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God Sends Sunday

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Recommended Citation

Charles L. James. (2001). "God Sends Sunday". *The Concise Oxford Companion To African American Literature*. 169-170.

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tions posed by Giovanni's poetry and prose, ordinary people—the people for whom she states she has always written—continue to keep her works in print, continue to fill the auditoriums in which she reads and lectures. Her place in literary history is undisputed because her voice speaks to and for people—about their joys and their sorrows, the forces arrayed against them and the strengths they bring as resistance—in tones and language they can understand.

• Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms: Modern American Poetry by Women*, A New Tradition, 1976. Eugene B. Redmond, *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry*, 1976. Anna T. Robinson, *Nikki Giovanni: From Revolution to Revelation*, 1979. Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*, 1983. William J. Harris, "Sweet Soft Essence of Possibility: The Poetry of Nikki Giovanni," in *Black Women Writers 1950–1980*, ed. Mari Evans, 1984, pp. 218–228. Margaret B. McDowell, "Groundwork for a More Comprehensive Criticism of Nikki Giovanni," in *Belief vs. Theory in Black American Literary Criticism*, eds. Joe Weixmann and Chester J. Fontenot, *Studies in Black American Literature*, vol. 2, 1986, pp. 135–160. Martha Cook, "Nikki Giovanni: Place and Sense of Place in Her Poetry," in *Southern Women Writers: The New Generation*, ed. Tonette Bond Inge, 1990, pp. 279–300. Virginia C. Fowler, *Nikki Giovanni*, 1992. Ekaterini Georgoudaki, "Nikki Giovanni: The Poet as Explorer of Outer and Inner Space," in *Women, Creators of Culture*, ed. Georgoudaki and Domna Pastourmatzi, 1997, pp. 153–170.

—Virginia C. Fowler

Giovanni's Room. A groundbreaking novel for its exploration of homosexuality, James *Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) holds a unique place in the American and African American literary traditions. Baldwin published it against the advice of Alfred Knopf, who published his acclaimed debut novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953); editors warned Baldwin that he would jeopardize his potential as a "Negro" author by writing a book about white male sexual and cultural identity. However, the determined Baldwin found a British publisher, Mark Joseph, and Dial Press eventually published *Giovanni's Room* in America.

The first-person narrative centers around David, a white American attempting to "find himself" in France. The novel opens in the present with David recalling his internecine upbringing and an adolescent homosexual encounter. In Paris awaiting the return of his girlfriend and possible fiancée, Hella, David engages in a torrid affair with Giovanni, an Italian bartender. Giovanni loves him unashamedly, and they live together for two months; however, David transforms Giovanni's room into a symbol of their "dirty" relationship. Upon Hella's return from Spain, David abruptly leaves the destitute Giovanni, who has been fired by bar owner Guillaume, a "disgusting old fairy." David's desertion psychologically destroys Giovanni, who enters a sexually and economically predatory gay underworld. Giovanni eventually murders Guillaume, who reneges on a promise to rehire him in exchange for sex; he is later caught and sentenced to death.

Meanwhile, David, despondent over his mistreatment of Giovanni and the truth about his homosexuality, attempts to rejuvenate himself via marriage. But upon discovering him and a sailor in a gay bar, Hella vows to return to America, wishing "I'd never left it." The novel's closing tableau replicates its opening: David ponders Giovanni's impending execution and his complicity in his erstwhile lover's demise.

Giovanni's Room fuses the personal, the actual, and the fictional: Baldwin exorcises demons surrounding his own sexual identity while simultaneously capturing the subterranean milieu he encountered in Paris during the late 1940s and early 1950s; he bases the murder plot on an actual crime involving the killing of an older man who purportedly propositioned a younger one; and he weaves a Jamesian tale of expatriate Americans fleeing their "complex fate" in search of their "true" selves. The novel received favorable reviews, many critics applauding Baldwin's restrained yet powerful handling of a "controversial" subject. Ultimately, the book is more than a study of sexual identity, as Baldwin himself posited: "It is not so much about homosexuality, it is what happens if you are so afraid that you finally cannot love anybody." *Giovanni's Room* maintains a seminal place in American, African American, and gay and lesbian literary studies.

• Georges-Michel Sarotte, *Like a Brother, Like a Lover: Male Homosexuality in the American Novel and Theatre from Herman Melville to James Baldwin*, trans. Richard Miller, 1978. Horace A. Porter, *Stealing the Fire: The Art and Protest of James Baldwin*, 1989.

—Keith Clark

God Sends Sunday. A novel by Arna *Bontemps, *God Sends Sunday* was published in 1931. According to local legend, Little Augie, born with a caul over his face, is blessed with the double gifts of luck and clairvoyance, but the notion is small solace for the timid, frail, undersized youngster who firmly believes his destiny lies in wandering until he exhausts his luck and meets his destruction.

