

characters with motives for their decisions. Daniel Day-Lewis (remembered for his role as the gay punker in *My Beautiful Laundrette*) is a younger, more impudent Tomas than in the book, and his insouciance makes it easy to sidestep his imperial sexual attitudes. Juliette Binoche's Tereza melds pathos and power in her eternally innocent sensuality. Lena Olin's Sabina looks more vulnerable than the novel's cool Sabina, and more commonplace as the I-want-my-independence artist fighting for gallery space in every Western city.

The psychological plausibility of the characters supplants Kundera's intellectual drama. The personal is in the foreground of this movie, and the political is a trigger that moves a plot, the very plot that Kundera kept sabotaging. Despite the film's slow storytelling that allows Kaufman to savor symbolic detail and echo, and emphasize the intense confrontation with self and other, you still want to know: What happened then? And no wonder: this isn't a movie with something to say but a lot to show. In the end, the movie resolves along the happy-ending lines of a Hollywood movie, with careful qualifications that cite its source in Eastern Europe.

Personal and political: Kaufman himself was concerned not to make an anti-Communist movie, and the film does avoid that, by neatly excising Kundera's savage, total indictment of Communism as kitsch. Czech bureaucrats and intellectual decision-makers are cowards and fools, and Russians are aging thugs and lost-boy soldiers. But although they have a powerful effect on the lives of the characters, the confusions and conflicts that propel the central characters' search for love belong to themselves. The story's been recast as Kaufman describes it: as the tale of ordinary people "swept away by history."

In the most basic ways, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* doesn't make sense. However, moments and scenes and characters make not sense but poetry, a kind of poetry that you rarely see in the movies. It takes money and connections to turn talent and courage into wide-screen art. Although Kaufman didn't find it easy to get this oddest of erotic epics made, he could dare to try on a scale few can. (He got backing from producer Saul Zaentz, who with *Amadeus* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* took big artistic gambles to huge box-office payoff.) And if the film uneasily joins the different preoccupations of an Eastern European intellectual and a Hollywood artist, it never errs on the side of safety.

Kaufman has transmogrified Kundera's deep intellectual pessimism into a profound sensual joy on screen. And that irrational, inexplicable fount of optimism buoys the movie past its irreconcilable differences of vision.

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Stetsasonic's anti-apartheid rap up: that's edu-tainment

By Mark Sommer

BROOKLYN RAP GROUP STETSASONIC's new record, "A.F.R.I.C.A." is part entertainment and part education, according to group leader Daddy-O. He calls it, "edu-tainment." Like Little Steven's anti-apartheid anthem, "Sun City," "A.F.R.I.C.A." includes a powerful video and study guide to help get an anti-apartheid message over the airwaves and into the classrooms.

The record was inspired by a trip Rev. Jesse Jackson made to southern Africa's frontline states in the summer of 1986. Fragments of a Jackson speech open the record.

his Drums of Passion. The video images reflect the song's lyrical intensity.

"A.F.R.I.C.A." expresses how we feel about what's going on over there," says Daddy-O. "Being from Brooklyn, we're used to seeing people killed from crack or being shot up; it's like a mirror held up to us every day. But learning that Angola is the amputee capital of the world because of anti-government forces supported by us and South Africa is no joke...This is our way of doing something."

Revelation was televised: Daddy-O says the group learned about Jackson's visit to the frontline states from a segment on

Against Racism" concerts the past four summers in New York, performed "Sun City" in New York's

"A.F.R.I.C.A.," like "Sun City" before it, is a benefit.

Central Park with Little Steven, Bono, Fela, and others, and last year performed "A.F.R.I.C.A." in Washington, D.C. at the peace and justice rally before more than 100,000 people.

"A.F.R.I.C.A.," like "Sun City" before it, is a benefit with all proceeds going to The Africa Fund. Money



Jesse Jackson with Brooklyn's Stetsasonic crew: rapping to get the message through.

And a sparse rhythm kicks in after Jackson's righteous anger charges "our nation at its lowest would have partnership with South Africa. It's a moral disgrace!" Stetsasonic begins by chanting the names of South Africa's neighbors, and goes on to draw attention to the undeclared war being waged against them by Pretoria. The six rappers and musicians who compose the group are joined by Nigerian percussionist Babatunde Olatunji and

ABC's 20/20. He says his group's young audience is more apt to be listening to RUN-DMC and the Beastie Boys than watching 20/20. But he says the group's fans seem to like the record, and other rappers have told him they, too, now want to talk about South Africa.

