

Asking Questions, Searching Souls

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE NEGRO?

By Robert Penn Warren

Random House. 454 pp. \$5.95.

Reviewed by

ALBERT MURRAY

Contributor, "New World Writing"

ROBERT PENN WARREN, a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Southerner, a one-time apologist for segregation, a long-time colleague of the old agrarian romantics and a sometime friend of countless white supremacists and even Dixiecrats, has written a new book which is perhaps the very best inside report on the Negro civil rights movement by anyone so far. In spite of several ridiculous flaws, which are much more characteristic of certain New York indoor intellectuals than of the worldly, realistic and thoughtful son of a hard-headed old Kentucky dirt farmer, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* deserves the widest possible circulation.

The title is misleading. This is not only a book about current U.S. Negro leaders and spokesmen. It is really a book about the fundamentals of citizenship which the author, a major novelist, poet and critic, compiled from a series of taped interviews and interspersed with his own reactions and commentary. It is also by far the most comprehensive treatment of the complex issues in the civil rights controversy on record. On the whole, it is also the most objective. But even when it is intensely personal, its accuracy is seldom compromised. Indeed, it achieves its greatest reliability through the very frankness with which it indulges in introspection.

It is as if Jack Burden, the self-searching Southern reporter-press agent, the narrator of *All The King's Men*, Warren's prize-winning novel of some 19 years ago, had finally gone back into the newspaper business. At the end of the sequence of sordid and sanguinary events which climaxed that hard-boiled story about power politics in a Southern state, Burden holed up in one of those beautiful but haunted ante bellum mansions to finish a book about one of his Confederate ancestors. He had always had a very special personal urge to come to terms with the past. In fact, the book he was working on had actually started out as a dissertation for a PhD in History. But even as he wrote he knew very well that soon now he would have to "go out of the house and go into the convulsion of the world, out of history into history and the awful responsibility of time."

It was inevitable that this responsibility, awful or magnificent, would require a truly serious and sensitive Southerner to confront the obvious fact that Negroes are a major force which determines much if not most of the convulsion in his immediate region of the world. The majority of Southerners, sensitive or not, come to realize this in some way or other sooner or later. Too many other Americans never do. In the special case of Jack Burden, his very sense of history would eventually lead him to realize that his destiny had always been inextricably entangled with that of the Negroes all around him.

At any rate, in *Who Speaks for the Negro?* Robert Penn Warren himself turns out to be just the sort of All-American star reporter-commentator one had hoped his training and experience had prepared Jack Burden to become. As a matter of fact, few present-day newsmen can touch him. The writing is much more than first-rate journalism. At its best it has many of the finest qualities of good fic-

tion: strong narrative progression, carefully observed and rendered detail, roundness and mystery of character, a mature awareness of the enigmatic complexity of human motives, and a fine sense of the texture of human life itself.

Warren is always at his best when he works with the disciplines of the novelist. He is least reliable when he allows himself to be sucked in by the all too neat theories of this or that social science; then he sounds like a reading-room intellectual. He wastes entirely too much time, for instance, fumbling around with Stanley Elkins' classroom theories about Samboism (sic!). When he sits listening to Charles Evers telling about the heroic pact between himself and his martyred brother Medgar, the novelist in him spots the almost too pat rhetorical dynamics, even as he accepts the truth of what is being said. Not so, however, when some postulating head shrinker wraps *his* rhetoric about Sambo archetypes in the jargon of psychiatry! He also lets the cocktail party theorists fake him into making glib speculations which would reduce music, dance, sports and even robust sexuality to questionable assets. Do these writers ever wonder how they sound to Negroes? Negroes think all of these things are wonderful. They are not the least bit interested in giving them up. They want to add other things to them.

A remarkable quality about Warren the interviewer, on the other hand, is his unique lack of condescension. He accepts his people for what they are, tries to understand them, records their opinions as faithfully as possible whether he agrees with them or not, never presumes, never attempts to browbeat. Thus his subjects come through as significant human beings engaged in a very serious controversy, and his book is a dependable source of first-hand information about almost every aspect of the Negro Revolution. It also

ASQUITH

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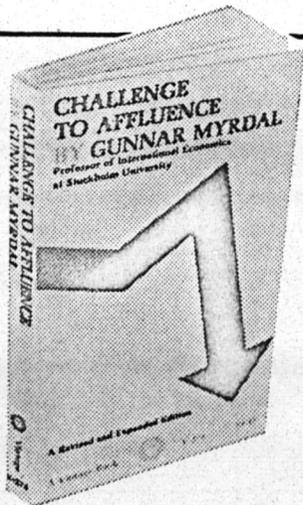


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contains most of the historical highlights of this domestic crisis over the last 10 years.

The Negro leaders and spokesmen Warren visited on his zig-zag trips to most of the key locations directly involved in the civil rights struggle represent all of the protest organizations and all walks of U.S. Negro life. They range from folk types to intellectuals. All are dedicated. All have a great awareness of the moral issues involved, and the overwhelming majority have a responsible and realistic sense of their own power. Those who have been physically brutalized, jailed or terrorized remain even more steadfast. Not only are most of them very articulate, many have held their own in the highest councils of the nation, and Warren respects their achievements, their courage and their intelligence.

