

Readers and Writers

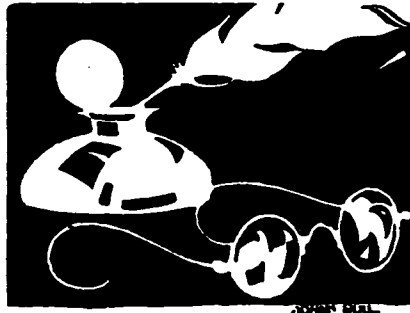
By Ernest Boyd

IN New York, if not elsewhere, there has been during the past few years a growing fad for all things negro. It is now a most fashionable fad and is bringing grist to the publishers' mills, after having first served the concert halls and cabarets. "The Book of Negro Spirituals" (Viking Press), edited by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson; R. Emmet Kennedy's "Mellows" (Boni), a book of negro work songs, street cries, and spirituals; and "Color" (Harper), a volume of verse by Countée P. Cullen are among the recent manifestations of interest in this movement. The epitome of the movement is sketched in "The New Negro" (Boni), edited by Alain Locke.

"This volume," according to the foreword, "aims to document the New Negro culturally and socially — to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America that have so significantly taken place in the last few years."

The book contains specimens of negro drama, poetry, and prose, a little music, and general essays on various social, political, and artistic phases of negro life. "Whoever wishes to see the Negro in his essential traits, in the full perspective of his achievement and possibilities, must seek the enlightenment of that self-portraiture which the present developments of Negro culture are offering. In these pages . . . we have . . . concentrated upon self-expression and the forces and motives of self-determination. So far as he is culturally articulate, we shall let the Negro speak for himself."

This sounds more rational than the ravings of one's friends who have heard Roland Hayes in the afternoon, seen Paul Robeson in the evening, attended the midnight performance of some show that features Florence Mills, and danced the "Charleston" in a Harlem cabaret until dawn. Yet, having closed the book, I am as far removed as ever from the enthusiasm which prompts the daily program which I have outlined. If I had supposed that all negroes were illiterate brutes, I might be astonished to discover that they can write good third-rate poetry, readable and unreadable magazine fiction, and that their real estate in Harlem is anything but dilapidated slum property. But I started with no such misconception. Therefore, though "The New Negro" is an interesting social document in my eyes and an invaluable reference book, as a revelation of a great renaissance of negro art and literature it is no more convincing than the momentary vogue of the "Charleston."



Ever since I first came to America I have been unable to acquire either the sentimental Southern or the sentimental Northern point of view about the negro. Living in the South, as I did at first, I could neither admit that colored people make excellent servants nor agree that they are legitimate sport for lynching bees. In the North I found a few white people who were seriously engaged in working for the education and better treatment of the negro, but they made no extravagant claims about either the cooking or the nursing proclivities of their protégés, nor did they argue that the race was possessed of any God-given faculties that marked it off from other Americans of the same class. It was not until the cult of Harlem and its works began that I found myself confronted by the Southern sentimentalities reversed. Then it became necessary to rave, not about one's "colored mammy," but about mediocre and usually unattractive-looking colored dancers, to extol the performances of colored actors, and to find great merit in the merely competent work of poets and prose writers simply because they were colored.

MY difficulty in the South was both human and gastronomical. Humanly speaking, I could not see how uneducated, undeveloped, and cowed people could make good servants; they were too stupid; and if they were not too dishonest, that was no fault of their masters. Their fried chicken, fried oysters, and rich waffles were not for digestions like mine, so the charm of the colored *cuisine* did not strike me as it should, no doubt, have done. As for the metaphysical process which enabled one to intrust children to colored nurses, but would not permit one to sit at the same end of a street car with those same nurses — well, I felt it was no business of mine, but it was wholly irrational, nevertheless.

On the same principle, I find myself unable to believe that a tawdry musical

show, performed by ugly, uncouth people, which would not last one week if played on Broadway by whites, becomes marvelous because one has to drive far up into Harlem to see it done by colored people. Nor do I think that the boredom of meeting uninteresting negroes is mitigated by the fact that many thousands of their white fellow citizens would not dare to meet them at all. That is no reflection upon the race, for I should hate to think that any intelligent man would try to argue that every member of his race is worth talking to. The negro is handicapped, as all members of oppressed races are, by the necessity for propaganda, and races and persons on the defensive are rarely intrinsically interesting.

IN "The New Negro" are all the features to which I, as a specialist in oppressed races, am accustomed. Every goose is a swan, and extravagant efforts are made to provide a tradition and to prove America's indebtedness to it. The ostensible aim is to show that the ignorant prejudices of white Americans against the negro are unfounded, and that he is often a man of culture and an industrious and loyal citizen. I should say that those facts are indicated by the contents of this particular book, especially by the essays of an historical and explanatory character wherein actual achievements are recorded. Those records do not prove that there is a Beethoven, an Einstein, or a Leonardo da Vinci hiding in Harlem from illiterate Ku-Kluxers, but they establish a definite rise in the status and comfort of the negro population, from which it is safe to assume that something better than bootblacks or saxophone players may be expected in the course of time.

As "creative writers," these negro authors express nothing whatever that has not been done better by very commonplace whites: their racial element, apart from dialect, is not apparent in their work. They even seem to take seriously such rubbish as Ronald Firbank's "Prancing Nigger," which is very much as if Israel Zangwill were to list "Abie the Agent" among the great contributions to the literature of Jewry. W. E. B. DuBois, I also note, is greatly depressed by the fact that two out of three colored French deputies in France are lacking in racial antagonism to the French. Evidently, the Jim Crow car is better suited to the requirements of the movement. But if Mr. DuBois were elected to Congress, would he stand for Ethiopia or for America?