
Jack Miles

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/pell_neh_I_36/23

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Education: National Endowment for the Arts and Humanities, Subject Files I (1973-1996) at DigitalCommons@URI. It has been accepted for inclusion in Iannone, Carol: News Articles (1991) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@URI. For more information, please contact digitalcommons-group@uri.edu.
The ‘Dictatorship of Mediocrity’

BY JACK MILES

Societies. PEN American Center. People for the American Way, the Wall Street Journal, the Washington Post and much four-estate heavies as William F. Buckley Jr., Garry Wills, George Will and Norman Podhoretz.

Last March Iannone wrote an article in Commentary magazine, disparaging at some length Charles Johnson’s “Middle Passage,” the winner of this year’s National Book Award for fiction. “Though Johnson’s larger ambitions may be,” Iannone wrote, “it is hard to take his prize-winning book seriously as literature.” Johnson is black. The other four NBA nominees included two Latinos, a Filipino and a white.

Iannone thought they were all third-rate, nominated not because of their merit but because of their minority-group membership. As for the one white, well, Joyce Carol Oates “Because it is bitter and because it is My Heart” is all about “the life of a wondrous black boy . . . wanted on account of a totally worthless steamer of a white.” It was that subject, Iannone suggested, that gave the literary merits of the book that won Oates her slot.

Iannone didn’t stop with this year’s alleged beneficiaries of literary affirmative action, however. Shearked back to Alice Walker, whose “The Color Purple” was awarded the 1982 National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize. “The amazing honor accorded to it seemingly a recognition of literary achievement,” Iannone wrote, “isn’t some official act of reparations, in this case to the

The ghost of controversies past returned to haunt me recently, a reminder of the day in 1987 when I attacked a woman of Asian color for promoting a woman of African color against my own favorite, pale male. Larry Hememann’s novel “Paco’s Story” had then just defeated the smart-money favorite, Toni Morrison’s “Beloved,” for the National Book Award. Michiko Kakutani, fiction critic of The New Times, denounced what she saw as a miscarriage of literary justice. I wrote in The Times Book Review that “Beloved” was a good book but “Paco’s Story” a better one. There was a little more to it than that, but not much more.

Why bring this up now? Because Toni Morrison’s failure to win the 1987 National Book Award has been a strangely neglected fact in a controversy over critic Carol Iannone that over the past three months has embroiled the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Modern Language Assem, the American Council for Learned

PAGE 9/SUNDAY, JULY 7, 1991

 WALLIS SIMPSON: The Novel

BOOK REVIEW LOS ANGELES TIMES • SUNDAY, JULY 7, 1991

The ‘Dictatorship of Mediocrity’

Continued From First Page

black woman in her capacity both as author and as literary charac-

And there were other unfairly celebrated blacks, she said. “Around the same time, another black woman novelist, Gloria Naylor, won a National Book Award and an American Book Award for an even less accomplished novel, The Women of Brewster Place, and in 1987, a group of black writers demanded and obtained the Pulitzer Prize for Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved.” Collectively, these cases proved to Iannone that American literature had become a “democratic dictatorship of mediocrity.”

Memory is so selective when you’ve got an agenda. It’s true that Toni Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize for “Beloved,” but it is also true, as noted above, that to the great shock of many in New York, publishing, she was denied the National Book Award. Which decision reveals more?

Yes, a group of blacks took an ad in the New York Times calling on the Pulitzer Prize judges to make amends by awarding Toni Morrison that prize. But when have the white male powerhouses of American newspaper publishing ever deferred to writers of any kind, much less black writers? “I can name quite a few from the white press,” Shadrack’s Own Glasswasser says. “So can I. So can any man,” answers Hossipur. "But will they come?"

In a backhanded, insultingly condescending compliment to Johnson, iannone says that he “holds the profoundly heterodox belief that black artists should be allowed to write as individuals rather than as spokesmen for the race.” If this is heterodox, who are the black writers who defended the orthodoxy? Find me a black writer who believes that he or she should not be allowed to write as an individual. Neither Naylor nor Walker nor Morrison would espouse that position.

