The Negro in three junior novels

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Abstract
To review current fiction to determine suitability of using it in school as one way of presenting the culture and life styles of the Negro American with the hope of promoting better interracial understanding.

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THE NEGRO IN THREE JUNIOR NOVELS

A Research Paper
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In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Linda Lea Donahue
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The discrepancy between our democratic ideals and our less-than-democratic practices in the area of race relations has been a major political, social, and educational concern in the United States. During the last two decades considerable effort has been devoted to bridge the gap, but as pointed out in Building Bridges of Understanding, the American public education system continues to be largely unequal. "Inequality has to do not only with physical facilities and the training of teachers, but with the content and orientation of educational materials as well."¹

If we are to build a more human democracy, we must start with the young people. Exposure of the middle-class white child to many cultural groups and life-styles has been hit and miss in many schools, with the result that a child goes through his school experience developing little understanding and feeling for the wide variety of life-styles in America. The traditional fiction stories contained mainly middle-class culture depriving both white and minority children of chance to view life and characters from minority groups.

Statement of the Problem

To review current fiction to determine suitability of using it in school as one way of presenting the culture and life styles of the Negro American with the hope of promoting better interracial understanding.

Delimitations

The fiction selected to be reviewed was limited to (1) novels for junior-high-school readers, (2) stories in which Negroes were main characters, (3) authors were Negroes living in the United States, and (4) novels of recent publication which were available in the University of Northern Iowa Youth Collection during the summer of 1972.

Overview of Remaining Chapters

Using both published and personal reviews the titles were evaluated in terms of contents, stylistic features, reader, and recommendation in Chapter 2. A comparison of the titles was covered in Chapter 3.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF NOVELS

The three novels selected for reviewing were: Ernest P. Gaines's *A Long Day in November*, Lorenz B. Graham's *Whose Town?*, and June Jordan's *His Own Where*.

**Review of A LONG DAY IN NOVEMBER**

Somebody is shaking me, but I don't want get up now because I'm tired and I'm sleepy and I don't want get up now. It's warm under the cover here, but it's cold up there and I don't want get up now."^2

To accept that opening in Ernest Gaines's *A Long Day in November* and get on with the story Whitman wrote "requires a conscious act of surrender, more natural to children than to adults..."^3 This story told from six-year-old Sonny Howard's viewpoint was developed from a short story which was originally written for adults. It appeared in the author's short story collection, *Bloodline*. "This remains essentially an expanded short story. Yet, given the single track on which it runs, the story succeeds exceptionally well."^4

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Sonny told how his Mama (Amy) left his Daddy (Eddie) because she was tired of being second to a car in her husband's affections. Amy packed her belongings and ordered Sonny to grab his pot and they walked down the road to Gran'mon's house. When Eddie came to take them home, Gran'mon who always said, "That nigger ain't no good. A yellow nigger with a gap like that 'tween his front teeth ain't no good." met him at the door and ran him out of the yard with a shotgun. After coaxing Sonny to come with him, Eddie appealed to the Reverend Simmons to help him regain his wife; but "God take so long to--" Finally, he asked Madame Toussaint, the voodoo woman, for advice. He reluctantly followed her suggestion and burnt his car. The long day ended in reconciliation with Sonny back in bed.

I hear Mama and Daddy talking low. I get way under the cover. I go to sleep little bit, but I wake up. I hear Mama and Daddy talking. I like to hear Mama and Daddy talking when the talking good. I go to sleep some more. It's some dark under here. It's warm. I feel good way under here."7

The plot was simple and treated a vanished world, Gaines wrote, a superstitious world of hard and tedious work. "The life as described in A Long Day in November is just about gone. Technology has destroyed it, and I think all for the best."8 Thus, the value of the contents of the novel was the "brilliant recreation of Southern plantation life."9

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5Gaines, p. 28. 6Gaines, p. 72. 7Gaines, p. 134 8Gaines, pp. 136-137. 9Whitman, p. 6.
style of a sharecropper on a plantation in the early 1940's is vividly re-created through the eyes of a child. 10 And the setting of the Louisiana sugar-cane plantation was "perfectly realized." 11 Although the story was told by a child, Burns wrote that "rather than a story about a child, it is about adult relationships and emotions as chronicled by a child observer who is sensitive to, and yet confused by, events which are beyond his level of experience." 12 However, Gaines's purpose was to present a child's version of his adult story about life of a family—not just the adult relationships, but also, the child's reactions to them.

