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Randall Kenan: An Exploration into the Value of a Literary Phenomenon

Randall Kenan is perhaps one of the most talented Southern authors of the present era. His works address a myriad of themes from racial and sexual identity to corruption, forgiveness, and acceptance. His grasp of American folklore as it relates to both the past and present is unprecedented. Drawing inspiration from a varying array of phenomenal authors, Kenan paints a picture of the South that appears as fresh and new as it is old. Examined collectively, Randall Kenan's in depth thematic explorations into the human condition, the aesthetics of his masterful use of folklore, and the cultural and historical relevance of his body of work determine the value of his prose in American and Southern Literature.

Over the course of his writing career, Randall Kenan has written many works and received several awards. He is the recipient of the Los Angeles Times Book Award for fiction and the Notable Book Critics Award. His collection of short stories, "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," was named a New York Times Notable Book. His first novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, was met with huge success and won Kenan a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship as well as a McDowell Colony Lila Wallace Reader's Digest fellowship. In addition, Kenan produced a biographical work on notable gay African American James Baldwin, an author who Kenan greatly admired. As an homage to Baldwin, Kenan's latest work was released in 2007 and is titled "The Fire This Time," a novel that answers Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time." Though a somewhat obscure modern writer, Kenan has managed to secure his place as a progressive voice

in the literary New South. While his successes would seem to define the value of his work, they are unable to convey specifically the qualities of Kenan's writing that have canonized him in American and Southern literature. To discover the true value of Kenan's contribution to literature one must examine his prose and weigh it against a myriad of factors that affect the worth of all written works today.

Very few formal guidelines exist to define the criteria by which the value of a body of literature is judged. Some literary scholars would argue that a work of literature is to be judged according to the work's form, structure, descriptive ability and dramatic realism and effect. Such criteria come up short when attempting to measure the value of a work of literature. All of these qualities of a work (form, structure, etc) are necessary and pertinent in creating a working piece of literature. However, they are all taken into account during editing and publication. Thus, it stands to reason that if a work has been published, it has already passed the scrutiny of mechanical overview. In addition, review of mechanics leaves out a vast array of other qualities that contribute to the totality of a work's value. Still, given that determining literary value remains subjective, other, far more specific criteria exist by which to judge a work. Thematic messages, aesthetic content, and cultural and historical significance are excellent factors, all intertwined and underscored by relevance. All of these criteria, examined together and applied to Kenan's works, define the value of his writing.

At a glance, it is easy to assume the greater body of Kenan's works deal with being an African American. It is true that many of his themes address being black in the South, both in the past and the present. In the title story of "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," Kenan recounts the tale of how the small fictional town of Tims Creek came into being. A runaway slave by the name of Pharaoh settled on a patch of swampy, almost jungle like land in North Carolina. It was

the ex-slave's dream to raise an army and eventually conquer the state. However, Tims Creek eventually became a haven for slaves and "freedmen." As the history of the town is told, Tims Creek grows, survives the Civil War, and suffers through the Reconstruction as a peaceful hamlet set aside where even the Klan would not dare to venture. As Kenan constructs Tims Creek's past, he delves deeply into themes of slavery, freedom, poverty, religion, sexuality, and African American and even Southern identity. Nearer to the present, Kenan addresses corruption in "Things of This World; or Angels Unawares" as he follows Mr. John Edgar Stokes' attempt to take the law in to his own hands. Following the brutal murder of his beloved dog "Shep," Stokes takes revenge on the man who committed the crime, Percy Terrell, by killing one of his dogs. Later, Stokes is confronted by the local sheriff, and justifies his actions: "Well, the Bible say 'an eye for an eye.'" (Kenan, 42). However, Percy Terrell is one of the only wealthy landowners in Tims Creek and has bribed the sheriff. Despite Stokes' protests, he is arrested. Here, Kenan intentionally victimizes Stokes and shows that, despite living in a black community, poverty plays a part in prejudice. Still, Kenan's themes are not limited to the past.

More than just addressing the theme of African American identity in the South, Kenan throws sexuality into the equation. A openly gay man, himself, Kenan repeatedly pits homosexual characters against a religiously oppressive region that is reluctant, if not totally opposed, to accepting homosexuality. In ways, Kenan's gay characters are an open indictment of a new prejudice and a new segregation that exists even today in, not just the South, but all of America. In "A Visitation of Spirits," Kenan tells the story of a gay teenager, Horace, who struggles to come to terms with his sexuality. Once again, the story is set in Tims Creek. Horace moves through a number of romantic encounters, all of which end poorly. Eventually, Horace begins studying books of sorcery to try and escape his predicament. However, his endeavors are

fruitless. Horace eventually kills himself and reappears later in the story as a ghost. With his protagonist's suicide, Kenan alludes to a troubling cultural issue that is teen-suicide rates among homosexuals. Rather than a happy resolution or a fantastic folklore ending, Kenan keeps to the disturbing reality of suicide as if to, once again, point out an issue that seems long ignored in American society.