This year’s National Book Critics Circle Awards are highly relevant data for the question of whether a libertarian belief in mediocrity guarantees honors to minority writers. I would note first that the NBCC Awards are the most representative literary awards in the country, much more so than the National Book Awards.

The small permanent staff of National Book Foundation names five distinguished writers and critics to serve as judges in each NBA category, and there the judging rests. The NBCC, by contrast, polls nearly 300 reviewers from around the country, and final decisions are made by a 24-person board that represents the literary establishment. The NBCC also closely follows books by other bodies in the country. This year, the board included members from the Washington Post, Newsday, the Los Angeles Times, the Village Voice, the Boston Globe, and the New Yorker as well as a number of extremely well-established free-lance critics. If politically motivated mediocrity rules, the NBCC would be the ideal place to see it in action.

Three black writers were nominated in this year’s NBCC competition. Johnson in fiction, Stanley Crouch—long a jazz and culture critic at the Village Voice, now a contributing editor at The New Republic—in criticism, and Shelby Steele—a literary critic and professor of literature famous for his opposition to affirmative action—in nonfiction. Steele won JohnJohnson and Crouch did not. Does this mean that the NBCC is less politically co-opted than the NBA? No, it does not. What it means is that there is no such conspiracy afoot, anywhere. Carol Iannone is denouncing a chummers.

Reality is always more complicated than idealists—or the sometimes overzealous denouncers of ideology—are willing to allow. Yes, Shelby Steele opposes affirmative action in his book, "The Content of Our Character." An obvious right-wing pawn. But then Shelby Steele voted for Jesse Jackson in 1988. Hmm. Stanley Crouch in his collection "Notes of a Hanging Judge" disparages Morris-

Johnson, but he does. Iannone’s earlier book, "The Nigger's Apprentice." Not a black pervert, certainly, but maybe a racist, a black chauvinist pig. But then, inconveniently for that theory, Crouch happens to have it in for Spike Lee, a black male whom he compares in one whacking essay to serial killer John Wayne Gacy Jr.

Do I mean to suggest that black writers are at each other’s throats? No more than white writers, truth be told. But that’s the point. Blacks are conservative, liberal, radical; also mystical and dreamy, like Alice Walker; dry and sardonic, like Stanley Crouch; earnest and concerned, like Shelby Steele; and witty and determined to whittle into the worst gale, like Charles Johnson. How sad it is that a critic like Iannone who wants to stand up for the conservative belief that it is merit and merit alone that deserves reward, should have been deluded into seeing a front of immeasurable, absolute racial attacks on white radicals where none exists.

Shortly before she published her attack on black prize winners, Iannone was nominated to the National Council on the Humanities by Lyman V. Cheney, chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The MLA and the ACLS have objected to the nomination, claiming that they find Iannone’s scholarly bibliography (20 articles and reviews, half of them in Commentary magazine) inadequate, though clearly they also objected here. The USIA and various conservative defen-

ders declare Iannone’s credentials as inadequate, that she is clearly her political views that have raised her to prominence.

No one called the question by its right name until Joel Conarroe, president of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation, and current chairman of the National Book Foundation, did so in a letter to Cheney which was later quoted in the Wall Street Journal. The WSJ denounced Conarroe for calling Iannone’s story about Toni Morrison and the 1987 Pulitzer Prize “inflammatory nonsense.”

Iannone may very well be confirmed in her Council post, despite the fact that Ted Kennedy chairs the committee that does the confirming. But Conarroe—a former Pulitzer, NBA and NBCC judge—is right: “Inflammatory nonsense” is exactly what her belief in a conspiracy against quali-

ty in American letters amounts to. And the more her paranoia per-

uates the deliberations of the Na-

tional Endowment for the Humani-
ties, the more the air will bid-

on for those of us who want to see black writers as the free unpredictable and politically independent individuals that they are. The real American literary world will go on, doubtless, more or less as it has, but the NEH will be for a few more years an extent in the grip of a sudden and dangerous over-

simpathizatation.