The novel was well-written and the writing style made the characters come across as real people. The author "can see people moving under their skins [and] has written a story about a black family, and has made them sound like people." 13 Through the "simple, halting language" 14 the characterization of a convincingly typical six-year-old was achieved. His ego-centered reactions to his parent's fight further sustained the credibility of the child. Because his mother did not help him with his reading lesson, he

11 Pollack, p. 4184.
14 Whitman, p. 6.
"wee-weed" on himself when called upon to recite in school.

The novel was recommended for junior high and upper elementary school students. However, Burns believed that in order to appreciate "the subtle nuances of characterization, the skilled uses of contrast..." called for a sufficiently sophisticated reader. And she continued

what makes the book succeed from the adult's point of view may tend to limit its appeal for children: first, because the child narrator, a first-grader, is too young to interest the average adolescent; second, because he is acted upon rather than being the prime mover; third, because he senses the problems but plays no real part in their solution.

The writer personally agreed that adolescents like to read about situations involving characters who are not much older than themselves and become more involved with a story in which they can identify with the main character and visualize themselves in a role of action. However, the novel *A Long Day in November* could be of interest to students who are encouraged to read and discuss the information and characters in the story. Through discussion the similarities between the characters' lives and attitudes and reactions could be compared with real life situations to show the commonness of these Negro characters with white people and hopefully, lead to interracial understanding. Another reviewer wondered if the title would work as a juvenile story, since the crises and concerns were of adult interest. But, he concluded "Still, for whoever does tune in, it's warming and

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refreshing fun."¹⁷

Review of WHOSE TOWN?

Lorenz Graham's Whose Town? was a sequel to his books, South Town and North Town, which "contrast the living conditions that exist for Negroes in a rural southern town with those that exist in a northern city."¹⁸ In this novel Graham emphasized the effects of racism on the town's Negro community and dealt with the black power and black pride movements.

David Williams, the eighteen-year-old protagonist, had seemingly adjusted to North Town and found his place in the community; he played end for the football team, was outwardly accepted by all of his classmates, worked at a hardware store on weekends, and had a steady girlfriend. However, problems began one night after a party when David and his friends stopped at a drive-in hamburger stand in the white sector of the town. He was jumped by a gang of white boys and then he and his Negro friends were arrested and blamed for starting the fight. Then one incident lead on to another. David's friend, Lonnie Webster, was shot by a white man who was never charged. The Iron Foundation laid off his father and his mother went to work as a domestic. Tension grew between the white and Negro community and finally exploded

¹⁷Rev. of Ernest Gaines, A Long Day in November (Dial), Kirkus Reviews, August 1, 1971, p. 815.

when a Negro child drowned in the municipal swimming pool. Several black militants, followers of the black-power advocate Moshombo, incited the community to riot. The aftermath of the riot revealed the prejudice and the wide gap between the black and white communities. Now David became even more confused of whose town North Town was and what was the best stance for a Negro American. After attending black power meetings and hearing Moshombo cry out

'Ethiopia shall rise again.' To bring this to pass, he said quietly, it would be necessary for the black man to be united in the brotherhood, as the fingers of the hand are united in the center of the hand, from which the fingers spring. Formed together in a mass, they could gain full freedom.¹⁹ 

David accompanied his parents to church where he decided the best stand for him was the one taken by the pastor who said, "When we join hands and sing 'Black and White together, we shall overcome,' we are expressing the real meaning of the struggle."²⁰

The power of the book resides in the range of ideas that the author represents to the reader....David's struggle to find his role in our society, to determine if he should consider 'which side was right' or only 'which side was black,' represents the struggle of every Negro to take his rightful place in America as a man.²¹ 

Throughout the story the message of the need for continuing cooperation between both races tended to overshadow the plot; but the incidents, attitudes, and feelings revealed in the novel were pertinent to life today.²²

