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Book Review Sundial

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BOOKS

Sundial

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Reviewed by E. Ethelbert Miller

Every generation has the opportunity to write its own history, and indeed it is obliged to do so.
—John Hope Franklin

When I attended Howard University in the late '60s the school was being transformed by the Black consciousness movement; students were demanding Black courses and a "relevant education." The emphasis was on obtaining "nation-building" skills and returning to the community. While a student at Howard I was fortunate to hear many of the leading advocates of Black power and Black pride. I can recall seeing everyone from Stokely Carmichael to Eldridge Cleaver. Writers like Amiri Baraka, Don L. Lee and Sonia Sanchez also visited the campus and I guess one reason I became a writer stemmed from my appreciation of their work.

During my undergraduate years (1968–1972) there was always a part of me that wanted to write about the period I witnessed. There were numerous incidents that could have served as the foundation or beginning of a short story, play or novel. Unfortunately I only wrote poetry and never found the discipline to keep a journal or diary. What remains of my college days is buried in boxes and consists mainly of letters, old *Hilltop* newspapers and *Bison* yearbooks.

I was the first person in my family to pursue and complete a college education. Like many young people who had the opportunity, I was introduced to a new world, one which changed my values and beliefs. It's always impressive to listen to the numerous well-known names that are associated with Howard University. I often wonder what some of these people were like during their undergraduate years. I wonder what antics or practical jokes they played on their fellow classmates. Because college years are so critical to one's social and political development they need to be examined and discussed not only by scholars and educators but also by artists. A number of Black writers have accepted this task and challenge.

It was my good friend Roy McKay who told me about a new book, *Sundial*, by L. C. Morse. He said to me, "You must read this book." Although Roy gave me a number of descriptions of what Morse looked like, I could not remember if I knew him from the old school days.

"A novel about Howard,!" I thought, as I held Morse's book in my hand. Could it be better than the classic short story, "The Alternative," that Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) had written?

"The Alternative" can be found in *Tales* (1967). It's funny and is descriptive of life in a male dormitory; it's even bold enough to handle the topic of homosexuality. "The Alternative" finds Baraka's words coming as fast as notes emanating from the horns of Charlie Parker or John Coltrane. Baraka's language is penetrating, his wit so devastating, he questions the entire college experience. Baraka's 25-page short story is an indictment of middle-class values which he finds shallow and lacking in substance. It results in his characters' tormenting individuals who in many ways are helpless.

A more factual account of Amiri Baraka's years at Howard University can be found in *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka* (1984). Here Baraka relies on his Marxist ideology to make sense out of the Howard experience.

Much of what one learns at a Black school is meaningful. Yet as I look back on my college days how do I assess the significance of the panty raids on the Quad? Or the water fights in Cook Hall? If this was simply indicative of the joys of youth, when did I become a man? What part did Howard University play in helping me grow up and become a more responsible person? The answers to these questions and others are what intrigues me about the college setting. Essentially for many of us the four or five years at college serve as a rite of passage into adulthood. In the late '60s and early '70s it also meant a formidable movement into blackness.

My friend Gerard Brown worked for several years on a play about his years at Howard. For some time I thought he

was only thinking about writing something. However, in the '80s Joseph Papp produced *Jonin'* in New York. I was fortunate to be invited to a reading of the play in 1987 at the Source Theater in Washington. *Jonin'* is similar to "The Alternative" in that it also utilizes the male dormitory as the setting and backdrop for its characters. *Jonin'* is successful primarily because Gerard Brown captures how his friends talk. Woven into the play's comedy is a serious and tragic story which illustrates how important attending college and doing well is for many students. The college student confronts not only peer pressure but also is forced into pleasing his or her parents. As a result we find some students obsessed with grades as well as selecting academic majors only to please their mother or father. One wonders if there is a hidden axiom which states that lawyers must produce lawyers and doctors, doctors.

As students we are pushed to excel during one of the most exciting periods of our lives. So much of our education takes place outside the classroom that some students get so distracted they fail to maintain a certain academic average or to retain a scholarship. For a young person these setbacks represent the end of the world. Brown's *Jonin'* is ambitious enought to handle the serious emotional side of college life while celebrating the funny stuff.

Perhaps it is ironic that playwright Gerard Brown makes a brief appearance in Spike Lee's "School Daze". To me parts of Lee's film are similar to *Jonin'* but this might be primarily because both writers are handling the same material. There is only so much ground to be covered if the artist limits himself to a discussion of dormitory life or fraternities. It would be unfortunate if Black writers continued to write about the college experience without going beneath the surface. To some extent Lee's willingness to touch on the issues of hair and color in "*School Daze*" is more radical than any critical remarks about Black colleges in Amiri Baraka's autobiography, primarily because those issues were elevated to the screen and presented for mass consumption.

The uproar surrounding Lee's film shows a considerable portion of the Black community to be more comfortable living within four walls of silence. Too often we set limits on our writers and artists by telling them what they can or cannot do. This puts the writer/artist in a struggle against a conservative community regardless of how progressive or radical that community might seem on race relations. Conservative communities uphold traditions and in the Black community this means the propagation of silence on many issues. One wonders what would have happened to Spike Lee if he had explored the same subject material in a serious manner. Because "School Daze" was a musical comedy it was more acceptable to many. One ponders how this film would have been received if it had explored the issue of Black male homsexuality on campus as Baraka did in "The Alternative." How many college presidents would then deny Lee access to their facilities? All this is speculation, of course, but the reality is that behind every institution lies a certain degree of mythology. Artists either attempt to destroy these myths or they embrace them and try to make them more meaningful to future generations.