Stetsasonic has a reputation for performing at benefits for a variety of issues—and in a variety of locations, including day-care centers and prisons. They have done "Rock

raised from this record will aid humanitarian relief projects for people living in the frontline states. The Africa Fund's project coordinator, Marcia McBroom Landess, says the study guide they have developed for grades junior high and up is geared to provide information on apartheid's devastating consequences, and show ways to oppose it. Like the record insert, the study guide also provides information on each of the frontline states, discus-

ses the economic and military war leveled against them by Pretoria, and explains the regional alliance these countries have made to escape South Africa's control of industry, trade and transport.

"The 'Sun City' guide continues to do very well, and that is why we were inspired to do another one," says McBroom Landess. "This guide is easy to read, very informative, it includes photographs and a glossary, a message from the Stet, and it really focuses on the plight of children in these countries. They're torturing, maiming, and killing children, and we want the reader to become aware—and enraged."

"At the end of the guide," says McBroom Landess, "we've included things people can do and are doing, because it's not enough to just be aware of the situation; we want to encourage them to act."

Video education: Loretta Williams, who directs public policy work for the Unitarian Universalist Association, says she is already using the video with youth groups, and it's effective. "I think it's a valuable addition to the repertoire of materials that are out there. This isn't just another kind of depressing picture of what's happening. It's dynamic, and it's about people working to change things and their determination to be free."

Stetsasonic's Daddy-O says it was important to the group that Jesse Jackson be on the record. "Jesse's very influential in the black community. Originally he wanted to do it live with us, but his schedule didn't permit it. But we did perform it with him in Chicago at a reception for [African National Congress leader] Oliver Tambo. It was amazing! There were people there 8 to 80, and it was the first time I saw gray-haired ladies dancing to rap!"

Jackson's voice can also be heard on the flip side of the 12" single in a rap called "Free South Africa," by Tack Head. He is heard along with Tambo, Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda, Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe, and Tanzania's Julius Nyerere commenting on the freedom struggle for southern Africa. The record is also dedicated to the late President Samora Machel of Mozambique.

When the record debuted recently, it was played simultaneously across the country on over 100 black and urban radio stations as well as in Mozambique. It's also been featured on 20/20. Still, "A.F.R.I.C.A." co-producer Rick Dutka says that because "the record's got a strong black sound and is very political, it isn't expected to get as much exposure if it were neither of those things."

To obtain the "A.F.R.I.C.A." record, video and teaching guide, and the "Sun City" teaching materials, contact The Africa Fund, 198 Broadway, Suite 402, New York, NY 10038, (212) 962-1210.

Mark Sommer is a Boston-based freelance writer.

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Nicaragua

Continued from page 13

through a Sandinista-allied cooperative. On the ground it's a mirror of the old share-cropper system, to the extent that the *campesino* assumes all the risk of planting and harvest, with the important exception that he is not already committed to selling off a part of his harvest to the landowner. (There are other cases where *campesinos* farm enough land to harvest a large surplus for sale, with the stipulation that they sell part of their harvest to the state purchasing agency, ENABAS. The "rent" they pay for their land is the difference between what ENABAS pays for their crop and what they can make on the black market. Undoubtedly too many *campesinos* unable to resist too much temptation makes for disappointing harvests, and shortages at the MILCOIN.)

Within this system is a political decision to redistribute as much arable land as possible and reverse the years of "marginalization" of the poor. Within the system, as well, is a terrible contradiction. The Sandinistas stand accused of gross mismanagement of their farm sector, clearly their country's most essential. Even the policy of distributing land to the landless has had an unexpected side effect: a shortage of migrant laborers to harvest the export crops, such as coffee and cotton. Reduced export income means lower profits to reinvest in the farm economy, the capital needed for machinery, pesticides and fertilizers. And if you are a government committed to building up the small cooperatives, if necessary at the expense of the large, independent estates—and the FSLN is—then ultimately a decision will have to be made to favor small, subsis-

tence plots like Carlito's over ones producing for the export market.

Meanwhile inflation is running at 600 percent or better, rendering almost worthless the *cordobas* raised in the internal market, and making the price of imported chemicals and machinery dearer still. After four or five years of this the big, efficient farms find themselves unable to make a profit of any kind. Some hang on, losing money, others are abandoned, and then are appropriated by the Sandinistas.