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The incidents seemed to be somewhat artificially contrived so Graham could present "a variety of opinions about racism and ways of combating it." 23 He made sure his main character became directly or indirectly involved in every imaginable kind of racial incident; discrimination in court, black power meetings, situation in which blacks were the first fired, a riot, and the aftermath of the riot. During the story the "developments were talked out" 24 rather than appearing to occur naturally. As the reviewer in *Kirkus Reviews* indicated "As a catalogue of consequences of racism it comes closer to reality than it does as a critique or criterion, and it's less successful than *South Town* and *North Town*." 25 Although the handling of the racial incidents was sometimes "naive, the issues were examined with frankness and dignity." 26

"The characters are symbolic, drawn a little larger than life." 27 Through the characters the author portrayed white men who displayed every conceivable attitude toward Negroes: sympathy, condemnation, hatred and scorn, fear,

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25 *Kirkus Reviews*, p. 452.


27 *Farell*, p. 416.
fairness and respect. Also, the Negro characters exhibited as great a variety of attitudes toward the whites. These characters included the militant Negro, the bigoted white governor, the black mother who believed in staying in her place and not standing up to the white folk, the confused young Negro, the prejudiced cop, the white bully, and the middle-class black who's tried to cross over the line. By creating characters as such, they were less human and more stereotyped; although their traits taken separately were believable to the extent that as human beings, sometimes, to explain a complex situation or person, one simplifies the person by labeling him as this type or that type.

The novel was a "social commentary and discussion starter rather than a stylistic showpiece...." The writing style was at times over-simplified as Graham reiterated his theme of racial harmony through black and white people working together. Most of the reviewers recommended the novel for junior high readers. One reviewer qualified his recommendation of the title as an "additional book of acceptable quality for collections needing more material in the area." And the review added that "despite a style that often seems over-simplified, an important and honest book." The title, however, was not highly recommended by

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28 Miller, p. 2509.
30 Bulletin, p. 158.
Kirkus Reviews which stated:

Whether teenagers today will be impressed, as David is ultimately, by the minister's injunction not 'to support or endorse hatred and evil' on either side (here directed against inflammatory prophet Prempey Moshombo on the Negro side) is central to the reception of the book since it has little impact purely as fiction: the style is plodding, the people stiff...31

The book could be useful for discussion purposes concerning race problems in the United States today, for most facets of the social problem were touched on in Whose Town? Also, the main character's feeling of confusion and not knowing what is right is one of the concerns of young people today.

Review of HIS OWN WHERE

June Jordan's His Own Where told the story of a black teen-ager from the "brokenland of Brooklyn" by beginning and ending with the following:

You be different from the dead. All them tombstones tearing up the ground, look like a little city, like a small Manhattan, not exactly. Here is not the same.

Here, you be bigger than the buildings, bigger than the little city. You be really different from the rest, the resting other ones.

Cemetery let them lie there belly close, their shoulders now undressed down to the color of the heat they feel, in lying close, their legs a strong disturbing of the dust. His own where, own place for loving made for making love, the cemetery where nobody guard the dead.32

As the story opened Buddy Rivers, sixteen-year-old black, was virtually on his own. His father was slowly dying in a

31 Kirkus Reviews, p. 452.
hospital after being hit by a car and his mother deserted the family years ago. Buddy lived in a run-down house that he and his father turned into an architectural marvel. When visiting his father at the hospital he met Angela whose mother was a nurse's aid. He walked her home much to the dismay of her suspicious parent who thought her daughter was wild and no good. Together Buddy and Angela faced the city which Buddy considered an ugly adversary of speeding cars, overcrowded buildings, high-priced food, and dangerous living.

At first, Buddy attended school; but after leading a protest against the present physical educational program and advocating more sex education and creating a disturbance in the school cafeteria, Buddy was expelled.

He continued seeing Angela until her father beat her and she was sent away to a Catholic girls' home. After a few months she returned to the city for a visit, but was not welcome in her own home so she went to Buddy's. From here they decided to run away from the authorities and the city. So Buddy took her to "his own where" the cemetery and set up housekeeping in a small brick building by the reservoir.