L. C. Morse's *Sundial* tends to do both. The result is a good first novel by a graduate of Howard University. The title is taken from the sundial that was erected by the class of 1929 on the main quadrangle of the campus. One assumes that Morse selected this monument as a symbol because of its relationship with the concept of time and the measurement of change. I never think about the sundial when I'm walking across campus. When I was a student my key points of reference were The Wall outside the Women's Quadrangle, the Punch-Out in the Student Center and maybe the clock tower on Founders Library.

What Morse accomplishes in *Sundial* is twofold. First he tells the story of an individual coming of age during a period of major political and social change. Second he gives us the simple love affair we all imagine ourselves having once in our lifetime. The kind that brings back old memories whenever a certain song is played on the radio. Where is the woman I danced to the Delfonics with in a dark apartment building on Fairmont Street?

Sundial begins with William Bennett, a graduate of Howard's School of Architecture, returning after five years to renovate a cafeteria located across the street from the university. A mural painted on the cafeteria wall brings back Bennett's college memories. If I hadn't seen the mural Morse writes about I would have dismissed his use of it as that of a writer groping for something to use in order to establish a reason or way of telling a story. A painting or photograph is almost a predictable technique, a point of entry-into the past. However, Morse is an excellent writer when it comes to detail and he recreates the cafeteria and its mural.

I remember the first time I saw the mural. I was with my roomate Reggie Hudgins from Philadelphia. We both thought the entire painting was hilarious (student radicals that we were). The mural reflected the "old" Howard and told about the plight of an incoming freshman and how he eventually overcomes obstacles to become a big man on campus. The images used to depict this story showed a Howard of fraternities and fair complexioned women.

What Morse does in *Sundial* is to explore and penetrate the experience, to seek the deeper level of meaning. Here is how he describes William Bennett looking at the mural:

> "Nine years earlier, when first I realized the series of paintings along those walls told what appeared a simple story of student days at Howard during the mid-to-late nineteen forties, I had thought them cute—if disarmingly romantic; a chronicle of simpler, more innocent times. For when in subsequent years they had caused me to reflect on my own time there, I had seen in them only stark contrast. But standing there alone on that day in late March, I thought of Hugo; how like him to have—in jest—called them hieroglyphs . . . and to have been right."

Morse has William Bennett trying to come to grips not only with his past but also with his relationship to an institution and what it represents. If the painting is a hieroglyph then what is its hidden meaning or message? To me the painting was an icon, something sacred and protective of a myth. What it depicted was an acceptance into the status quo.

What intrigues me about *Sundial* is the author's point of view. What he begins as reminiscence about college ends up making a definite political statement about an important time in recent American history. The author claims it

was like any other time when in fact it was not.

For William Bennett it is the time for his friends Hugo Mackey, Leroy Cuffy, Bezo Gant and Ronald Maxwell to come of age. It is the time for William Bennett and Lisa Brevard to fall in love. But what should we make of Morse's description of the radicalization of Ronald Maxwell a young student from Tampa, Florida?

> "He would come by our room and sit for hours spouting whatever fragments of his current "ideology" he had retained and it became difficult to know from week to week if he thought himself a Black Panther, Pan-Africanist, Cultural Nationalist or Black Muslim. Often the various bits and pieces of his doctrinal tapestry would run together and the confusion which existed in his mind would become evident on his face."

One of the recent racial stereotypes in literature and film has been the Black militant. Often he is presented wearing sunglasses, a beret and a million buttons. He is everywhere, including in the films "Soul Man" and "School Daze." The militant is either troubled or confused and is never a sympathetical character. The militant is always depicted as an individual living in the past or dreaming about an impossible red, black and green future. Here Morse, a new novelist, falls into an old trap.

Morse is on safer grounds when telling us about the relationship between Bennett and Lisa Brevard. Here is romance filled with tenderness linked with respect. The getting-to-know-each-other is sincere and not over-shadowed by sexual game playing. It's what many of us wanted even if we were unable to commit ourselves to it. Brevard reminds me of the actress Debbie Allen when she was on campus. The energy, talent and beauty of a special woman is captured in Morse's prose. Even when the relationship ends and Brevard commits herself to the man back home, Morse keeps everything in perspective by relating how times change and we mature as we meet new people.

The current college reader will find many things to identify with in *Sundial*. Still we must also judge Morse's book as literature, as part of a tradition in which our concern is with craft and the handling of his theme. L. C. Morse writes well

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and handles *Sundial's* simple plot well. What falls apart, in my opinion, is the ending of the novel. Morse's decision to incorporate fictional newspaper articles into his prose does not work. It can be confusing to readers since Morse's fictional and non-fictional references are scattered throughout the book. Had I not attended Howard, I would have believed that a Black militant climbed into the campus clock tower (as a white marksman did at the University of Texas in Austin) and shot to death a number of people.

Sundial is about how friendships change over the years. Many are made, a few last an entire lifetime, others maybe a semester. All of this is just a moment in time or what L. C. Morse would describe as a dance around the sundial. □

The reviewer is director of the Afro-American Resource Center at Howard University. His latest collection of poems, "where are the love poems for dictators?," was published in 1986. *See page 22 for excerpts from SUNDIAL.*