The obvious risks in this type of system are that large producers will go outside the legal (taxable) market, seeking what profits they can from speculators. Or worse, eventually too much of the country's farming will be done by those least equipped to absorb the costs of securing a harvest. Carlito is already cutting so many corners in trying to bring in his crop, what would happen in a nation of Carlitos? Famine is not a remote possibility. Up to now these are risks the Sandinistas have been willing to take. The government is unwilling to risk losing the *campesino* loyalists. It is a political decision, certainly, but also a religious one. It is a literal example of 'exercising a preferential option for the poor' discussed at Medellin, and the root from which all of the theology of liberation rises. In the past three years the FSLN banks have forgiven thousands of small farm loans when drought or a bad harvest wiped out a *campesino's* ability to repay. More mismanagement, perhaps, but that is the cost of vigilance against backsliding to an era when rural society was divided between the haves and the have-nots.

"The project": The story of how Nicaragua's strongest movements—Sandinista, the theology of liberation, the

counter-revolutionary war—are woven together takes place back in Carlito's fields. Carlito exemplifies what the Managua propagandists call Nicaragua's "new men." Ask Carlito if he's a *nuevo hombre* and he'll laugh at the joke. But in Pilas he is something special. He is the product of the community, and not just in the psychoanalytical sense. He is their "project," and all of the community has a stake in his success.

His fields come not from land administered by the state but from CEPA, part of five cooperatives loosely federated with the Christian base communities. While there is apparently no loyalty test in Pilas—membership in neither the communities nor the Sandinista front is a requirement for joining the cooperatives—the town is too small for there to be very many lone wolves, and as it happens the overlap between revolutionary Christians and cooperative members is rather large. In fact, the relationship between the community and the Alberto Gutierrez Cooperative is the same relationship, writ small, as that between the Sandinista front and the radical church.

Risky business: The eight years of Sandinista rule are also the same eight years Carlito has spent becoming a "delegate of the word." He made his decision in the last days of the Somoza dictatorship, just before his 12th birthday. It is not easy for a North American to imagine the gravity of such a decision. In the last two years of the Somoza dictatorship, hundreds of delegates had been murdered by the National Guard. Indeed, so many catechists, priests and lay workers had been persecuted that, in some villages, religious life ground almost to a standstill. At the same time, Carlito was making the transformation from "fed"—a hungry half-worker who costs more than he can earn—to feeder, in *campesino* terms the fullest measure of adulthood. All this at a time of profound social change in Rivas—an armed revolt followed by a revolutionary new regime. Yet he was ready to step out on a road whose signposts are the very slogans of the revolution.

In Pilas, delegates train in Friday night discussion groups held at the home of Juana Gonzalez Ruiz. She, too, was one of Padre Gaspar's catechists, and is herself a delegate of the word, and vice-chair of the sewing cooperative.

As in all seminaries, rigorous Bible study is an important part of the course. The "preferential option for the poor" that is at the heart of liberation theology is taken literally, to the extent that every book, chapter and verse can be interpreted as giving strong endorsement to popular rebellion. In Central America whole masses and songbooks are devoted to the "religion of the *campesino*" where parables of the Bible are applied to *campesino* life.

But becoming a delegate of the word in Pilas requires something more than the ability to read rebellion into the Good Book. For Carlito and those before him, it means undertaking a process of self-discovery. Community service must be demonstrated, as well as personal sacrifice. It is years of learning the confidence to take a leading role in the community—not an easy concept for an unwed *campesino* mother in her teens, like Juana—in Bible study or petitioning El Senor for a better split of the harvest, or challenging God for the answers to why there is so much pain in their lives. Carlito is the pride of the community. The change from the most timid peasant ashamed almost to tears of his patched clothes and bare feet to the man

who can stand up and take a leading role is made, not born. "You should have seen him then," beams Alejandra, nearly bursting with pride. "He wouldn't even talk. Nobody thought he would stick it out."

Indeed, a glimpse of the old Carlito can be seen when his voice drops below a whisper, a little mouse-squeak, when he checks to see if his two words of English, "sank you," are correct. He can be seen in Rufino, five years younger than Carlito but already stooped into middle age, who runs behind the house in fright when Donna and I try to ask him a question.

