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WILFRED D. SAMUELS



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Keith E. Byerman

### Kennedy, Adrienne (1931– )

Adrienne Kennedy was born Adrienne Lita Hawkins to Cornell and Etta Haugabook Hawkins in Pittsburgh on September 13, 1931. Her father was a social worker and executive officer of the YMCA; her mother was a teacher. Kennedy attended Ohio State University, where she began writing fiction while taking a course in 20th-century literature. She received a bachelor's degree in education in 1953 and, soon thereafter, married Joseph Kennedy; they had two sons, Joseph C. and Adam. The Kennedy family moved to New York City, where Adrienne studied creative writing at Columbia University while her husband taught at Hunter College.

The Kennedys traveled to Europe and Africa in 1960. Kennedy's writing was influenced while she was living in West Africa. She states, "I couldn't cling to what I had been writing—it [Africa] changed me so. . . . I think the main thing was that I discovered a strength in being a black person and a connection to West Africa" (qtd. in Draper, 1149). Elements of the new geographical spaces appear in Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. Selected by Edward Albee for the Edward Albee Playwrights' Workshop, this play had a successful off-Broadway run; it won a *Village Voice* Obie Award in 1964. She was also awarded a CBS Fellowship at the School of Drama in 1973, a Creative Artists public service grant in 1974, a Yale Fellowship in 1974, and an American Book Award in 1990. Kennedy has served

as a lecturer at Yale University and the University of California at Berkeley; she has taught playwrighting at Princeton and Brown Universities.

Kennedy's autobiographical writing includes characters who are psychologically linked to her and are in search of identity and agency in American society. She explains, "I see my writing as being an outlet for inner psychological confusion and questions stemming from childhood. . . . It's really figuring out the 'why' of things—that is, if that is even possible" (quoted in Draper, 1149).

In *Funnyhouse of a Negro* and *The Owl Answers*, Kennedy uses African and English images to display the fragmentation of her biracial protagonists. Her contemporary characters seek subjectivity and agency while having conversations with William Shakespeare, William the Conqueror, and Patrice Lumumba. Kennedy wrote these biracial, women-driven plays at a time when other African-American dramatists were concerned with black pride and power.

In Kennedy's *A Lesson in Dead Language*, a teacher dressed as a white dog leads menstruating, white-clad students on a philosophical journey toward adulthood. *A Rat's Mass* depicts an incestuous relationship between hybrid siblings with rat and human features who regress to a state of animal-like existence. In her mystery novel and journal *Deadly Triplets*, she includes "An Evening with Dead Essex," which was inspired by a sniper incident in Vietnam. In "A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White," Kennedy shares her fascination with Hollywood stars Bette Davis, Marlon Brando, and Montgomery Clift.

Kennedy's play *Sleep Deprivation Chamber*, written with her son Adam, captures his real-life experience of being abused by corrupt police officers. *The Ohio State Murders* includes Kennedy's *The Alexander Plays*, in which character Suzanne Alexander chronicles Kennedy's real-life experiences as a student at Ohio State. The other three plays of this volume are *She Talks to Beethoven*, *The Film Club*, and *The Dramatic Circle*.

Kennedy's multifaceted talents can also be found in such works as *A Beast's Story*, which describes the unkind treatment of animals by humans; *The Lennon Play: In His Own Write*, cowritten with John

Lennon; *Sun*; "A Poem for Malcolm X Inspired by His Assassination"; *A Lancashire Lad*, based on the childhood of Charlie Chaplin; and *Orestes and Electra*, adaptations of the plays by Euripides.

In 1993, Kennedy published "Letter to My Students" in the *Kenyon Review*, which reintroduces her audience to the Suzanne Alexander character, who chronicles events from past Kennedy literary works. This essay, along with many of Kennedy's previous and more recent work, can be found in *The Adrienne Kennedy Reader* (2001), which also includes *June and Jean in Concert* (*Concert of Their Lives*), *A Letter to Flowers*, *Sisters Etta and Ella* (*Excerpt from a Narrative*), and *Grendel and Grendel's Mother*. Kennedy won an Obie for *June and Jean in Concert* in 1996.

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Daintee Glover Jones

### Killens, John Oliver (1916–1987)

John Oliver Killens, an accomplished novelist, editor, essayist, activist, and critic, was born in Macon, Georgia, on January 14, 1916. He challenged racial issues directly, writing about segregation and racism in the South and the military. From 1936 to 1942, Killens attended college at night while working during the day for the National Labor Relations Board. He attended various colleges and universities, including Morris Brown College and Howard, Columbia, and New York universities, and he taught at two HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES, Fisk and

Howard universities. Killens served in the Pacific during World War II. For the last seven years of his life, Killens was the writer-in-residence at New York's Medgar Evers College. During this time, his Brooklyn home served as a meeting place for various artists and activists.

