

Reckless Eyeballing Short Guide

Reckless Eyeballing by Ishmael Reed

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Characters

As in his other novels, Reed's characters are symbols of the particular social ill on which he is commenting. There are a number of different story lines and characters to pursue those story lines. Ball, the central character of the novel, is a southerner — from the West Indies, not the southern United States — who is beholden to the materialism of the mid-1980s. The women, the gadgets, and the apartment are all a vital part of his life. So in order to become a successful, famous playwright, he is interested in getting his name off the feminists' "sex list." Ball writes *Reckless Eyeballing*, a play comprised mostly of women, as an attempt to placate the feminists. Ball is another in a long line of complicated Reed characters: He thinks one way and acts another and he struggles over whether to compromise his values for the money and prestige a hit play would bring. In the end, his duality takes control of him, the result of Hoodoo practiced on him at birth by his mother's lover's wife.

She "put a hex on the child . . . [saying] he would be born a two-head, of two minds, the one not knowing what the other was up to."

Although Ball travels from New York back to New Oya during the space of the novel, Tremonisha Smarts is the character who makes the longest philosophical journey. She begins the novel as a black man-bashing womanist, and ends the book acknowledging the way her views have been co-opted by whites for their own agenda. As a result, she leaves the New York theatre scene and accompanies her man to Yuba City, California, to begin a theatre group and have "lots of babies."

Smarts is a broad character, who does not quite emerge as fully realized as she was probably intended. She finally becomes a character who acts the way Reed apparently wishes all black feminists would act. The area she must cover to come to an understanding of Reed's point of view is great, and, as a character, she doesn't emerge unscathed.

The chief power broker in *Reckless Eyeballing* is Becky French, the theatre producer. She is the person who insists on including a controversial scene in Tremonisha Smarts' play, *Wrong-Headed Man*; she makes an important change in Ball's *Reckless Eyeballing*; and she is producing the Eva Braun play. This character is meant to symbolize the cannibalistic nature of the white power structure, and the way those wielding power can influence the artist. French doesn't change at all in the book. She's manipulative and mean throughout, and she drives the major characters away with her strong-arm tactics. By devising a powerful, immovable character, Reed illustrates the necessity of learning to get around the power structure with values intact.

Social Concerns/Themes

Although the dust jacket for *Reckless Eyeballing* says the novel is "men vs. women, blacks vs. Jews, North vs.

South, and Ishmael Reed vs. everybody," certainly some of the alliances are more positive than they sound. The novel's central character, for example, playwright Ian Ball, has an excellent working relationship with his Jewish director, and while the battle lines between men and women are clearly drawn, there is an attempt at fusion by the book's end.

Reed's primary focus in *Reckless Eyeballing* is on the black women writers who routinely display black men in ways that mirror society's general misconception of them. Reed came under heavy criticism for this novel, as many critics saw the book as a thinly veiled attack on Alice Walker and *The Color Purple* (1982). The similarities between Walker and her novel and Reed's fictional character and her play are striking. Tremonisha Smarts, a black female playwright, has written a play called *Wrong-Headed Man*, where all the black men commit incest, and routinely rape and brutalize women.

Her play is being adapted into film by a director who "did science fiction plots that were so embellished with special effects that you forgot the weak story lines and the bad acting." Also, direct references are made to "that lesbian business" and to a woman who puts "urine and spit into her guests' drinks," both, seemingly, direct allusions to *The Color Purple*. ("The book is a work of fiction," Reed maintains, dismissing the charges.)

It is clear, however, that Reed intends to expose the way some black writers could unwittingly be controlled by powerful whites. "I was writing about some brutal black guys," says Tremonisha Smarts, "who I knew in my life who beat women, abandoned their children, cynical, ignorant, and arrogant, you know these types, but my critics and the people who praised me took some of these characters and made them out to be all black men."

