); What the Negro Wants, edited by Rayford W. Logan (1944); Roi Ottley's New World A'Coming (1943). ~~The following book~~

The following books, all by white authors, indicate the trend of liberalism among whites in this country--The Making of a Southerner by Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin (1947); Southern Exposure by Stetson Kennedy (1946); Color Blind by Margaret Halsey (1946). ~~There are~~ ^{are} two others mentioned for just the opposite reason--they re-affirm

(1944) by Gunnar Myrdale

boldly and baldly the inferiority of the Negro and are white supremacist volumes. ^{They are} ~~the~~ ^{ad} ~~here~~ ^{only} mention ~~them~~ because such books are rare. These books are The Cult of Equality by Stuart O. Landry (1945); and Take Your Choice--Separation or Mongrelization by Theodore G. Bilbo (1947), whom you all know.

the social commentary books.

the most voluminous, comprehensive and significant of ~~these~~ ^{is Gunnar Myrdal's} An American Dilemma. It contains indisputable scientific facts and presents in clear and compelling language the greatest challenge to the fulfillment of the American creed; namely, the principle of equal rights and equal justice for all.

Gunnar Myrdal, an internationally famous Swedish scholar, was invited by the Carnegie Corporation to come to this country to direct a vast scholarly enterprise on the place of the Negro in American life. ^{Gathering} ~~He gathered~~ a group of outstanding white and Negro American authorities on the subject, ^{were drafted} ~~they drafted~~ some 20 bulky monographs from which he drew a two volume analysis. "Look, Americans," he says, "Here you have your American creed, of which you may well be proud. But how does it square with jim crow, widespread disfranchisement on the basis of color, inequality of work, housing, health and educational opportunities?"

If you dip into any chapter, you will find yourself reading on and on. One is intrigued by the topics presented.

A few words must certainly be said about What the Negro Wants edited by Rayford W. Logan. In the heightened interracial tensions of the war, the publisher at the University of North Carolina Press asked fourteen Negro leaders representing diversified opinion, ^(Institute) (the President of Tuskegee is one of them) to say what the Negro wants. Their answer is direct and perhaps more candid than anything a group of Negro writers has ever had to say. These Negroes state that what the Negro wants is first class American citizenship, without reservation.

Mr. Couch, the publisher, does not believe in full democracy and equality for Negroes. Before the book was published he wrote letters to the contributors trying to persuade them not to say what they had indicated they planned writing. When they refused, he wrote an introduction repudiating the contents.

Every person working with young people should know about the American Youth Commission series, which gives an account of why the personality of Negro youth is what it is. These books are: Thus Be Their Destiny by Atwood, Wyatt, Davis and Walker (1941); Children of Bondage (1940); by Allison Davis and John Dollard; Negro Youth at the Crossways by E. Franklin Frazier (1940); Growing up in the Black Belt by Charles S. Johnson (1941); and Color and Human Nature by Warner, Junker and Adams (1941).

Although the Negro church is one of the most influential institutions in the life of Negroes, relatively few books have been written concerning this aspect of institutional life. So, Dr. Harry V. Richardson's study of the rural Negro church called Dark Glory (1947) is a welcomed addition, for the insight which it gives of rural church conditions and religion. It is the best book to date in this field. Dr. Richardson is ^{the} Chaplain of Tuskegee Institute.

(Insert)

Biographies and Autobiographies

Of special importance to persons working to secure civil rights for Negroes is Milton R. Konvitz's The Constitution and Civil Rights (1947), which deals with the civil rights, ~~and~~ "privileges and immunities of citizens. His discussion shows that as the Constitution and statutes have been construed by the Supreme Court, very narrow scope has been given to the meaning of these terms. And as far as the Constitution is concerned, the Civil Rights, privileges and immunities can be counted on one hand." ~~It~~ Important to know is the fact that in ^{thirty} ~~30~~ American States ^{and the District of Columbia} there are no Civil Rights Acts and the scope of the federal Civil Rights acts is very narrow.

