

The Man in the Artist in the Selected Novels of John Oliver Killens

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 19 June 2018

Keywords

Thunder, Heard, Columbia, Black Arts Movement

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ABSTRACT

John Oliver Killens's politically charged novels *And Then We Heard the Thunder* and *The Cotillion*; or *One Good Bull Is Half the Herd*, were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. His works of fiction and nonfiction, the most famous of which is his novel *Youngblood*, have been translated into more than a dozen languages. An influential novelist, essayist, screenwriter, and teacher, he was the founding chair of the Harlem Writers Guild and mentored a generation of black writers at Fisk, Howard, Columbia, and elsewhere. Killens is recognized as the spiritual father of the Black Arts Movement. In this first major biography of Killens, Keith Gilyard examines the life and career of the man who was perhaps the premier African American writer-activist from the 1950s to the 1980s.

Gilyard extends his focus to the broad boundaries of Killens's times and literary achievement—from the Old Left to the Black Arts Movement and beyond. Figuring prominently in these pages are the many important African American artists and political figures connected to the author from the 1930s to the 1980s—W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Alphaeus Hunton, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Harry Belafonte, and Maya Angelou, among others.

1. Introduction

Any emerging novelist would be thrilled to receive the critical reception that John Oliver Killens did for *Youngblood* when the book appeared in the spring of 1954. Although a few southern reviewers predictably balked at the damning portrait of white supremacy, and his hometown newspaper, the *Macon Telegraph*, ignored the book, positive and effusive praise prevailed nationally. Taylor Glenn, a transplanted Maconite who wrote for the *Bridgeport (Connecticut) Sunday Post*, announced, "The story of *Crossroads* and its people, the genteel, the middle class, the peckerwoods, and the Negroes, is the most exciting adventure, the most pulsating excursion, I've had in all the novels I've read this year." No reviewer understood the story's social and political geography more than Glenn, who spent much of his article describing Macon before endorsing Killens's portrayal of their native city: "Whether he calls it *Crossroads*, or I call it *Macon*, on one side of whose tracks he was born, I on the other, is unimportant—I can vouch for its veracity, its authenticity." Glenn then concluded, "*Youngblood* is more real than Dreiser's *American Tragedy*, of which I was immediately reminded, more searching of Negro-white relations than Lillian Smith's *Strange Fruit*, far, far more faithful to its setting, more detailed in its delineation, more powerful in its presentation than *Invisible Man*." Explicitly or implicitly, Ralph Ellison's novel frequently would be a basis of comparison. John Henrik Clarke surely had *Invisible Man* in mind when he labeled Killens's novel a story of "healthy Negroes" and the best black novel to date. In a *New York Times* review, Granville Hicks suggested that both Ellison's "invisible men" conception and Richard Wright's outsider metaphor were legitimate ways to examine the race problem, freeing African American authors from "rigid poses of indignation" and allowing them to be more artistically resourceful. Yet Hicks conceded that protest novels possessed

considerable value and believed that "so long as they are as sincere and credible as John Killens' *Youngblood*, we can be grateful for them."

Killens understood the compliment paid by Hicks but eschewed the social-protest label, preferring instead to call his book a "Novel of Affirmation" that "asserts the human dignity of all people everywhere."

Killens also preferred realism in his quest to dramatize black life, explaining that "romanticism would tend to cover it up, sentimentalize it. Naturalism takes the lid off and lets the light and air in, but realism does the real probing that is required."

Trying to fix *Youngblood*'s place in recent African American fiction, *People's World* reviewer Al Richmond hailed the book as a "literary milestone," declaring, "For the first time the Negro American, who looms as an ever more imposing figure in the political and social conflicts of our time, assumes full stature in a contemporary novel." He further credited Killens with composing a "work of great optimism" that expresses a "deep faith in his people" and breaks with the "pattern set by Richard Wright's *Native Son* and since followed to its sadder extremes by Wright and other Negro American novelists." Richmond would have applauded almost any departure from what he termed the "Wright-Chester Himes trend," but he considered *Youngblood* "a novel of such scope, such vitality, and such genuine artistry" that he exclaimed, "Hallelujah!"

From an early age Killens was exposed to African American writers and thinkers. His father encouraged him to read Langston Hughes, and his mother introduced him to the work of poet and novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar. Growing up in Georgia

under Jim Crow law had a profound impact on Killens's political and social outlook and provided source material for his writings.

2. Novels of John Oliver Killens

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3. Killen as an American Writer and Activist

Between 1934 and 1936 Killens attended many colleges and universities, including Edward Waters College in Jacksonville, Florida, and Morris Brown College in Atlanta. In 1936 he moved to Washington, D.C., and, while working for the National Labor Relations Board (through 1942), he took night classes and completed a bachelor's degree at Howard University. He then began to pursue a law degree with evening classes at Terrell Law School but was interrupted by military service during World War II. The racism he experienced while serving in the South Pacific in the highly segregated U.S. Army inspired later writings, especially the novel *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1963).

When Killens returned from the war, he settled in Brooklyn and began taking writing classes first at Columbia University and later at New York University. At that time, during the late 1940s, he began meeting regularly with other young socially conscious African American writers. In 1950, with John Henrik Clarke, Rosa Guy, and Walter Christmas, he founded the Harlem Writers Club, which became the Harlem Writers Guild two years later. In 1954 Killens published the Pulitzer Prize-nominated novel *Youngblood*, for which he is best known. The story focuses on the Youngbloods, an African American family that faces the struggle of living in the South under Jim Crow law in the first decades of the 20th century. The inspiration for the characters and their experiences, at least in part, stemmed from Killens's own upbringing. *Youngblood* was the first book published by a guild member and became a landmark protest novel of the American civil rights movement. It also launched his role as a leader among African American activist writers.

