

Mumbo Jumbo Short Guide

Mumbo Jumbo by Ishmael Reed

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Characters

Mumbo Jumbo is a book with a great many characters. Some of them, including President Warren Harding and James Weldon Johnson, are actual historical figures. The overwhelming majority of characters are fictional, and two characters are at its center. The hero is PaPa LaBas, a HooDoo detective who, with his colleague Black Herman, tries to uncover the origins of Jes Grew and devise ways to keep the "anti-plague" alive. LaBas and Black Herman use conjuring, exorcising and healing in their work, and as a result, LaBas' critics call his headquarters Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral. Critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. claims PaPa LaBas is "the chief detective in hard-and-fast pursuit of both Jes Grew and its Text.

LaBas is the Afro-American trickster figure from black sacred tradition. His surname, of course, is French for "over there," and his presence unites "over there" (Africa) with "right here." He is indeed the messenger of the gods, the divine Pan-African interpreter, pursuing, in the language of the text, "The Work," which is not only Vaudou but also the very work (and play) of art itself."

The other central character is Hincle Von Vampton. Von Vampton lives in a house called "Spiraling Agony," and is pursuing The Book of Thoth in order to destroy Jes Grew before it gets to New York. Von Vampton and his colleague, Herbert "Safecracker" Gould, manipulate naive, rural blacks, and those they cannot manipulate they steal from and misrepresent their writings. These two characters appear to represent the white power structure that carries out the practice of revising history and stealing from black culture. "Safecracker" Gould, throughout the novel, eavesdrops on black culture and records it, thereby becoming an "expert."

This expertise, or lack thereof, is exposed when he fails to carry off his attempt to pose as the "Talking Android" in blackface.

Another character portrayed in blackface, even though he is black, is Woodrow Wilson Jefferson, a black farmhand from Re-mote, Mississippi.

Jefferson, with his overly formal manner and his use of titles (he calls Von Vampton "Publisher Hincle Von Vampton" whenever he addresses him), embodies the image of the pretentious pseudo-middle-class black man who is actually quite naive and rural. Jefferson is hired at Von Vampton's publication, the Benign Monster, to write the Negro Viewpoint (a viewpoint Von Vampton will actually command, with Jefferson acting as figurehead). Seconds after being hired, Jefferson asks Von Vampton if he would introduce Jefferson to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. "[I'll] really have to mold this 1," Von Vampton thinks, "but it would give [me] good practice for when [I] discovered the Android." Eventually, Jefferson's Baptist minister father comes to New York to drag him back home.

The most complex character in Mumbo Jumbo is Abdul Hamid, the black nationalist. Hamid is shown to be brash and extroverted, yet confessional and intimate. He is



always looking for a chance to get on a soapbox ("Abdul sees the doorway is empty. Deprived of an audience, he changes his demeanor.

He suddenly becomes polite affable patient reasonable."), but also is one who sticks to his principles — indeed, dies for them. He obviously cares deeply for his people, but his attempt at "censorship," ostensibly to help blacks, actually accounts for the regression of Jes Grew. Hamid burns *The Work — The Book of Thoth* — that is the key to Jes Grew, and after the burning, Jes Grew "just withered up and died." In spite of the bad light Reed puts Hamid in, he also makes it clear that, however misguided, he does have blacks' best interests at heart.

Hamid is the character through which some of Reed's most prophetic statements are voiced. Early in the novel, for example, Hamid says, "People are beginning to trickle in here from down home and I'll bet sooner or later there will be an exodus rivaling the 1 of the Good Book Happy Dust is here now. What strange enslaving drugs will be here later?"



Social Concerns/Themes

At its heart, *Mumbo Jumbo* is a struggle between the Judeo-Christian Ethic and what Reed calls the NeoHooDoo Aesthetic. The catalyst for the struggle is a mysterious "anti-plague" called "Jes Grew," a "disease" that forces its "victims" to dance and let their inhibitions go. Since the NeoHooDoo Faction feels "laughter washes the heart," they are excited and supportive of Jes Grew, whereas the secret society attempting to subdue the plague, the Knights Templar, is aligned with the Wallflower Order. They are intent on stopping Jes Grew before it gets to New York City.

Reed, as he has in other books, sprays his satirical buckshot far and wide, and there are many victims.

Black nationalists again are perceived as being hypocritical and contradictory. In a 1974 interview Reed said, Some of the people who call themselves nationalists and revolutionaries are your worst enemies because, in many ways, they're sicker than the mainline critic who's a superficial expert on blackness. You get those blacks who feel that just because you're the same skin color . . . shit! Most of the time I'm cherry red. I'm beginning to see why black writers flee this country.