Greater still, with the discovery of his sexuality, Randall Kenan was presented with a duality of identity with which to struggle. Not only is Kenan a gay man, he is also a black man. This created a difficult enigma for Kenan as he grew up in the South an unaccepted African American as well as even lesser tolerated homosexual. This created for him the constant possibility of being shunned, not just by white dominated society, but by his own community as well. This is an issue that Kenan grew to overcome as well as reflect masterfully in his prose.

In "The Foundations of the Earth" Kenan tells the story of an old black woman named Maggie MacGowan Williams as she attempts to come to terms with the fact that her grandson, Edward, was a homosexual. She is accompanied throughout the story by Edward's lover, Gabriel, the malevolent Baptist minister of Tims Creek, Reverend Hezekiah Barden, and an almost stereotypical churchgoing fanatic, Henrietta Fuchee. As they sit on her porch on a lazy Sunday evening, Maggie reflects on her grandson's tragic death in a car accident. Her thoughts are all the more complicated by Gabriel's presence as she tries to reconcile her grandson's sexuality with her upbringing and religious beliefs. Originally, she had invited Gabriel down from Boston, where he and her grandson had lived together, to help her gain an understanding and insight in to her grandson's lifestyle. As she reflects, she eventually begins to grow contemptuous towards Edward. Feeling that his sexuality might have somehow been her fault, she justifies his upbringing, reassuring herself that she did the best she could. She begins to place blame on

Edward for not keeping in touch with her and being more appreciative of her presence in his life. "But before she could make up her mind to find him and confront him with her fury…a truck would have the audacity to skid into her grandchild's car…and end his life at twenty-seven, taking the opportunity away from her forever" (Kenan 1084). From the passage, it becomes clear exactly how pained the otherwise stalwart Maggie Williams really is. Not content to blame her grandson, she soon turns on Gabriel, falling back on her religious upbringing and condemning his lifestyle. Reflecting on the funeral, Maggie remembers her feelings when Gabriel offered his condolences: "How dare he? [T]o throw his sinful lust for her grandbaby in her face. Now this abomination had to be flaunted" (Kenan 1085). Despite Maggie's feelings toward Gabriel, he stays and attempts to form a connection with her. As their bond grows, Maggie's defenses begin to break down, and she starts to gain an understanding about her grandson's lifestyle. Towards the end, Kenan finally brings the racial undertones of the story to the surface. Driving home from church one day, Maggie asks Gabriel if it is hard being gay. Gabriel responds: "Edward and I used to get into arguments about that, Mrs. W…He used to say it was harder being black in this country than gay. Gays can always pass for straight; but blacks can't always pass for white. And most can never pass" (Kenan 1089). Through realistic dialogue, Kenan brings to the forefront an issue of racial and sexual identity that, even today, is still a generally unaddressed subject. Gabriel's insight to Maggie, along with a series of vividly descriptive spiritual dreams finally guide Maggie to accepting her grandson's lifestyle, if only tentatively. By aggressively addressing themes of sexuality alongside racial intolerance, Kenan challenges accepted norms and beliefs as well as religious prejudice . Perhaps one of the first Southern authors to openly analyze the struggles of homosexuals, Kenan subtly intertwines common concerns and ideals from the Civil Rights Era and parallels the Gay Rights Movement of today. This literary

contribution to American culture, alone, would stand to argue the value of Kenan's work. However, Kenan offers another rich donation to American culture through his skillful portrayal of the tradition of folklore.

Historically, folklore has been a part of American culture from its beginning. Tall tales are commonplace in every region of America, and the South is no exception. One of the greatest contributors to American folklore was Zora Neale Hurston, who is clearly a huge influence on Randall Kenan. In fact, Hurston and Kenan's subject matter seem to often parallel one another in, not just their use of folklore, but also on social issues surrounding African Americans, such as prejudice, equality, and sexuality (although Hurston was decidedly more feminist). However, through his writing style, Kenan has managed to use folklore in a manner that is uniquely fantastic and reminiscent of epic tall tales of the past. Revisiting the title story of "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," Kenan recounts in his historical narrative the tale of a grizzly mass exhumation, after which the town's dead rise up to battle the living, brining with them a host of seemingly Hollywood movie characters such as werewolves and demons. With this event, Kenan manages to blend classic folklore with modern film, effectively creating a zombie attack set in the past. Still, like Hurston, Kenan's use of folklore can also be more subtle. For example, "Clarence *and* the Dead (*And* What Do They Tell You, Clarence? *And* The Dead Speak to Clarence)" begins with "On the day Clarence Pickett died, Wilma Jones's hog Francis stopped talking" (Kenan 1.) Throughout the story, Wilma Jones swears to the townsfolk that her pig can talk. Despite no one ever hearing the pig talk, Wilma claims she heard it clearly say "Jesus wept" (Kenan 1). Francis the pig seems to exist alongside Clarence, though the two characters interact very little. Clarence Pickett is the focus of the story; a boy who can seemingly read minds. The truth of the matter, however, is that Clarence is continually visited by ghosts who tell him