And, in the final analysis, that is why Carlito was chosen—with all the odds against him—to farm with the cooperative. The old Carlito would already be crushed by the odds, slinking back to the *hacienda* to chop weeds for wages, or hitting the road for eight months on the harvest circuit. "Today, Lord, we are hungry—for work, shelter and bread..." read the words of "Comunion," one of the hymns in Carlito's book *Songs of My People*. "Give us now your body and blood, and the strength to fight." All of a revolution are in these words: We are hungry, master. Give us The Lord's strength to fight for our lives.

Our group spent its last night in Managua, back at Casa Colorado. Our final "reflection" (the name Maria gave our end-of-day Bible reading and round-table talk) began with a passage from the New Testament, Matthew Chapter 19, verses 13 and 14.

They brought children for him to lay his hands on them with prayer. The disciples rebuked them, but Jesus said to them, "Let the children come to me; do not try to stop them; for the kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these."

Donna and I spent one last night in Managua at the old Somoza mansions. We joined a delegation of church workers visiting Nicaragua from the U.S. and the Dominican Republic. Two Episcopal priests, Father Henry and "Father" Maria, a Guatemalan woman who now spreads the gospel as a chaplain in the New York state prison system, led us in a reading from the Book of Matthew, Carlito's favorite.

Christ and revolution: After staying in Pilas one remains at a loss to speak of the "big picture" where Nicaragua is part of a headline in the *New York Times*. Who can argue against a kingdom pledged to assist the poor? Who can forget how far away that kingdom is, how long and hard the road ahead?

"You know," says Father Henry, "In some versions this chapter starts 'Some people brought their children forward.' Who are 'some people?' They're the poor, those who have no name, who don't matter. That's the first thing you lose when you're poor in Latin America, your identity. That you're unimportant is something you learn over and over again every day until you die."

Nicaragua is not the only country in Latin America where discussions take place, but it is still the only one where hundreds of government workers, farmers, soldiers, dentists and truck drivers are trying to live its themes. It is one of the few where ideas—of reform, of justice—can be discussed freely, and made into public policy.

And so hundreds of Christians come to Nicaragua from Europe and the U.S. and the rest of Latin America, to learn about trying. Many leave as the CEPA trainees leave, intent on effecting social changes at home. In that way, yes, Nicaragua is a threat to its neighbors. And also their hope. □

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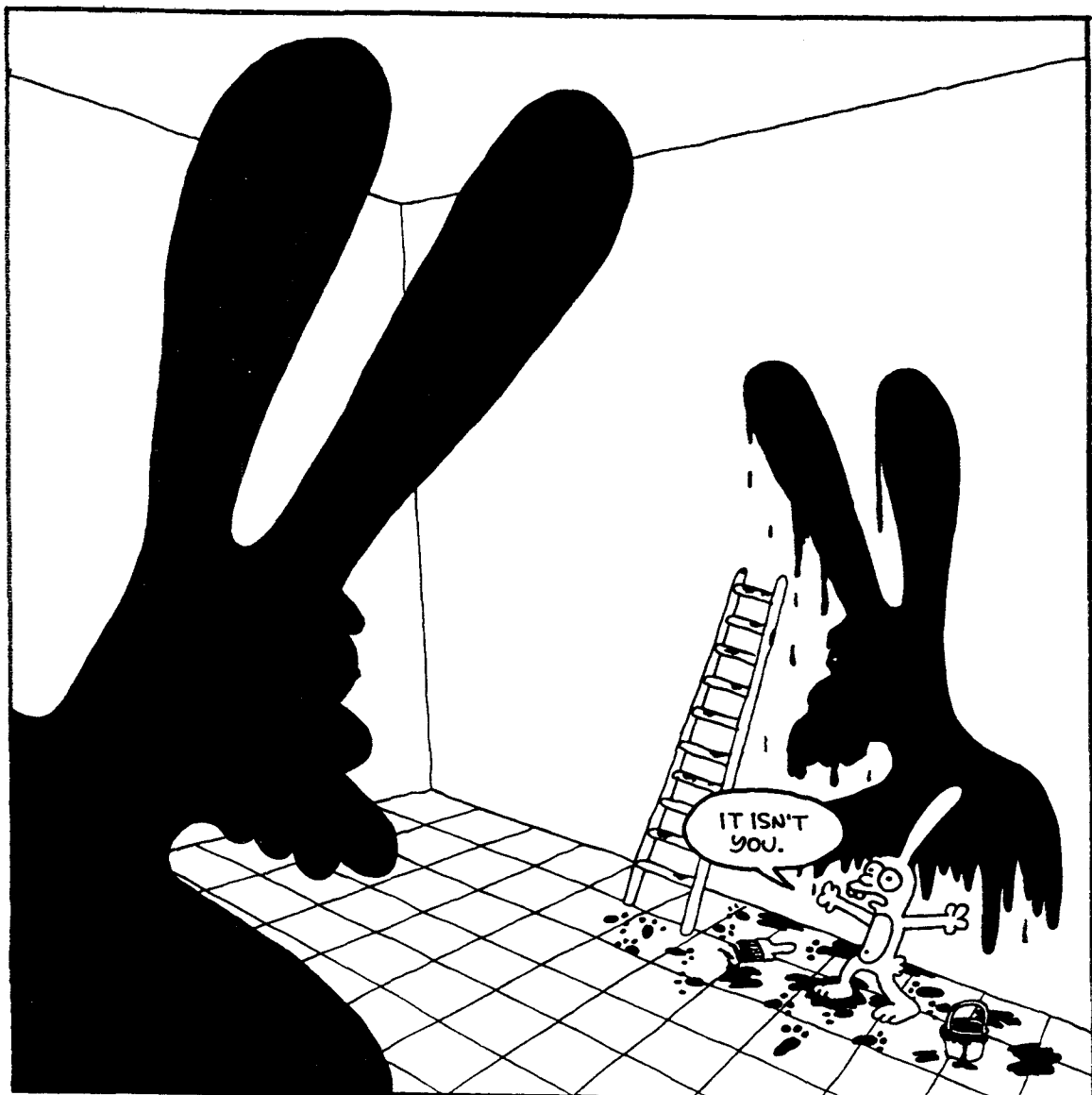
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IN WHAT MIGHT BE CALLED A COMPLAINT-cum-preemptive strike, 48 black writers and critics recently signed a public statement protesting the literary establishment's failure to appropriately reward Toni Morrison, author of five novels including the critically acclaimed *Beloved*.

