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THE ARTS

Books

36 **Langston
Hughes:
Before and
Beyond
Harlem**

by Faith Berry,
Lawrence Hill and Company, Westport, Conn.,
1983, 376 pp.

Reviewed by Julian Mayfield

Reading this excellent biography is as engrossing as opening a John LeCarre novel for the first time. It is full of surprises, and not a little humbling, for anyone who, like this reviewer, thought he knew Langston Hughes and several of the hundreds of real life characters who crowded the pages of the writer's richly tapestried, nomadic, and enigmatic life.

There was so much in his life, so many places and significant people, that one comes away from Faith Berry's book admiring not only her scholarship and unlabored writing style, but also her ability to give them each the amount of attention deserved. If Hughes had done the decent thing, written only a few books and poems and essays, and then settled down at a college somewhere, we could safely stash him away in a nice little academic niche, and be done with him.

But, no—his productive life spread over the four most important and distinctive decades of our century. In the 1920s, "the jazz age," his clear and youthfully arrogant voice was the declaration of Black creative spirits everywhere. In the 1930s, in the wake of the collapse of world capitalism, he went to see the young

revolution in Russia, declared that it worked, and with thousands of others in every language produced a hodgepodge of ideologically inspired poetry, essays and plays. Much of it was (as in "Revolution" below) transparent propaganda meant to call forth an instant response from frontline fighters:

*Great mob that knows no fear
Come here!
And raise your hand
Against this man
of iron and steel and gold
Who's bought and sold
You —
Each one for the last thousand years
Come here.
Great mob that knows no fear,
And tear him limb from limb
Split his golden throat
Ear to ear
And end his time forever,
Now —
This year —
Great mob that knows no fear.*

If Hughes wished to shock, he certainly got his wish when, in the early 1930s, he wrote a score of blasphemous poems, including "Goodbye, Christ" (which he would live to regret). The poem below, "Christ in Alabama," almost got him lynched in Chapel Hill, N.C.

*Christ is a nigger
Beaten and black
O, bare your back.*

*Mary is his mother —
Mammy of the South
Silence your mouth.*

*God's His Father —
White master above
Grant us your love.*

*Most holy bastard
Of the bleeding mouth:
Nigger Christ
On the cross of the South.*

I have never believed that the pen was mightier than the sword, but it certainly could draw blood. From the early 1930s when Hughes travelled through much of the Soviet Union with the Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler, and then on to China where he talked with Madam Sun Yat-sen, widow of the founder of the Chinese Republic, and Japan where his writings were well known, he was harassed by secret police, apparently with the encouragement of J. Edgar Hoover's new Federal Bureau of Investigation. As late as 1960, he was still haunted by "Christ in Alabama." And when he was nominated for the NAACP's prestigious Spingarn Award, some powerful people

on the nine-member committee overlooked Hughes's reference to Jesus as a "nigger," but condemned him for calling Jesus a "bastard." Hughes was passed over and the medal went to Richard Wright, which made about as much sense as awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Malcolm X instead of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Of a bolder generation than any writer who has previously attempted a biography of Langston Hughes, Faith Berry has probed deeply into the poet's complex personality and shed light on significant areas of the Harlem Renaissance. That Hughes was attracted to men has long been a shared knowledge among the cognoscenti, but it is not generally appreciated how widespread homosexuality was among many of the stalwarts of the Renaissance. Berry notes this not to titillate but to shed light on some of the leading literati of the period.

Berry also sheds light on another touchy issue: that of the relationship between Black Renaissance figures and their white patrons. Hughes and the scholar Alain Locke—along with novelist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston and artist Aaron Douglas—had a common white Park Avenue benefactor, Charlotte Mason.

In many ways, this patron (Mason), is one of the most astonishing characters in this biography; one immediately suspects she had been plucked out of the grand parade of English eccentrics and dropped into a New York setting. In her seventies when Locke introduced Hughes into her circle, Mason, in the vogue, worshipped "primitivism" in all things and people Black and African. Generous with her money, she was a hard taskmaster who made her Black friends dance to her tune. At one point she insisted that Hughes should write her a letter almost every day. He did. For three and a half years, after 1927, Hughes played the game. Zora Neale Hurston worked the old woman for all she could get. And Locke enthusiastically reported to her every movement of Black artists he could discern, especially of the errant Hughes. This continued for more than a decade up to the time of her death.

I have called attention to the saga of Charlotte Mason not only because, as set out by Faith Berry, it is bitterly entertaining, but also pointedly instructive. Many critics and observers have maintained that there probably would have been no Harlem Renaissance had it not been for white patronage money. For all his contradictions, Hughes himself was

under no illusions about the period. He wrote later, "Some Harlemites thought the race problem had been solved through art. . . I don't know what made them think that—except that they were mostly intellectuals doing the thinking. The ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance."