States with C R Act

Richard Wright easily heads the list of able Negro writers in America. And Black Boy, the story of his youth, is a rare book not only for its literary style and its morbidly cynical and pessimistic outlook, but because of its literary criticism of the American race problem. It shows how insecurity, poverty, fear, prejudice, injustice hounded the writer until he finally escaped ~~not only~~ to another section of the country, ^{and} ~~but~~ to a better way of life.

Black Boy is not delightful reading; in fact, it is most distasteful, but reading it is compulsory for one who would be intelligent on the literary production of Negroes.

A decided contrast to Wright's Black Boy is Era Bell Thompson's American Daughter. ~~Miss Thompson is just starting on her career.~~ Her autobiography depicts the sorrows, the joys and the struggles of an interesting pioneer family, who moved from Des Moines to a farm in the heart of the Dakota prairie land. American Daughter is like a breath of clean fresh air after reading Black Boy. Well written and entertaining, the public is looking for other works by ^{young} ~~Miss~~ Thompson.

Of all the biographies and autobiographies that have appeared, ~~the~~ one ^{of the best} ~~that I~~ ~~derived most pleasure from~~ is W. C. Handy's Father of the Blues (1941). Handy is not, as is popularly believed, the originator of syncopation. He is the recorder of a type of rhythm that antedates his time and goes back to the primitive African. Handy's fight for a musical career against the wishes of his devoutly religious father to whom music was a thing of the devil is fascinatingly told. (A)

While Dvorak and others lifted the Negro spirituals into the realm of the classic, it was Handy's tenacity and devotion to the cause of Negro music that laid the foundation for such recognition. Handy never lost sight of his early desire to make of Negro music something more than a personal success. The manner in which he came to write many of his popular compositions, especially the St. Louis Blues, which he composed overnight, makes a fine story, touching, thrilling.

Poetry

Just off the press are volumes by two outstanding poets, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. Cullen's book, completed by him just before his untimely death in

1946, entitled, On These I Stand, is a collection of his best poems. Some are burning and bitter, some are deeply religious; others concern death; and some rebel at the race distinctions made in America. Says he;

"Yet do I marvel at this curious thing
To make a poet black and bid him sing!" (2)

Many of his poems are light verse as these two epitaphs show. The first is entitled,

For a Lady I Know (3)

"She even things that up in heaven
Her class lies late and snores,
While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores."

The other one is about,

A Mouthy Woman (4)

"God and the devil still are wrangling
Which should have her, which repel;
God wants no discord in his heaven;
Satin has enough in hell."

Langston Hughes' latest book of lyric poems, Fields of Wonder, is welcomed as it comes from this poet who is ~~not only~~ gifted in verse, ~~but~~ in prose, and ~~on the~~ platform ~~of~~ ^{as a} speaker. The themes of his poems range from love to oppression; from the big city to the cotton field, and give an insight into individual human experiences that made his poetry satisfying. He has come a long way since his Fine Clothes to the Jew, published in 1927.

There are ^{two} new Negro poets, both young women, whose works should certainly be mentioned. ^{have recently come on the scene.} For My People by Margaret Walker (1942); and A Street in Bronzeville, by Gwendolyn Brooks. They are both extremely talented and have been widely acclaimed for their straightwardness, directness, ^{Some of} reality and dynamic originality. Gwendolyn Brooks poetry is reminiscent of that of Paul Laurence Dunbar, brought up to date.

History

Scholars more and more are writing serious studies on specific aspects of the history of the Negro. Future historians will have a much easier time because of these efforts. Much of this history is the result of ~~studies resulting from the~~ requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Such volumes include A. A. Taylor's The Negro in Tennessee,

(2) On These I Stand by Countee Cullen. New York Harper + Bros. 1947, p. 3,
(3) Ibid, p. 33.
(4) Ibid, p. 35.