"Despite the international stature of Toni Morrison, she has yet to receive the national recognition that her five major works of fiction entirely deserve," the letter reads. "She has yet to receive the keystone honors of the National Book Award or the Pulitzer Prize. We, the undersigned black critics and black writers, here assert ourselves against such oversight and harmful whimsey."

The statement, which appeared in the January 24 edition of the *New York Times Book Review*, was accompanied by another letter bemoaning the failure to award the late James Baldwin those same "keystone" honors. The letter, passionate and ornate, speaks of a "grief that goes beyond our sorrow at his death.... We grieve because we cannot yet assure that such shame, such national neglect will not occur again, and then again."

The documents, both composed primarily by poet June Jordan with some assistance from University of Pennsylvania English professor Houston A. Baker Jr., were inspired by the outpouring of emotion and regrets expressed at Baldwin's December 8 memorial service at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Baldwin died December 1 of stomach cancer in southern France. "How shall we explain the exile of this man who wanted to be loved so much at home?" the letter asks.

The notion that black writers are seldom granted their due by the white literary establishment is not a new one. What's new is the concerted aggressiveness with which that establishment is being challenged. Included among the four dozen signers of the statement praising Morrison are writers who seldom find agreement elsewhere: hard-core socialists like Amiri Baraka are listed with romantic poets like Lucille Clifton, feminists (or "womanists") like Alice Walker and nationalists like Eugene Redmond. "After the letter—I prefer to call it a love poem—was composed it was forwarded to key people in different parts of the country," explains Baker. "The signers were a wide-ranging group, and the move was absolutely historic and structure-breaking."

Black writers, like writers everywhere, are independent spirits, traditionally averse to group endeavors. But the lonely death of such a towering figure as Baldwin who, though widely acknowledged as a writer of great power and skill, had never received a major literary award, provoked considerable anger among those he influenced most profoundly. It was his treatment by this country's arbiters of literary merit that forged this unprecedented unity of black writers.

Rising expectations: Pulitzer Prize winners will not be announced until March 31, but Morrison's lavishly praised new novel, *Beloved*, has already lost out in two of literature's most prestigious awards (although the book was a finalist for both honors). The 1987 National Book Award was presented to Larry Heinemann's Vietnam novel *Paco's Story*, and Philip Roth's *The Counterlife* won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

BELOVED AUTHOR TONI MORRISON



Is excellence its own reward?