The relevant question about white patronage is not why it was accepted, but where was the *Black* patronage? The quick and easy answer has always been that there were no Black millionaires, but even that is not true. If for the moment we grant that point, have not our institutions, especially our churches, supported a dozen generations of educated and uneducated con men who took from Black communities far more than they ever brought to them? At the same time our writers and other artists, whose mountain of work testifies to their dedication to racial purpose and direction, have had to go begging, and very often cease creative effort altogether.

Berry, a free-lance writer, researcher and editor, devoted more than 10 years to the making of this solid book. Clearly a labor of love, she nevertheless poked into the dark crevices and uncovered the warts which make humans of us all. What emerges is a full-blown portrait of one of the nation's most talented, prolific and versatile writers who worked in every area of literature. Famous before he was 30, Hughes achieved recognition in every part of the world where people read and hear words and through their images dared to dream of freedom. That he was not rewarded in his own country attests more to our enduring legacy of racism than to any deficiencies of his.

Every writer who reads *Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem* will be astounded and perhaps dismayed by the enormous amount of work the man did. In the end, as he was wont to say, this is the only thing that counts. Indeed, for a long time Berry's book will be the definitive work on Langston Hughes.

I believe I first saw Hughes at the Henry Hudson Hotel in New York in 1959. The event was billed as The First Negro Writers Conference, and we younger people expected the famous man to come and give us ideological leadership in our struggle against racism. Instead, he devoted his speech to developments in publishing, and possible opportunities in motion pictures and the still relatively new television industry. I recall that most of us were vaguely disappointed.

A few months later, over lunch at Frank's in Harlem, I told him about my next novel, and he urged me not to frivol away my time waiting for publication, but to get to work on my next book. I wondered what his case was. I was full of energy and ideas, and fully expected to turn out a dozen books in the next five years. In 1960 and 1961, he passed along to me book review assignments he no longer had time for, and even forced me on his prestigious agency where everybody seemed as famous as he was. (At least I had the good sense to bow out as soon as I decently could.)

At the time I did not know of the great work he had done, nor that he had been savaged by Senator Joseph McCarthy's committee, which had beaten him to the wall and tried to force him to recant much of his most militant anti-racist and anti-capitalist poetry, and denounce his former friends and political associates. He hadn't hurled defiance in the committee's face as had the more secure Paul Robeson and several whites. (Robeson would die under the hammer, and the whites who survived would be rehabilitated.) Instead, Langston had worked a deal with the committee.

How to explain it? One incident may help.

In 1941 Hughes received a small Rosenwald Fund fellowship to write several sketches on Frederick Douglass. Depressed with hospital bills and debts, he wrote to a friend that "my main interest is centered on trying to get a new brown suit. . . never having had one. . . I'd just as well go back to waiting table and get a suit on credit. You know, being a 'great' author doesn't give one the credit rating of a guy with a \$12.00 a week job. . ." A few weeks later, as his biographer records, he bought a new brown suit, matching shoes, and a tie. Despite his productivity, Hughes lived much of his life on the edge of poverty, always underpaid and often cheated by publishers and producers.

Near the end of his life, all sorts of honors and recognition came his way, including honorary degrees and offers to be writer-in-residence at several universities. He never felt the world owed him a living because he had labored so long and so well in every imaginable area of literature, but he would not have been human had he not felt some bitterness.

On May 6, 1967, Langston Hughes suffered an attack at the Wellington Hotel in New York City. He took a taxi to the Polyclinic Hospital where he registered

under an assumed name. There he was treated like an indigent until he was recognized by a Black orderly. Only a few close friends knew where he was. He died alone in his sleep on May 22, at age 65. □

The reviewer is Writer-in-Residence, Department of English, Howard University.

Black Apollo of Science— The Life of Ernest Everett Just

by Kenneth R. Manning
Oxford University Press, New York, 1983,
397 pp.

Reviewed by W. Montague Cobb

This beautifully written, meticulously researched biography, published in the centennial year of the birth of its subject, holds the mirror up to the American environment of the last century and the effect of this on one gifted personality of that period.

Ernest Everett Just was born in Charleston, South Carolina, August 14, 1883. His father died when he was not yet four, and his able mother became his major inspirational force. It is to her that he inscribed his *opus magnum*, "The Biology of the Cell Surface," published by Blakiston in 1939. Kenneth Manning carefully details the travails of the family when Ernest Just was young.

His mother, Mary Mathews Just, was a courageous and resourceful woman of great vision. After he had completed the classical course at what is now South Carolina State College at Orangeburg in 1899 and became a licensed teacher at age 15, Just decided that teaching was not for him.

In the pages of the *Christian Endeavor World*, his mother read an advertisement for a school in Meriden, New Hampshire (Kimball Union Academy) which had