When Little Augie attains manhood and becomes a full-fledged jockey, success transforms him into a swaggering, cigar-smoking gallant with a relish for mulatto women, only to find himself in hopeless rivalry with Mr. Woody for voluptuous Florence Dessau. First Augie turns to drinking whiskey and singing the blues, then he departs for St. Louis in search of a substitute for Florence and finds Della Green, a "fancy woman" on the infamous Targee Street. They thrive famously until Augie kills his impulsive competitor Biglow Brown who had challenged Augie's courage.

Some thirty years later, withered with age, wearing a frayed Prince Albert outfit, Little Augie wends his way to Mudtown, a black country neighborhood in southern California and new home of his sister Leah and her teenaged grandchild, Terry. His battered traveling bag, a bottle of whiskey, and his old accordion

represent the complete remains of his character. Soon Augie is reanimated by handling Leah's livestock—especially her worn-out old racehorse—and dares to dream of new beginnings. His schemes, however, are disturbed by menacing signs and dark forebodings. When Little Augie gravely wounds a man in a fight, once again he must move on, and he is last seen making his way to Mexico.

This novel was praised for its poetic style and challenged for its racy content, but Hugh Gloster perceived it as setting a new trend in African American fiction because of its abandonment of Harlem for its background. Countee *Cullen joined Bontemps in a dramatization of the story that subsequently became the controversial yet successful 1946 Broadway musical entitled *St. Louis Woman*.

—Charles L. James

God's Trombones. James Weldon *Johnson's major contribution to the Harlem Renaissance explosion of black American writing was his book of poems, *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*, published in 1927. For almost ten years Johnson worked on these folk sermons in verse whenever the demands of NAACP work relented enough to make writing possible. "The Creation" was published in 1918, and two others were published in magazines during the mid-1920s. In this work he followed the principles he had developed in writing the long preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*:

What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. . . . He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect. . . . a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar terms of thought and distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro. (Quoted in Johnson's introduction to *God's Trombones*)

The completed book presents seven sermons—"The Creation," "The Prodigal Son," "Go Down Death—A Funeral Sermon," "Noah Built the Ark," "The Crucifixion," "Let My People Go," and "The Judgment Day"—preceded by an opening poem, "Listen, Lord—A Prayer." While the book as a whole does not have a narrative structure, as the sermons stand independent of one another, the sermons as poems bring together the narrative element of the stories from the Bible on which they are each based, the narrative/dramatic moment of the sermon, and the lyric quality of the folk preacher's language.

God's Trombones is a radical departure from the beaten pathway for Johnson the aesthetic conservative. While remaining connected to the late Romantic dramatic monologue form that Paul Laurence *Dunbar and other black American poets had long favored,

Johnson here admits the free verse tradition of Walt Whitman to mingle with the rhetorical imagery and verbal excitement of the folk preacher. Not forced to represent speech rhythms with mechanical metrics or distracting rhymes, Johnson is able to focus attention on the metaphoric and ironic creativity of the African American oral tradition. His preacher connects a world of Bible-based ideas to the congregation/reader's mundane reality.

Johnson is remarkably successful in creating a poetic equivalent of the language of what he calls in the introduction "the old time Negro preacher." In "The Creation," the first and most famous of these poems, he creates that old-time preacher's voice as a mixture of vibrant folk idiom, King James version grandeur, and apt metaphor. Thus God makes man of the clay from the riverbed while kneeling "like a mammy bending over her baby." The rather abstract and distant creator of the Bible text is humanized by the preacher's narrative details and poetic touches.

The imagery and rhetoric of the poems draw upon the traditions of sacred song as well as sermons. In "Let My People Go" Johnson echoes his favorite spiritual, while at the same time addressing both black readers and white.

Commonly accepted as James Weldon Johnson's highest achievement in poetry, *God's Trombones* demonstrated in art the dignity and power of African American folk culture. With its illustrations by Aaron Douglas, the collection has enjoyed continuous popularity among scholars and general readers alike.

• Jean Wagner, *Black Poets of the United States*, 1973.

—Joseph T. Skerrett, Jr.

Goin' a Buffalo. One of the Black consciousness plays of Ed *Bullins's *Twentieth-Century Cycle*, *Goin' a Buffalo* first appeared as a staged reading at the American Place Theater in June of 1968.

The play features the tough, streetwise Curt and his nubile wife Pandora, who sells her body to bring Curt money; Curt's friend Rich; Mamma Too Tight, a young white woman who is wholly dependent upon her pimp, Shaky; and Art, a quiet, seemingly naive sort who, after having saved Curt in a prison fight, is befriended by him. Though some of these decide to leave the hostility of Los Angeles, it is Curt who decides on Buffalo as an actual destination, hoping that he and Pandora can start a legitimate business there. As the play proceeds, however, this goal dissolves in a mixture of violence, manipulation, and deception.

Leitmotifs of prison, money, drugs, and sex expose the gritty urban life and fragmented individual lives of the characters. Money for a sexuality based in violence (e.g., the play's manifold sexual connotations based on "Pandora's box") is the governing equation in a world without love. The play moves through a long middle sequence in a neighborhood nightclub where Pandora sings; there, the Bullinsian element of violence con-