

*The Essential Clarence Major: Prose and Poetry*

Clarence Major

378 pages

University of North Carolina Press

Reviewed by

Brian Gilmore

I had the extreme luck many years ago of hearing and seeing Clarence Major, the multifaceted writer-artist years ago in Washington D.C. It was in the 1990's at Vertigo Books and Major was in my hometown, for the reading of his latest novel at the time, *Dirty Bird Blues*. Like many poets and writers, at the time, Major was a must see, follow, study type of a writer. He never ceased to challenge a reader, and he surely made me, as a poet and writer, to feel that writing had great possibilities, beyond what I thought it was at the time. He was one of the writers who I used to say - the only rule is there are no rules.

*Dirty Bird Blues* turned out to be one of my favorites of his novels over the years and a piece of it is here in Major's latest publication, *The Essential Clarence Major*, a book that showcases not just many of Major's great works but it is a book of artistic definition, a book that expresses to the community how Major creates his work and what are his essential qualities as a writer-artist. *The Essential Clarence Major: Prose and Poetry* encompasses decades of writing. Your absolute favorites might not even be included here but you will come away with a better view of Major's creative tendencies and his approach to literature. His command of language, emotional details, rich and memorable characters, and the constant willingness, to jump across boundaries, is all here.

The book is arranged into novel excerpts, short stories, essays, memoir and poetry. The novel excerpt section begins with Major's second novel, from 1975, *Reflex and Bone Structure*, a book often described of having two viewpoints. It is this kind of experimentation whether intentional or unintentional that has always set Major's work apart. By the time you work through the excerpt from the very celebrated, *My Amputations* and then follow with one from *Such Was the Season*, Major has taken you places you have never been. Writers have a tendency to be careful, play it safe; Major lives dangerous on his pages. In the foreword to this collection, Kia Corthron acknowledges that *My Amputations* is a book by Major she "devoured" and which "commenced her lifelong reader-writer relationship."

*Such Was the Season* is the book that was talked up by all of my writer friends back in the day. I was reading his first short story collection back then, *Fun and Games* and was captivated by the variety of stories and tools of delivery. Yet *Such Was the Season* as everyone foretold me, lived up to the hype. Using the voice of an older black woman to drive the novel was quite unique at the time and especially so for a black male writer. The familiar beginning remains pretty famous to this day and it is here fortunately:

*"Last week was a killer-diller. I don't know if Juneboy brought good or bad luck. First news he was coming down here came from Esther. She called me one night from Chicago, where she*

*lives, oh bout a week for he was to get in. She said, 'Annie, my son Adam is coming down there to speak at Spelman bout his research at Howard University Hospital.'"*

In just a few sentences, Major draws the reader in cleverly and tells you a lot about his characters, who they are, where they live, and what they respect. It is something he repeats over and over in all of his work but especially when he is able to get outside of himself and into the lives of others.

There are six novel excerpts here that span the gamut of Major's career including *Dirty Bird Blues*, the raw saga of Man, a bluesmen, living the blues, but who is the blues. Major, like those who master this form, doesn't just tell you about the blues, the story is the blues, as form, life, language, and outcome. The language is special, as is a trademark of Major:

*"Man and Solly knew this bootleg joint where they always had a good supply on Sundays and holidays. Over on Thirty first and State, State where the trucks travel day and night, rumbling along carrying all that stuff people use from city to city passing through Chicago."*

All of the stories included here are from Major's second short story collection, 'Chicago Heat.' Considering the first works I read by Major were short stories from his collection, *Fun and Games*, this section had my attention more than others. From the first story, "*Chicago Heat*," where a man dies in a car waiting outside in that car as his wife attends a trial, you can understand Major's aesthetics and thrust of the book. Major, who once noted in an interview with Charles Rowell, that his first art was drawing (with crayons as a kid), is drawing here, but on the page. "*Chicago Heat*," the story, is cinematic in scope and depth. It is a short, brilliant tale, with a spooky overlay, as love seems to have sometimes, in fiction. There is always something, in other words, love wants to thrive, but it can also kill you. All of these short snippets of life report back like that as you read them like you are eating a big bag of chips slowly.

The essay section is full of gems. I will note a few. *Thanks for the Lunch, Baby: Clarence Major Has Lunch with James Baldwin* is a must read. Part truth and part imagination, the essay is a chance for Major to think deeply of his friend and mentor, James Baldwin, a writer he got to know when Major taught in France. It is again quite cool to reveal their friendship in this way as opposed to in a linear fashion based on memory and lacking the nuance of time and reflection. Baldwin, who died in 1987, is alive and is a real person again, telling us of back then and also, right now.

Two other essays of others are also special: *Richard Wright: The Long Hallucination* and *Claude McKay: My 1975 Adventure*. While both have been published previously, they help again to define this collection and Major as a thinker and artist. The details of Wright's writing life will give any artist the determination to press forward and stay true to their creative aesthetics. Accurately, Major describes Wright's career as reflecting "the general problem of an independent career in writing" which Wright lived. Major, in colorful prose, writes that Wright goes from being a "famous" writer whose novel *Native Son* sold out in three hours in New York, to his death about 20 years later in Paris, from a mysterious illness and hardly famous or relevant anymore. Yet, as Major likely believes, Wright stayed true to his ideals. Claude McKay, Major

notes in the McKay essay, “died in extreme poverty” and was once living in a “shelter for drunks and bums” in New York. His appreciation for McKay is self-evident throughout, again mostly for what McKay longed to be, as opposed to what he did become.

Naturally, because I have written and published a lot of poetry, I have always been drawn to Major’s poetry to challenge me to think outside of myself. Don’t write comfortably; write something that drags you out of your comfort zone. It is hard but Major, throughout his career, has been able to defy convention and always make poetry take on great possibilities. “Round Midnight,” a poem from his collection, *Configurations*, is one such example:

*“You know my story./They want to make me liable/To punishment for this picture./So my spirit is closed./I’m a delicate engraving/outlined/with semitones, curled/at the edges,/nearly worthless,/in a mysterious trouble.”*

A 2008 poem, “East Lansing, Michigan” is also in classic Major form, of traveling many places, and forcing the reader to slow down and dig deep. Considering I know the college town well, it caught my eye and even more so when what it was about surprised me:

*September 10/*

*There was no warning/Rising from his rest/The dog bit the man’s leg,/did it quietly/then returned to his spot/on the front lawn to rest.*

When you learn later that the poem references the 9-11 tragedy you will understand or at least explore the possibilities in the writing more deeply. This will make you consider the human experience in the work as Major always tries to get his readers to do. It is another cinematic masterwork of ideas and images that drive this collection from beginning to end.