There is, however, far too much academic pretentiousness among them. Almost everybody takes the stance of a social scientist of some kind, as if one's own sense of life is not valid unless it conforms to the going terminology. This sometimes causes some of them to talk a lot of pedantic nonsense which their very existence and their very actions belie. None, for example, seem more cocksure than those who insist that they have been oppressed and degraded to the point of self-hatred. None are more racist and Afro-Nationalist than those who complain loudest about being forced into a ghetto.

There are significant statements of policy and outlook by Martin Luther King, Adam Clayton Powell, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Whitney Young of the Urban League, James Farmer of CORE, James Foreman of SNCC, Robert Moses and Aaron Henry of the Mississippi Freedom Democrats, and the late Malcolm X, among others. There are also the theories of Bayard Rustin, the organizer, Kenneth B. Clark, the child psychologist and self-styled ghetto expert, and there are the

polemics of best-selling civil rights author James Baldwin, whom Warren calls the voice of himself—Jimmy Baldwin himself, that is.

Richest in intellectual resonance are Warren's exchanges with Ralph Ellison, whose *Shadow and Act* speaks not only for Negroes but for the U.S. and for contemporary man. Ellison is as solidly grounded in social science as the specialists who work at it full time. But outstanding novelist and man of letters that he is, his insights always extend beyond the standard assumptions. Thus he discusses integration not in terms of weak minorities and the all-powerful majority, but in terms of the basic pluralism of U.S. life. And when he examines the actual nature of the experience of Negroes during slavery and under oppression, he is always aware of the Negro's own value system, the Negro's own conception of himself. This enables him to reveal the background to that power of character, that courage and tenacity, that sense of timing, and that discipline before provocation and violence which sustains the flesh and blood heroism one witnesses in the Movement in confrontation after confrontation.

Robert Penn Warren, still the professional Southerner withal, sitting in his New England study with his fresh travel memories, notes and tape recorder, and the voices of Yankees outside his window, has gone a long way from PONDY Woods and such smug provincialisms as "Nigger your breed aint metaphysical." He had gone a great distance when he wrote *Segregation*, his account of the inner conflict in the South in 1955; and was a bit farther on when he wrote the *Legacy of the Civil War*. This present book is, among other things, another installment of his report on the progress of one noteworthy Southerner toward reconstruction 100 years after Appomattox.

Like most Americans he still has

a long way to go. But like an increasing number of Southerners, among them Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas, Hugo Black of Alabama, and Ralph McGill of Georgia, he is much farther along than many damnyankees, including some black ones, who think they are there already.

Pretension Without Content

THE CAT AND SHAKESPEARE

By Rajo Rao
Macmillan. 117 pp. \$3.95.

THE GAME OF DOSTOEVSKY

By Samuel Astrachan
Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
214 pp. \$4.95.

Reviewed by

DANIEL CURLEY

Author, "A Stone Man, Yes"

THE CAT AND SHAKESPEARE is like a novel written by one of the Indian characters in *A Passage to India*. It is not, however, written by Dr. Aziz, who is capable of ranging words "coldly on shelves." Nor is it written by Professor Godbole, who manages to keep even his greatest enigmas in touch with Western intelligence. It is not even written by Mr. Das, who is just barely able to keep order in the courtroom by the greatest of all possible efforts. No, it is written by Mrs. Bhattacharya, that charming lady who invites you to her house, laughing and enticing, and who, when you get there at the appointed time, is not at home, has never from the beginning intended to be at home.

The story is narrated by Ramakrishna Pai, a minor official at the Revenue Board. His work has taken him away from his native place,

and his wife has chosen to remain behind with the children, a choice that Mr. Pai finds rather to his liking, for he has discovered that his wife is really unsympathetic: She insists that two and two always make four. She will admit that in dreams the answer is often seven, but she says, "I am not living in a dream." Ramakrishna Pai rather thinks he is living in a dream, and he is so fortunate as to find a really womanly woman who is very bad

at arithmetic. In the course of the book, this woman bears his son, and they seem to live happily ever after, although the technicalities and legalities of the situation must continue to perplex the Western mind haunted by dreams of the most precise kind of arithmetic.

More important, however, than this idyl is the character of Govindan Nair, neighbor and best friend to Ramakrishna Pai. Govindan Nair is a mystic and perhaps a confidence

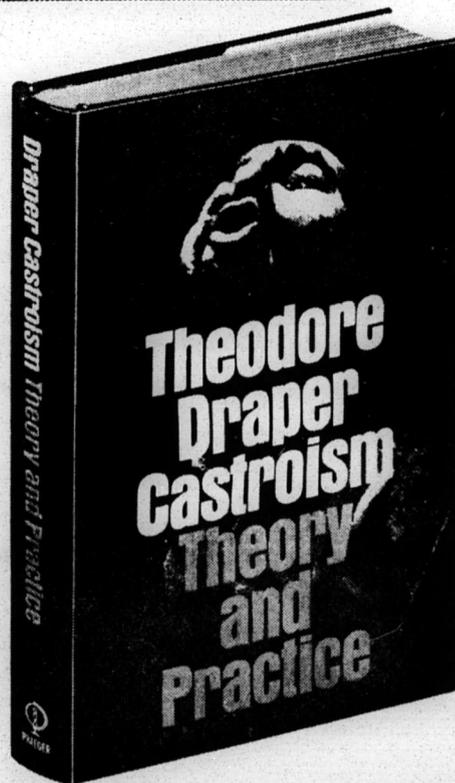
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