Reflecting this viewpoint, Reed created Abdul Hamid, the nationalist in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Hamid adjusts his wordplay depending on the audience he addresses, and is accused of "censorship to the very last. He took it upon himself to decide what writing should be viewed by black people."

The overriding theme of the novel is that prominent blacks are used by whites to achieve whites' hidden agenda. Many of the white characters attempt to manipulate black characters in order to stop Jes Grew. The white characters' primary aim is to get their dogma espoused by having black authority figures speak to other blacks.

The "Talking Android" (a black figure used to "work within the Negro . . . to drive [Jes Grew] out, categorize it analyze it expel it slay it, blot Jes Grew.")

is one way whites speak "through" blacks in *Mumbo Jumbo*. By using this theme, Reed not only exposes the white power structure, but condemns black leaders at the same time.

Mumbo Jumbo also seeks to show how history has been manipulated and revised by the white power structure.

Reed spends a lot of time talking about the 1915 U.S. invasion of Haiti, and the efforts of the Atonists — Reed's term for defenders of the Judeo-Christian ethic — to suppress knowledge of the occupation. At the climax of the book is an extended retelling of the legend of ancient Egyptians Osiris and Set, a story that began "1000s of years ago in



Egypt." The two brothers quarrelled over whether the Egyptians should dance and enjoy life, the Osiran view, or whether they should be modest and temperate as Set wished. Set won the battle, but Osiris was able to put his dances and rituals in a book, The Book of Thoth, that became the Text that the competing characters in Mumbo Jumbo seek to either reclaim or destroy.

The common historical omission of ancient Egyptian civilization as an important society is demonstrated by Reed when, as he finishes the Osiran section of the novel, he has a black character denounce it all. Reed makes it clear, as the character insists "serious works . . . began in Greece," that the effect of the historical omission is that blacks do not invest as much value in their own African-Egyptian history as they do in the "western" civilization popularly credited to ancient Athens.

Techniques/Literary Precedents

Mumbo Jumbo is an experimental, postmodern novel that actually employs more textbook than novelistic conventions. It contains illustrations, footnotes, and a bibliography. Of particular critical interest is the "Partial Bibliography," an inclusion one critic calls Reed's "most brilliant stroke."

Another critic finds that Reed's bibliography "affirms his opinion of pedantry and outworn attitudes in literary circles."

Beyond the textbooklike feel of the novel, the text itself comprises a mishmash of characters, conflict, and connections, all brought together in a style that shuns quotation marks, uses unusual spellings ("Kongress" instead of Congress; "Kathedral" instead of Cathedral), employs a selective use of commas, and substitutes numbers for numerical words. The technique makes for an interesting read. The novel is unconventional, but the differences add to the book's readability rather than detract.

One of the unusual aspects of Mumbo Jumbo is the usage of what critic Reginald Martin calls "HooDoo time," which he sees resurfacing through a "stylistic technique that produces a synchronic effect. Certain chapters which have detailed past events in the past tense are immediately followed by chapters that begin with present-tense verbs and present-day situations; this effect introduces simultaneity to the text, and elicits from the reader a response that mirrors the feeling of the HooDoo/oral culture. That is, the reader feels that all of the actions are thematically and rhetorically related, because they all seem to be happening in the same narrative time frame."

Reed talks about his usage of "necromancy" in his book of essays, *Shrovetide in Old New Orleans*: "I wanted to write about a time like the present or to use the past to prophesy about the future — a process called necromancy.

I chose the twenties because they are very similar to what's happening now.

This is a valid method and has been used by writers from time immemorial.

Nobody ever accused James Joyce of making up things. Using a past event of one's country or culture to comment on the present."

In a 1974 interview, Reed, while commenting on the fact that a photograph of John Mitchell, Richard Kliendienst, and John Dean appeared in Mumbo Jumbo before the Watergate scandal broke, talked about some of his writing techniques — both conscious and unconscious: It's necromancy. You try to prophesy; you get strange feelings or impulses. I do believe that I get psychic information from sources I'm not aware of when I'm writing. That's prophecy. But that's only one element of the book. I took all these things, used the classic techniques of the detective novel, as well as Egyptology, Western history, black dance, American civilization, and the Harding administration — all myths to explain the present.

Related Titles

Reed's writing style matured greatly between *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967) and *Mumbo Jumbo*. Critical response generally reflected this assertion, although a few critics felt that "the full-blown explication of NeoHooDoo dulled the devilishly humorous cutting edge of the two previous novels." The characters are more complex in *Mumbo Jumbo* than in Reed's earlier works. In *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* the contradictions some characters displayed made them seem inconsistent. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, the characters all display contradictions but are drawn in such a way that the differences make them more human.



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