This passage, late in the novel, demonstrates the way Reed's female characters come to understand Reed's position in a way Reed's real-life critics still have not come to understand. As a result, the criticism of *Reckless Eyeballing* was unusually harsh.

Several subthemes run through the novel. The killing of a Jewish director at a racist southern religious rally, along with frequent ruminations about the difference between the North and South, simultaneously point to the North/South dichotomy while commenting on race relations.

The white feminist movement is also examined, and Reed offers an example of the way history is revised by those who have the power to do so. A white female producer is set to produce a play about the "exploitation" of Eva Braun and the rest of the women who were "forced" into cooperation with the Nazis. The producer has also bumped Ball's play to a smaller, less comfortable theatre so she can run the Eva Braun play at the larger,

more prestigious theatre. By fusing the two themes — the discretionary power of those who produce and publish along with the way history revised — Reed shows not only that power exists, but how it is exercised and for what reasons.



Techniques

In writing *Reckless Eyeballing*, Reed does not employ as many of the unconventional experimental devices as in some of his earlier works. Still, Reed's basic underlying structure is that used in even the more experimental novels.

A wide range of characters are introduced, some having very much to do with the direct plot, along with others that are loosely connected to the plot but carry on a separate subplot of their own. A good example is Lawrence O'Reedy, a white New York detective.

O'Reedy serves a number of functions in the novel, from symbolizing the racist, murderous attitudes (and latent guilt) of some New York Police Department veterans, to exhibiting racist sexual attraction toward black women like Tremonisha Smarts (whose case he is investigating). O'Reedy, then, can provide an interesting subplot while commenting on the action of the main plot.

Neo-HooDooism is still at the core of the novel, as Reed uses HooDoo to explain the contrary actions of Ian Ball.

His actions stem from a curse put on him at birth by a HooDoo practitioner.

Reed also relates HooDoo to the novel in ways not immediately seen by the reader. Reginald Martin points out that Tremonisha Smarts' first name is drawn from a Scott Joplin opera of that title. "In Joplin's opera," says Martin, "the character Tremonisha represents the powers of assimilation into American culture in opposition to the 'powers of the HooDoo men.' Thus, not only does Reed's version of the Tremonisha character allude to the original Tremonisha's disagreement with early African-American currents, but she also becomes one of the critical forces that Reed has long opposed."

Some critics see the roots of *Reckless Eyeballing* as spreading further back than Joplin. Robert Elliot Fox, in *Conscientious Sorcerers: The Black Postmodernist Fiction of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Ishmael Reed, and Samuel R. Delany (1987)*, equates Reed with the Trickster figure from African folklore; Reed "simultaneously indicts and 'validates' Jews, feminists, 'failed' artists, and so on, through a dialectical disputation between rival theories, fantasies, 'facts,' and emotions engaged in by various characters in the book," writes Fox. "This allows him to make his case, in a sense, against his enemies and his 'inconsistent' friends and allies, while at the same time appearing to present a variety of viewpoints, silly and serious, paranoid and playful. When Jake Brashford accuses Ball of being 'nothin' but a trickologist,' the reader is likely to turn this accusation against Reed himself, who has, in fact, consciously identified with the Trickster figures who function at the center of his fictions. Indeed, Reed's work is a vaudeville of the spirit, a militant minstrelsy, trickster tales to trouble the conscience of a contradictory society."

Related Titles

While Reed's use of a more conventional narrative form in *Reckless Eyeballing* makes him less "experimental," his subject matter keeps him mired in controversy. One source comments that Reed "seemed to relish the outrage his book evoked as 'publicity' and as a way of carrying on the project that seems to consume him." So the lack of postmodern markers in Reed's *Reckless Eyeballing* does not mean that his viewpoints themselves lack any of the same punch he carried in his earlier works of fiction. Reed's aim is to enlighten and educate, and his fiction does both, to those who'll listen. For Ishmael Reed, indeed, "writing is fighting."



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