Reviews


Julie Barak
Mesa State College


The most problematic aspect of the text is the unevenness among the entries in depth of scholarship, style, and tone. A more thorough and careful editing of the individual entries was needed in order to present a polished whole. At the root of this unevenness is the variety of scholars submitting entries, which range from professors at research institutions to graduate students — of the 79 entries, 21 are written by doctoral candidates or graduate students. The entries average about five to seven pages per author.

The tone of the entries ranges widely. For example, Eberhard Alsen’s summary of Toni Morrison’s work is preachy and plot-based. He sums up Sula by noting that “Sula comes across as a character whose life is a cautionary tale and the novel affirms the values that are the opposite of Sula’s” (336). This seems a rather simple and dismissive judgment of one of Morrison’s most complex works and characters. Balancing this rather too facile account of Morrison’s novels is the beautiful assessment of Alice Walker’s writing by Molly Roden, who weaves her way through
Walker’s novels focusing on common themes and on her intellectual and artistic
development regarding issues of patriarchy, colonialism, and Christianity.

Some entries can be faulted for what they leave out. For example, the entry on Terry M cM illan by Rita D andridge mentions the short story M cM illan published in Breaking Ice, but doesn’t note that M cM illan edited this important collection of African American short fiction. Kimberly M . Brown’s discussion of June Jor-
dan focuses on her novel for young adults, His Own Where, only very briefly men-
tioning Jordan’s work as a poet and activist. While the focus of Nelson’s text is on
novelists, it seems necessary to contextualize a discussion of Jordan’s prose with
comments about her extensive poetic and political publications.

And then, the text omits some important novelists altogether. There are no en-
tries for Amiri Baraka, for instance, who, like Jordan, isn’t known as a novelist,
but has novels in print, or for Rosa Guy, who has published several novels for
young adults. Also, the definition of “African American” that the text employs may
be too limited, as it also excludes powerful contemporary novelists like Edwidge
D anticat and Lucille Clifton.

The bibliographic sections of the entries are as uneven as the biographical and
critical sections. Some list exhaustive and current publications by and about the
author; others fall short of the mark. For example, the entry on Frank Garvin Yerby
by Louis H ill Pratt lists only Yerby’s “best-selling novels,” naming only 12 of his
33 works. The entries under “Studies of Paule Marshall” exclude some important
publications on Marshall’s works that could be easily found in a search of the M LA
on-line database. Mary Ellen Quinn, who reviewed the book for Booklist, noted
that “the bibliography for Alice Walker ends unaccountably in 1992.”

The strength of the text is that it brings together in one easily accessible vol-
ume a survey of a wide selection of black American writers, many of whom are
little known. It provides students and scholars of African American literature a
good place to start their research on these writers whose literary reputation is
obscure. But there are other sources that would be at least as effective for better
known writers, including GalésC ontemporary Authors, the volumes on black writ-
ers in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, the on-line “Voices From the Gap”
homepage for women writers (http://voices.cla.umn.edu/), and the “Writing and
Resistance” homepage (http://www.public.asu.edu/~metro/aflit/authors.html).
Although this volume may serve as a useful introduction to some lesser known
African American novelists, the unevenness of its scholarship, style, and tone mar
its value for other purposes. ✽