anything and everything about the personal lives of the people of Tims Creek. One ghost, in particular, Fitzhugh Oxendine, is a murderous criminal who is out to get revenge on Clarence's grandfather, George Edward, the man who put Fitzhugh in jail. One day, while plowing the fields with Clarence, George is thrown from his tractor by an unseen force. He lands just in front of his plow, which in turn severs his hand from his arm. In the distance, Clarence is seen crying while Francis, who just happened to show up alongside Wilma Jones in time to save George Edward's life, wrestles with the unseen ghost of Fitzhugh, stirring up a massive dust cloud from which the pig eventually emerges triumphant. Here, Kenan alludes to a connection between Francis and Clarence, and shortly thereafter both the boy and the pig die. What is important, however, is exactly how far-fetched all of the elements of the story are, and at the same time, how familiar they are. A talking pig who seems to possess certain psychic abilities, a boy who sees ghosts, and the actual appearance of ghosts, are all reminiscent of elements seen in modern media, as well as historical folklore. It is Kenan's ability to create unbelievable characters and circumstances, and, at the same time, weave them into a story that becomes completely believable in both an historical and modern context that cements his place as a master of folklore. It is this trait of continually bringing the past into the present that helps to secure the relevancy of Kenan's works.

Perhaps one of the most subjective and most important ways to judge the value of an author's work is to examine its relevance to the culture around it. Few authors, such as Shakespeare, are immortally canonized in literature and find relevance throughout time. Many more authors, such as William Faulkner, who fell out of print for a time, or, again, Zora Neale Hurston, who's works were only truly appreciated posthumously, find their works scrutinized repeatedly and many times, fall to the literary wayside. Critically, Randal Kenan stands to make

a lasting, if not permanent, impression on Southern Literature. William L. Andrews says of Kenan in "The Literature of the American South" that as new writers begin to write the newest installment of the literary south that "…Randall Kenan is to be counted among them" (Gwin, et. al. 1080). Indeed, aside from awards, Kenan has received critical praise. Acclaimed author and book critic for the New York Times, Howard Frank Mosher, called Kenan's "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" a "wonder-book: one of those striking literary anomalies, in the tradition of 'Raintree Country' and 'The Country of the Pointed Firs,' that are nearly as difficult to classify as they are enjoyable to read and reread" (Mosher 1). Despite this praise, one could also say that Kenan is guilty of merely regurgitating old information. Indeed, it is hard to ignore the similarities that Kenan shares with authors who came before him. Tims Creek is a fictional location, created by Kenan in the fashion of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. The Terrell family in "Let The Dead Bury their Dead" and "A Visitation of Spirits" seem to parallel Faulkner's Snopes's. Kenan addresses issues of intolerance, prejudice, and bigotry that seem to mirror Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man." His use of folklore is very comparable to Zora Neale Hurston. It does seem true to say that Kenan is not giving the reader anything that they have not already experienced. However, such a statement misses the broader triumph of Kenan's endeavors. What makes Kenan relevant today is an ability throughout his works to drag up the past and place it in a modern context alongside inventive examinations of human sexuality and the issues that surround it. It could be said that, rather than copying those that came before him, that he is helping to keep their works alive. In a sense, Kenan is convincing the reader that though many pre-modern and modern authors may be gone, their works and ideas are still relevant today. It is this refreshing quality that Kenan brings to Southern Literature that allows the reader to look to history, remember the struggles and issues that came before, and examine

how far American culture has or has not grown over the past century. Equally, Kenan, through his characters' difficulties in defining their identities, reminds the reader of an American South that never truly had a definitive identity of its own. Reaching to the past, Kenan grasps a South that began in mythology, grew in moral shame and racial intolerance, and thrusts it forward into a present where, still, the South struggles to possess a definitive sense of unified self. It is perhaps this quality of Kenan's writing, above all else, that gives his work a modern context and secures, not only its relevance in the modern world, but its value to American Literature as a whole.

Determining the value of Randall Kenan's work to American and Southern Literature is a difficult undertaking. Unfortunately, few formal guidelines exist to help, and what does exist is farm from helpful. The ability to judge a piece of literature remains frustratingly subjective. Yet it is through such subjective scrutiny that new ideas and literary theory are generated. In essence, criticism of literature in the contemporary world has become an almost individualistic endeavor, mirroring the reverence for individualism in America. Perhaps Randall Kenan's work has been a helpful addition in discovering the deeper value of literature in the world. His examinations of identity reflect the nature of identity as an individual exploration and thus, any individual who reads his work is likely to have their own opinions as to it worth. Regardless, Kenan has contributed a great wealth of knowledge, wisdom, insight, and understanding to the canons of American and Southern Literature through his significant thematic material, his masterful use of folklore as a bridge between the past and present, and the cultural and historical relevance of his work. It is through this substantial contribution to American Literature that the value of Randall Kenan's work is understood.

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