

Clifford's Blues

A Unique Contribution to Holocaust Literature

A blurb on the back of John A. Williams' new novel, "Clifford's Blues," written by fellow novelist and recent winner of the coveted McArthur Genius award, Ishmael Reed, claims that this novel "proves again" that Williams is "the greatest American novelist of the twentieth century." To the untutored reader who is unfamiliar with the work of John A. Williams, this claim may sound like hyperbole. However, to those who have read other novels by Williams such as "The Man Who Cried I Am," "Captain Blackman," "Click Song," or "The Angry Ones," - Reed's claim does not seem far out at all.

Just when it seemed to many people that there was nothing new to say about the Third Reich and the genocidal policies that was its distinguishing feature, Williams' original approach to the subject has given us a fresh perspective while deepening our understanding of the work of important holocaust scholars. For instance, the exiled European Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt's arguments about the banality of evil in her controversial book "Eichmann In Jerusalem," and Harvard's professor Goldhagen's conclusion that the grisly work of the Nazi fascist was widely supported by the German citizenry in his recent book, "Hitlers Helpers," becomes crystal clear after reading "Clifford's Blues."

Williams employs a broad based understanding of the history of Nazi Germany and the psychology of fascism, complemented by a fertile and inventive imagination, to provide the reader with a sustained look into the daily lives of the victims and victimizers, i.e. the inmates and guards in Dachau, one of the most famous of the German concentration camps. The author's choice of Clifford Pepperidge - a black gay jazz

musician imprisoned in the camp - as narrator, insures that the reader will get a unique perspective on the rise of fascism in Germany.

The novel is written from the perspective of Clifford's diary during his incarceration in Dachau. His first entry sums up the situation: "My name's Clifford Pepperidge and I am in trouble. I'm an American Negro and I play piano, sometimes, and I'm a vocalist, too. I shouldn't be here, but they didn't pay any attention to me when they brought me. Didn't listen when I was in Berlin, either. I'm in Protective Custody, they call it."

With entries that span the twelve years from May 28, 1933, to April 28, 1945, the diary covers a period which corresponds to the rise and fall of Adolph Hitler. We learn from the diary that a wide variety of people were interned in this camp and they are charged with an assortment of crimes, virtually all of which became crimes only after the Nazi's took power.

Among the detainees are Jehovah's Witnesses, socialists and communists, Gypsies, homosexuals, race defilers (people in interracial marriages) people of mixed blood like the "Rhine land bastards," inferior races like Africans et. al. And while Clifford also saw Jews in Dachau, he tells us that most of them were shipped to the "death factories" like Triblinka, Bergen Belson, Auschwitz etc.

When Clifford first entered Dachau it appeared to be more of a slave labor detention camp than a death camp, but as the murderous Nazi's grow more powerful they greatly expand the camp and build a crematorium. As they start attacking neighboring countries and carrying out mass executions of captured prisoners, Clifford begins to see stacks of dead bodies everywhere and the stench of burning flesh befouls the air. Eventually the classification of death factory or slave labor camp becomes a distinction without a difference because the dead and dying are everywhere. Through the brilliantly crafted entries in Clifford's diary Williams reconstructs this nightmare with a rare poignance and power that makes it feel real.

But while the novel treats one of the most horrible episodes in human history it is not grim reading. And that is perhaps the greatest achievement of the author. What prevents the novel from becoming a depressing experience is the irrepressible spirit of Clifford Pepperidge. An apolitical artist and trickster who calls himself "The Cliff," Pepperidge was having such a ball snorting coke, partying in gay orgies, and performing in the nightclubs that enlivened night life in the decadent milieu of Weimar Berlin - the setting for Berthold Brecht's *Three Penny Opera* and the popular musical *Cabaret* - that he barely noticed the rise of the Nazi's until he was arrested and carted off to Dachau with the rest of the "queers."

