

The Free-Lance Pallbearers Short Guide

The Free-Lance Pallbearers by Ishmael Reed

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Characters

Reed's characters in *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* are symbolic representations of the particular issue he is satirizing.

At times, the issue/character is gently rendered, as with Doopeyduk. His naivete and trusting nature make his early foibles easier to swallow, and the reader ends up feeling more sorry for Doopeyduk — and his real-life counterparts — than anything else. Much more often, however, Reed's characters are used to savagely attack what Reed sees as falsity and corruption. The "attack" characters' actions provide the novel with much of its vicious humor and relevancy.

Reed's critical views toward black leaders, for example, are portrayed by Elijah Raven, the muslim/black nationalist whose ideas of cultural and racial separation in the United States are contradicted by his actions again and again: You'd better get on the right side, brother, because when the deal goes down, all backsliding uncle toms are going to ... get it in the neck, Doopeyduk, " Elijah scowled, moving his finger across his neck ... revealing cufflinksElijah from Sargent Shriver.

Other negative black characters are Eclair Porkchop, the minister and people's advocate who is later found having sexual relations with HARRY SAM, and the Free-Lance Pallbearers of the title, who allow their leaders to be killed and only arrive to bury and venerate the corpse. It is black leaders in general, though, who are the hardest hit by Reed's satirical punches: The leaders of the blacks ...

mounted the circuitous steps leading to SAM's assuring the boss dat: "Wasn't us, boss. Twas Stokely and Malcolm. Not us, boss. No indeed. We put dat ad in da Times repudiating dem, boss.

'Member, boss? You saw da ad, didn't you, boss? Look, boss. We can prove it to you, dat we loves you. Would you like for us to cook up some strange recipes for ya boss? Or tell some jokes? Did you hear the one about da nigger in da woodpile? Well, seems dere was this nigger, boss

While Reed is highly critical of certain types of blacks, he certainly does not let the white power structure escape unharmed. Throughout the novel, most of the white characters are mired in a world of excrement: HARRY SAM, the chief power figure, has been in the "john" for thirty years, and he lives in a house surrounded by a moat filled with human waste; and Doopeyduk's mentor at Harry Sam College, U2 Polyglot, is first introduced as he is preparing a paper for an English literary quarterly entitled "The Egyptian Dung Beetle in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*." Doopeyduk finds Polyglot pushing a "light ball of excrement" around his office by the tip of his nose.



Bukka Doopeyduk is virtually the only character who is treated sympathetically by Reed. Doopeyduk suffers his lazy, hostile wife gladly, becomes humiliated as the star of a performance art exhibit, and pursues his spiritual Nazarene growth until he actually meets SAM and becomes disillusioned.

Since his primary duty as an orderly is to empty bedpans filled with excrement, he is thereby initially aligned with the white characters. His slow transformation from obedient Nazarene apprentice to power-hungry black leader forms the narrative of the novel.



Social Concerns/Themes

Reed's first novel contains a myriad of stances and positions, all wrapped in a satiric, parodic narrative. Reed develops several themes in *The FreeLance Pallbearers*, including an examination of what Reginald Martin calls the "oppressive, stress-filled, Western/ European/Christian tradition." Other themes include a parody of the autobiographical style of earlier AfricanAmerican narratives and an examination of the different strata in the black community, especially different kinds of black leaders. Random targets of Reed's satire are the academic community, the debate over the nature and purpose of art, and the American political system.

Nothing, it seems, and no one is safe from Reed's satirical barbs. The black community's various attempts to find a leader to rally behind, for example, are spoofed by the inclusion of a capricious black nationalist character who teaches purity but secretly eats pork, and black ministers who, beneath the piety, run numbers rackets and "sell reefer."

Linking the different parodies together is narrator Bukka Doopeyduk, an articulate, naive young black man who appears to favor assimilation and integration at the beginning of the book: ... it behooves me to start at the bottom and work my way up the ladder. Temperance, frugality, thrift — that kind of thing.

He later moves to more of an activist position: NOW I WAS DA ONE. NOW NOT ONLY WOULD I BE THE NAZARENE BISHOP WHICH WAS AFTER ALL PEANUTS, BUT I WAS GOING TO RUN THE WHOLE KIT AND KABOODLE. ME DICTATOR OF BUKKA DOOPEYDUK.

Ultimately, Doopeyduk is satirizing assimilated blacks and corrupt black militants.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

"One of the problems with monoethnic critics approaching my work is that they don't know the full scope of the traditions I'm drawing upon," says Reed, who is African American; "As I learn more and more about differing cultures in this country, the gap between my work and the viewpoint of some critics — especially those in the northeast — widens, and the critics become very frustrated. They call my style idiosyncratic; yet my style is older than the European tradition."

While using that "old" style, Reed draws on sources ranging from Egyptian mythology to Caribbean voodoo to American black folklore to create his fiction.

Reed often uses phonetic spellings instead of standard spellings, capitalization for emphasis, and uses news flashes and radio voice-overs to comment on the book's action. The effect is a narrative that reads much like a motion picture or television show. The pacing and flow are reminiscent of the way the media communicates its ideas.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Editor - Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults

Includes bibliographical references.

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for fiction, nonfiction, and biographies written for young adults.

Includes a short biography for the author of each analyzed work.

1. Young adults—Books and reading. 2. Young adult literature—History and criticism. 3.

Young adult literature—Bio-bibliography. 4. Biography—Bio-bibliography.

[1. Literature—History and criticism. 2. Literature—Bio-bibliography]

I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952

Z1037.A1G85 1994 028.1'62 94-18048 ISBN 0-933833-32-6

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1994