Killens was active in the civil rights movement, participating in the Montgomery bus boycott and associating with Martin Luther King, Jr. However, by the early 1960s Killens had become more interested in the philosophy of Malcolm X, and in 1964 he helped cofound the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which encouraged African Americans to look to and embrace their African heritage. That year he also received a Pulitzer Prize nomination for his book about facing racism in the U.S. Army, *And Then We Heard the Thunder*. Killens's affiliation with black nationalism and his new, more-militant perspective on fighting racism was apparent in his 1965 collection of essays *Black Man's Burden*, which addressed the African American experience in the United States and denounced the nonviolent approach to facing oppression.

In 1967 Killens became a writer in residence at Nashville's Fisk University, the first of many teaching positions he would hold over the next 20 years. While there he organized what would be his first major black writer's conference. It was held in both 1966 and 1967. In its first year important figures in the Black Arts movement such as Ossie Davis, Arna Bontemps, and Margaret Walker were in attendance. While at Fisk he also wrote *'Sippi* (1967), which tells the story of a college student embroiled in the struggle to achieve the right to vote. Though its characters are from the South, the story takes place in New York City, Killens's first novel to be set in the North. From 1968 to 1974 Killens taught writing at Columbia University.

Killens continued writing prolifically as well as teaching, at Trinity College (1970–71) in Hartford, Connecticut, and Howard University (1971–77) in Washington, D.C. While at Howard, he organized another black writer's conference (1974) and wrote his fourth novel, *The Cotillion; or, One Good Bull Is Half the Herd* (1971), which, from his strong Black Nationalist perspective, examined class division among African Americans in two communities in New York. The novel, though it received mixed reviews, earned him another Pulitzer Prize nomination. He next wrote a book for young adults, *Great Gittin' Up Morning* (1972), a biography of Denmark Vesey, an African American slave who in 1822 led the largest slave rebellion in U.S. history. In 1975 Killens wrote a book for a younger audience titled *A Man Ain't Nothin' but a Man: the Adventures of John Henry*. He taught from 1978 to 1983 at Bronx Community College and from 1983 to 1987 at Medgar Evers College at the City University of New York, where in 1986 he established the National Black Writers Conference, which continued into the 21st century. The Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College sponsored the *Killens Review of Arts & Letters*, a biannual publication launched in 2010 in honour of the author. His final book, *Great Black Russian: A Novel on the Life and Times of Alexander Pushkin*, was published posthumously in 1989. (According to Pushkin family tradition, the writer's mother was the granddaughter of an Abyssinian princeling bought as a slave at Constantinople and adopted by Peter the Great.)

Killens, though prolific, was largely underappreciated. The reception of his work was varied after his first two novels. Critics largely objected to his writing style, which, because of his highly charged messages, was often perceived as didactic and inauthentic. Many of his works went out of print throughout the 1980s and '90s. And, further, in the three years in which in he

earned nominations for the Pulitzer Prize (1954, 1964, and 1971), no award was issued. Beyond his essays and works of fiction (and two screenplays: *Odds Against Tomorrow* [1959] and *Slaves* [1969]), Killens was noted for his teaching, especially for the impact he had on young African American writers such as Ntozake Shange and Nikki Giovanni, who both studied with him. He also served as the vice president of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters from its founding in 1969 and was instrumental in the formation of the Junior Black Academy of Arts and Letters in 1977.

4. John Oliver Killens: Writer and activist known for Politically charged Novels

John Oliver Killens was an American writer and activist known for his politically charged novels and his contributions to the Black Arts Movement and as a founder of the Harlem Writers Guild

Killens was born January 14, 1916, in Macon, Georgia, to Charles Myles Killens Sr., a restaurant manager, and Willie Lee Coleman, an insurance company clerk. His parents were well-read and kept on top of the latest trends and events important to African-Americans. His mother introduced him to the work of poet and novelist Paul Laurence Dunbar when he was a young boy. The Jim Crow laws had an enormous impact on Killens' political and social outlook; it was the source of many of his writings.

Killens attended several colleges and universities. He ultimately graduated from Howard University with a bachelor's degree and then pursued a law degree by taking evening classes at Terrell Law School. He was interrupted while attending Terrell by military service during World War II. While serving, he encountered intense racism in the South Pacific, which later inspired his novel *And Then We Heard the Thunder*.

He wrote six novels for adults. His works include *Black Man's Burden*, essays on race in America; *Great Black Russian*, a biographical work on the poet Alexander Pushkin; and two books for young readers, *Great Gittin' Up Morning*, a biography of Denmark Vesey; and *A Man Ain't Nothin' but a Man* (1975), which recounts the adventures of John Henry. Killens also wrote plays, screenplays, and numerous articles and short stories

With his work came several honors, which include the vice presidency of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship, and a Distinguished Writer Award from the Middle Atlantic Writers Association. The Before Columbus Foundation, which sponsors the American Book Awards, cited Killens for lifetime achievement in 1985. He is also a member of the Georgia Writers Hall of Fame. John Oliver Killens died on October 27, 1987.

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