Killens traced the desire to become a writer back to his childhood, when he listened to his great-grandmother's stories of her childhood experiences in slavery. In the late 1940s, Killens began meeting with young writers John Henrik Clarke, ROSA GUY, and Walter Christmas in a Harlem storefront. This group, which became the Harlem Writers Guild in 1950, continues to meet to this day. Some of the more notable participants have included OSSIE DAVIS, MAYA ANGELOU, TERRY McMILLAN, AUDRE LORDE, ALICE CHILDRESS, and WALTER MOSLEY. Killens, Clarke, Guy, and Christmas banded together as the guild in order to critique each other's stories, united as writers with a nationalistic outlook and commitment to social change. A decade later, the guild became identified with the BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT. Killens is thought of as one spiritual father who inspired a genre of African-American protest novels.

Killens's 1954 novel *Youngblood* was the first work to be published by a member of the guild. Set in Crossroads, Georgia, *Youngblood* follows Joe Youngblood and family in their struggle to define and maintain their dignity in the Jim Crow South. Unlike many of Killens' contemporaries, including RICHARD WRIGHT, RALPH ELLISON, and JAMES BALDWIN, who, in their work focus on a similar theme and consequently, more often than not, on the Great Migration, southern blacks moving and adjusting to the urban North, Killens does not allow the Youngblood family to migrate. Instead they remain in their southern home and struggle with dignity to survive. Killens highlights this struggle through Joe Youngblood's relationship with Richard Myles, a teacher from the North who has come to the South to identify with the families' and workers' efforts for fairness. Myles is considered a member of the Youngblood family after Joe Youngblood's martyrdom.

Killens's second novel, *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (1962), details the experiences of a sol-

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Wilfred D. Samuels

### Youngblood, Shay (1959– )

A Columbus, Georgia, native, Youngblood received a bachelor's degree in mass communications from Clark-Atlanta University in 1981 and a master's degree in creative writing from Brown University in 1993. Youngblood has written poetry, plays, and fiction. Sidney Poitier selected her play *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* to become a screenplay for Columbia Pictures. Before making her living as a writer, she served as an agricultural informational officer for the Peace Corps in Dominica in the eastern Caribbean. She then worked as a freelance writer in Atlanta, New York, and Paris, France. She has taught creative writing at the Syracuse Community Writer's Project and playwriting at the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institution for Women. She has also taught for Brown University and the New School for Social Research.

She is a member of the Dramatists' and Authors' Guild, the National Writers' Union, and the Writers' Guild of America. She has won the Hollywood NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE Theatre Awards for best playwright, 1991, for *Talking Bones*; the Kennedy Center's Lorraine Hansberry Playwrighting Award, 1993, for *Square Blues*; and the National Theatre Award from the Paul Green Foundation, 1995. She was the Edward Albee Honoree at the 21st Century Playwrights Festival, 1993.

Youngblood's plays *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery*, *The Big Mama Stories* (1992), and *Soul Kiss* (1998) demonstrate her fascination with coming-of-age stories. Youngblood's female protagonists must all find their places in the world and must come to understand their impact on their

communities. While the first two texts use a more conventional bildungsroman format, in which the protagonist must learn lessons from the elders and be part of a traditional rite of passage, *Soul Kiss* is a story that shows what occurs when the protagonist ignores the elders and tradition. In *Shakin'* and *The Big Mama Stories*, Youngblood's characters Daughter and Narrator both lose their mothers but are adopted by grandmother and aunt figures. These elders share stories that appear as legend or myth to these young daughters and act as griots who teach oral narratives from in the past. These elders also use a ritual marking the beginning of womanhood or the onset of menstruation to enable the daughters to transition into adulthood while accompanied by others who have already "been to the river."

In *Soul Kiss*, Mariah, the protagonist, rebukes the advice of her elders and decides to find her transition into adulthood without the aid of family. Mariah goes in search of her missing father only to become involved in an inappropriate relationship with him because she has ignored advice of her aunts and he still fantasizes about Mariah's missing mother, whom she closely resembles.

Youngblood's works have been met with mixed reviews. Her writing style has been praised, but her character development has been found lacking by some critics.

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