

William Demby Has Not Left the Building

Postcard From Tuscany

A Profile by Jeff Biggers

Off a dirt road in the backwoods of Tuscany, living in a wonderfully decadent villa inherited by his Italian wife, William Demby is making the final edit of his literary masterpiece, *King Comus*. The novel is the first work of fiction by the mercurial author (who also spends much of his time in Sag Harbor) in nearly 25 years; the opus stretches back to the Congress of Vienna for an original look at the roots of African American and Jewish conflicts in America, the rise and fall of Constantine, and the meaning of a world empire today. For the last living native son and onetime confidant and translator of Italy's legendary neorealism film directors, the completion of this long-awaited novel should be a cause for celebration. A real literary event. Instead, the octogenarian Demby, author of the classics *Beetlecreek* and *The Catacombs*, wonders if his work can find a place in the carved-up sandbox of literary fiction today.

"Since *Catacombs*, I think I have been kicked out of the Black Arts race," Demby laughs, walking me to the edge of a bluff near the village of Consuma. There is an element of sorrow in his voice. He points out a nearby site where a series of executions took place during World War II.

Demby, who first came to Italy nearly 60 years ago as a soldier in an African American cavalry unit, has taken his share of casualties in the literary world. He emerged on the scene in 1950 with *Beetlecreek*, an existential classic that dealt with race relations in West Virginia. "It would be hard," *The New Yorker* declared, "to give Mr. Demby too much praise for the skill with which he has maneuvered the relationships in this book." By that time, Demby had already returned to Rome, carting along a trunk full of fancy clothes, a clarinet, and \$75 in his pocket, with a vague idea of studying art, playing jazz, and writing novels; he planted himself in the burgeoning postwar literary, art, and film movements in Rome. His interracial marriage to Italian author Lucia Druidi was newsworthy in Europe for the times; the couple visited Richard Wright in Paris on their honeymoon. Fluent in Italian, Demby eventually served as the English translator for virtually all of the important Cinecitta films by Antonioni, Fellini, Visconti, and Rossellini; he took a turn as assistant director on Rossellini's *Europa 51*.

This dual cultural identity, while seemingly placing Demby on the stage with other intellectual heavyweights, somehow ended up displacing him in the American literary arena; like those of his contemporary Milan Kundera, Demby's idea-soaked novels take place in an international realm that

detests ethnic provincialism as much as narrow fundamentalism. In the process, Demby's relationship with the canons and canonists of African American literature, including fellow West Virginia-raised critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., is elusive at best.

"I believed, as I still do, that a black writer has the same kind of mind that writers have had all through time," Demby says, looking back on his career. His words sound with more bewilderment than resentment. "He can imagine any world he wants to imagine."

It took more than 15 years before Demby's imagination led him to the depths of the Roman underground for his next novel, *The Catacombs*. Hailed by *The New York Times* as "one of the most important black novels of the 1960s," *The Catacombs* shattered any social-realist portent to Demby's work. Chronicling the struggles of a writer named William Demby and his rapport with an African American actress in Rome, it was a groundbreaking collage, more akin to the creations of his cubist artist friends than to the Black Arts Literary movement. For critic James C. Hall, who featured

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Demby in his book *Mercy Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties*, the novel established Demby as one of the great antimodernists, on the same plane as John Coltrane and Robert Hayden. Others considered Demby the heir to Gertrude Stein's expatriate chronicles. For Demby, ironically, the novel and its juxtaposition of fact and fiction in an age of moral disintegration placed him into the avant garde of postmodernism.

As if to further complicate his literary life, Demby followed up his experimental novel with the brazen and offbeat *Love Story Black*. Disgruntled with the New York literary circles, Demby turned to Ishmael Reed's fugitive press, Reed, Cannon and Johnson, to publish the novel in 1978. (Dutton reissued the novel in 1986.) *Love Story Black* was a searing satire, chronicled through the eyes of a jaded college professor during his libidinous affair with an aging chanteuse. It excoriated boorish academic circles, rights movements, and the emerging black women's glossies in the New York magazine world. The novel received mixed reviews. Despite being included in Terry McMillan's *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction* in 1990, it seemingly distanced Demby further from African American literary circles for its unclassifiable niche and provocative twists.

"We're living in a visionary period," Demby says, back at the farmhouse. "The only way to leap beyond the complexities today is to be visionary." Demby's vision is complex. *King Comus* begins on a summer night in 1815, with a providential stagecoach accident involving a debt-ridden Hasidic musician and a European noble. It underscores one of Demby's tightly held themes. As he explains, "When complexity becomes simplicity, when we think everything is clear, we say, now I understand. But the moment it becomes clear,

another set of complexities emerges. This is the cycle of history. At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, they thought they had resolved the conflict between monarchy and democracy, the church and state, between ethnicities, between the new economy and the rights of the common man, and they marched confidently into the 19th century, only to confront two problems: one having to deal with black slaves, and one that had to deal with Jews and Judaism." The novel has raised the eyebrows of some editors who have taken an advance peek at the novel, with an eye on marketing it to the new wave of African American readers.

Demby points to a book he is reading on Primo Levi, the brilliant Italian novelist and Holocaust survivor. The volatile link between Jews and African Americans is now at the heart of Demby's focus. It's part of what the author sees as a missing link in African American writing. "I had to go back to Constantine to save myself, before Christianity, before Islam, a world yearning and primed for a new wave of belief," Demby says.

In the tradition of Milton's medieval masquerade of Comus, a devilish figure of seduction, Demby's novel spans a family tree from ancient times to modern, from Austria to New Orleans, and back to the contemporary Tuscan villa of an African American veteran who takes part in the reenactment of Constantine's march on Rome. Sound complex enough? The novel unfurls itself as a dialogue on the very forces of conflict today: empires, sex, the media, religion, rank prejudice, and the search for domestic bliss.

Every decade there seems to be a surprise novel by a genius author who has disappeared for untold years into that no-exit world of obscurity. Felipe Alfau's controversial 1990 National Book Award-nominated *Chromos* comes to mind, as do comparisons with Henry Roth's *Mercy of a Rude Stream* series. Whether it is a visionary maze or a masterpiece, *King Comus*, which is yet to be picked up by a publisher, has the makings of becoming a literary event in the next year, if only to remind the New York publishing world that William Demby has not left the building. ■

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