From the outset of his detention in "Protective Custody," he strikes a Faustian bargain with a jazz loving SS captain who is also a closeted homosexual with a taste for cocaine and chocolate buns. "The Cliff" had sort of known the captain when they were both out in the world, and he recounts his feelings upon seeing him on his first day in Dachau thusly : "It was Dieter Lange, and he had more reason to be here, in a gray suit, than me. He'd been a Raffke in Berlin - a hustler, a pimp, profiteer, a regular MacHeath, but his lovers were all men. He was a chicken plucker who'd always wanted to pluck a black chicken because they were so rare in Germany....But...I never went out with men like Dieter Lange."

However, after checking out the scene in Dachau, going out with Dieter Lange didn't seem like such a bad deal. In fact, when Dieter hit on him Cliff found the offer irresistible : "If I was nice to him, he'd be nice to me. He'd always liked jazz music and my singing and playing. He would do his best to look after me. But if I became troublesome, he'd have me back in the camp in a prisoner barracks in a flash." Considering the gruesome alternative, it was an offer he couldn't refuse.

Thus began a strange and complex psycho/sexual relationship that would eventually include a menage a trois with Dieter Lange's wife Anna - a big blond country Fräulein who metamorphosed into the kind of house Frau that the SS considered ideal for breeding little Nazi's - and sexual trysts with Anna and her girlfriend / lover Ursula,

who was also the wife of an SS officer. After a decade of this, “The Cliff” emerged as master of the situation and clearly the smartest and strongest of the lot.

Among the many outstanding achievements of this novel - which include the humanization of Nazi functionaries and the creation of a masterful black gay male who keeps his head when all around him are losing theirs - perhaps the most remarkable is the celebration of Afro-American history and cultural styles that is woven throughout the text. In fragments of memory during the twelve years that Cliff Pepperidge confided his most cherished reveries to his diary, we learn much about the history of black Americans of that period.

We are told about Paul Robeson’s visit to Germany; the world renowned biologist and Howard University professor Ernest Just’s researches at the famous Kaiser Wilhelm institute; the spells cast upon Europeans by dazzling black performers like Florence Mills; Bricktop’s failed attempt to open a nightclub in Berlin in and attempt to duplicate her great success in Paris; the irresistible charms of Jazz; Jessie Owen’s domination of the Berlin Olympics; Joe Louis’ defeat at the hands of Max Schmeling and his stunning victory in the return match; the spellbinding heroics of Afro-American fighter pilots who blasted German jets out of the skies flying their technologically disadvantaged prop planes etc.

Yet Even if the novel had omitted this treasure trove of Afro-Americana, John Williams’ transparent love for, and superb knowledge of, the Classical tradition of black American complex instrumental music popularly known as jazz, and his gift for rendering it in finely crafted English prose, would have been well worth the price of the text. There are many opportunities for Williams to display his gift for musical explication because Dieter Lange has a serious interest in Cliff’s musical abilities beyond being a fan.

As a seasoned hustler cum social climber Lange recognized that Cliff’s musical talents could help promote his career, since his superior officers in the SS were jazz lovers in spite of the official Nazi party position that it was the decadent wailing of an

inferior people. Cliff's explanations of how he whipped a group of stiff German musicians - who were mostly trained in European classical music and played instruments that properly belonged in a symphony orchestra, like the violin and French horn - into a swinging ensemble is a real education in the art of making music.

"The Cliff's" constant comparisons of the racial practices of Nazi Germany to the racist etiquette of his native Louisiana in the early twentieth century - which is what drove him into European exile in the first place - is like a dagger which rips away the veil of ignorance and denial that white Americans have erected in order to cover up their shameful past. Which has now been superbly documented by Yale Law Professor, James Q. Whitman in his book "*Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law*," published by the rigorously peer reviewed Princeton University Press. Showing the similarity of Nazi Germany and apartheid Louisiana is a courageous act on the part of the author, especially in an era when intellectual cowardice and shameless genuflection before the imperatives of a Eurocentric literary marketplace is the order of the day. And it explains why this splendid book was rejected by 57 publishers! This is a sin and a shame because "Clifford's Blues" is a tour de force, a masterpiece of modern American fiction. It will make a splendid companion piece to the documentary film "*Uncovering The Black German Holocaust*," by David Okuefuna and Moise Shewa.

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The Village of Harlem