To some, this protest seems somewhat out of historical sync. After all, black writers (at least, black female writers) are currently riding a wave of popularity. Black poet Rita Dove won a Pulitzer last year for her book *Thomas and Beulah* and Alice Walker won in 1983 for *The Color Purple*. Morrison herself won the Circle Award 10 years ago for *Song of Solomon*, and her other works, *The Bluest Eyes*, *Sula* and *Tar Baby* have all been big sellers.

Receptive publishers: What's more, black writers have seldom found publishers more receptive than in the last 10 years or so. Works by Gayl Jones, John Edgar Wideman, Richard Perry, Octavia Butler, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Ntozake Shange, Charles Johnson, Adrienne Kennedy, Toni Cade Bambara, David Bradley, Jamaica Kincaid and many others have found their way into print. For black women writers in particular the last 15 years have been extraordinarily productive; they are now the dominant voices in African-American literature.

Just as the black social movement of the '60s became more insistent during a period of rising expectations, so it is too with writers. The explosion of published

works by black authors apparently has energized and emboldened the African-American literary community. "The legitimate need for our own critical voice in relation to our own literature can no longer be denied," the 48 signatories note. "We, therefore, urgently affirm our rightful and positive authority in the realm of American letters and, in this prideful context, we do raise this tribute [to Morrison]...."

Amiri Baraka, who eulogized Baldwin at the emotional memorial service, says the statement is an indication of the African-American community's growing confidence and maturity. "Many of us now realize that it is our duty to register outrage at the system of white supremacy that consistently devalues our best creative artists. And more than that, he adds, "we want to go on record for paying tribute to those writers we value while they live."

Endorsing tokenism: Not surprisingly, these documents have created some controversy. The response of *Washington Post* columnist Jonathan Yardley is typical: "Since the suggestion has been made that Morrison has failed to win a major prize because she is black, are we now to understand she should be given one because

she is black?" he asked in a January 26 column. "...However much we may sympathize with their [the signers of the statement] feelings, we must not let this blind us to the rather less attractive implications of their protest."

Yardley argues contrarily that Morrison's *Beloved* has been a great success. Like all of her other novels, he says, it was the "recipient of extravagant, indeed excessive, reviews, and spent a number of weeks on the best-seller lists." Race, Yardley adds, has nothing to do with the giving of awards and "to suggest as much is nothing except dangerous self-delusion." But in Yardley's eagerness to defend the arbiters of literary merit, it is he who appears deluded. To exclude race as a factor is to ignore this country's racist traditions; even the *Washington Post* can't get away with that.

Black novelist Ishmael Reed also criticizes the statement, but for completely different reasons. "To complain about not getting an award from the white male literary establishment is to give credence to tokenism," Reed contends. "It's an old colonial ploy to award one exceptional native to keep the rest of the natives happy. If they really wanted to do an effective protest, they could start their own book awards."

"Those so-called literary awards are actually set up by representatives of the publishers and thus they are more concerned with commercial considerations than with literary ones," he adds. "Even self-respecting white authors are abandoning those phony, award-giving rituals, and it's really embarrassing to see so many allegedly intelligent black writers giving credibility to dying institutions. But I guess, for many of them, the only writing they ever do is sign petitions," he says. Reed also criticized the documents' writing style as "antiquated, 19th-century prose."

Reed's gripe goes deeper than his objection to the protest by the 48 writers. He has passionately argued the view that there is a literary conspiracy to elevate black women writers at the expense of black men. This plot, he contends, is part of a concerted social effort to isolate and stigmatize black males as brutish, even criminal, chauvinists. By Reed's reckoning, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* was a major manifesto of this conspiracy, and won the Pulitzer Prize only to ensure that it would be widely read.

His 1986 novel, *Reckless Eyeballing*, was a thinly disguised attack on Walker, feminism and the white literary establishment that he contends uses black women to serve its socio-political purposes. Reed's lack of enthusiasm about the statement praising Morrison has to be considered in that light.

But Reed's ulterior motives should not completely discredit his objections to the protest letters. For one thing, his criticism of the writing style is not entirely off base. Consider the following sentences: "And so we write, here, hoping not to delay, not to arrive, in any way, late with this, our simple tribute to the seismic character and beauty of your writing. And furthermore, in grateful wonder at the advent of *Beloved*, your most recent gift to our community, our country, our conscience, our courage flourishing as it grows, we here record our pride, our respect and our appreciation for the treasury of your findings and inventions."

Say what? ■