Using the language of the ghetto, Jordan combined words and phrases of dialect, free verse and prose, abandoned end punctuation, used present tense to describe situations and feelings, and effectively used a stream-of-conscious style. This type of writing style was at first difficult and different to read, but after the first pages a sense of experiencing the situations and feelings began. "The result is a reader-
absorbing stream-of-consciousness effect, a superbly individual vision of 'the living' which readers will recognize from their own where."\(^{33}\) Her writing style was "very personal and in an unorthodox idiom..."\(^{34}\) and attempted "to remove the barrier between words and experiences.... The author controls the language carefully, however, and her images never seem melodramatic or contrived."\(^{35}\)

The characters were realistically developed. They were concerned with the present, attacked problems in their own way without heavily weighing consequences or the future. "Buddy's reactions are rarely clichéd; he sees the hospital as a clean place staffed by concerned people, not as a cold, sterile building; far from wanting solitude for his father, he's glad the dying man at least has a semi-private room so that he won't meet death alone."\(^{36}\) However, some of the incidents in which Buddy was involved were "those of a mythic hero, not a sixteen-year-old."\(^{37}\) But he cannot be dismissed as an unbelievable character, for many of his thought, feelings, dreams, and actions were typical of teen-agers. Angela's presented as a girl who played it cool as she listened to the radio all day long. "Angela's uptight parents, no-nonsense working people, abuse her.... 'But why,' Buddy asks,  

\(^{34}\) Rev. of June Jordan, His Own Where (Crowell), Kirkus Reviews, September 15, 1971, p. 1021.  
\(^{36}\) Goddard, p. 4191.  
\(^{37}\) Goddard, p. 4191.
'Angela's folks have to work so hard and long and why they have to live so crowded up..." The characterization of her parents brought out the social problems of the ghetto but the author did not over-emphasize it.

The story and the plot were simple. It was "no cop-out pseudo-case study of a confused kid or of kids in 'trouble'. Buddy's not guilty, hostile, mixed up and ineffective, or prodded on the road of self-discovery by a well-meaning adult." The action moved the story along at a natural pace. The comments about ghetto life were true to life and not contrived or dramatized. The love relationship between Angela and Buddy might concern some adults for they want to make a baby, even though they were not concerned with the future of how they could support themselves, let alone a child. "In old timey books, this kind of able, intelligent boy would plan to really be somebody important. He would then come back, get Angela, and take her away to live in the real world."

The novel was recommended for junior high and older students. The reviewers believed the title would appeal to teenagers since they could identify with the main character's feelings, dreams, concerns, and actions.

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39 Goddard, p. 4190.

40 Hentoff, p. 13.
Even though the odds of finding happiness for a long time were against Buddy and Angela when they begin life in the cemetery, "they seem to have a chance; they have to try, and most young readers will recognize this impulse while seeing their vulnerability." The story gave some insight into the life-style of a Negro teen-ager showing indirectly the similarities with any teen-ager regardless of race.

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41Kirkus Reviews, p. 1921.
Chapter 3

COMPARISON OF NOVELS

Since the three authors wrote about experiences they dealt with directly in their own lives, most of the situations and characters were believable although sometimes drawn a little larger than life for effect. Ernest Gaines had been born on a Louisiana plantation in 1933 and had worked on a sugar-cane plantation at the age of nine for fifty cents a day. He vividly recreated the lifestyle of the plantation worker in his novel *A Long Day in November*; the main criticism of his work was the use of a six-year-old narrator which could limit the stories appeal to the adolescent.

Lorenz Graham, a Negro American writer, who had experienced the problems of being black in the United States strongly emphasized the idea of cooperation between the races in his novel *Whose Town?* by developing symbolic characters who represented the variety of attitudes held by whites and blacks. The action, characterization, and theme could attract the interest of the adolescent, but the overpowering message could turn off the reader in certain situations.

*His Own Where* had the greatest appeal for the junior high student. June Jordan was born in Harlem and lived in Brooklyn and wrote a rich and moving story of a Negro teen-
agers from the streets of the ghetto today.

All of the three books had boys as the central characters, but girls will find the reading just as enjoyable and interesting. The books can be used to provide information and to start discussions of the social problems in the United States today. Through the stories both white and black students could identify with the concerns developed in the novels even though they might not always identify with the characters. All three novels could be useful additions to a fiction collection about the lifestyle and culture of the Negro American. And since many students will read fiction before non-fiction the titles could be used to promote understanding between races.
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Kirkus Reviews, April 15, 1969, p. 452.