1865-1880 (1941); John Hope Franklin's The Free Negro in North Carolina, 1790-1860 (1943) and Lorenzo J. Green's The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776 (1942). These and others were stimulated by Dr. Carter G. Woodson of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, whose History of the Negro is the first and only authoritative general history on the Negro which has been written.

Growing out of the war are three volumes which make interesting reading: All Brave Sailors, by John Beecher (1945), the story of the S. S. Booker T. Washington and of Captain Mulzac, the first Negro Captain commissioned by the U. S. Merchant Marine; Walter White's The Rising Wind (1945), an account of Mr. White's tour of the European theatre of war to obtain first-hand information concerning what Negro troops were doing and what was happening to them; and The Negro in the Armed Forces by Seymour J. Schoenfeld (1945), valuable because it gives the author's impressions, from first hand experience, of the value of Negroes as soldiers.

Herbert Aptheker, a white historian, is making valuable contributions to the history of the Negro. His most recent book, Essays in the History of the American Negro (1945) brings together for the first time the basic facts on the role of the American Negro's fight for freedom from the first slave revolt in 1520 to the close of the Civil War.

Henrietta Buckmaster's Let My People Go, tells the story of the Underground Railroad and the growth of the abolition movement. No more valuable books are found in the field of American Negro literature than those on historical subjects. They correct much traditional error concerning Negro people.

Fiction

Almost everyone likes to read good fiction. Some of the best romantic literature now being produced is by and about Negroes.

Two Negro writers have departed from the social protest theme in fiction, abandoning past tradition which maintained an almost unwritten law that seemed to limit Negro authors to Negro themes and have turned their talent to first-rate novels about white

people. Frank Yerby in his books, The Foxes of Harrow (1946) and The Vixens (1947) both historical novels, treats the intimate relations between the races, and Reconstruction, two of the touchiest subjects in the American thought pattern. ^{The} Foxes of Harrow (1946) has been compared with Gone With the Wind to the disadvantage of Mis Mitchell's novel. The Vixens is considered even better than The Foxes of Harrow. Frank Yerby has a six year contract to write a novel a year for his publishers.

Willard Motley in Knock on Any Door (1947) writes about a young Italian boy on the West Side of Chicago. "In construction, in wealth of detail, in artistry of presentation, the book probably exceeds anything that has come out of the Chicago school of realistic writers." The author had written nothing before and few knew that he is a Negro. Motley requested that his race not be publicized until his book had been out for a while. He wanted to know if the book was good or bad on its merits alone. It is called by the New York Times, the find of the year for 1947. "Mr. Motley lived in the areas largely populated by Italian people ^{while} ~~during the time~~ he worked on his book, just as Mr. Yerby gathered information for his novels, ^{while he lived.} in New Orleans."

Three women, two white and one Negro, have written novels of more than passing interest--Strange Fruit (1944) by Lillian Smith, a southern white woman of aristocratic birth, ^{who} strikes hard at the race problem ^{through} ~~with~~ the love affair of a white man and a Negro girl as the vehicle for her story; Mrs. Palmer's Honey (1944) by ~~the~~ Fannie Cook of St. Louis, a social worker, ^{who} ~~she~~ portrays the matamorphosis of a Negro girl from a domestic servant into a labor union leader; and The Street by Ann Petry (1946) a young Negro writer of New York City, still in her twenties, ~~is~~ also a pharmacist, ^{who} does not spare her pen telling about poor housing and other evils in Harlem.

Two novels in 1947 by white male writers are causing considerable comment: Kingsblood Royal by Sinclair Lewis, the author of Babbitt, Main Street, Arrowsmith, Elmer Gantry and others; and The Chequer Board by Nevil Shute, a British Aeronautical engineer and also a popular novelist. Both of them have racial intermixture as their theme. The critics say, Kingsblood Royal is not up to Lewis' standard when it comes to