1991


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The ‘Dictatorship of Mediocrity’

BY JACK MILES

Societies. PEN American Center. People for the American Way. the Wall Street Journal. the Washington Post. and such 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 are laudable,” Iannone wrote, “it is hard to take his prize-winning book seriously as literature.” Johnson is black. The other four NBA nominees included two Launia. a Filipino and a white.

Johnson 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 Eater and Because it is My Heart” is all about “the life of a wondrous black boy who erased on an account of a totally worthless sneakerball of a white.” It was that subject. Iannone says. than 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. She harried back to Alice Walker. whose “Inaugural Prize” was awarded the 1982 National Book Award and Pulitizer Prize. “The amazing honor accorded to it seemed less a recognition of literary achievement.” Iannone wrote. “than some official act of repentance. in this case to the


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 Shelby Steele. earnest and concerned. like Shelby Steele. and witty and determined to whittle into the worst gale. like Charles Johnson. How sad it is 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 popular front of liberal activists and a 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 Lynne I. 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. Cheney. and various conservative defendants declare Iannone’s credentials dubious. though 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 Pulitizer Prize “Inflammatory nonsense.”

Iannone may very well be confirmed in her Council position. despite the fact that Ted Kennedy chairs the committee that does the confiming. But Conarroe—a former Pulitzer. NBA and NBCC judge—is right. “Inflammatory nonsense” is exactly what her belief in a conspiracy against quality in American letters amounts to.

And the more her paranoia peruits the deliberations of the National Endowment for the Humanities. the more the air will be poisoned 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 work will go on. doubtless. more or less as it has. but the NEH will be far more alert to the danger—stated or insinuated—in the grip of a slanders and dangerous over-simplification.

Miles. Times book editor since June until October. 1981. is president of the National Book Critics Circle.