

2008

Book Review

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Law and Politics Book Review

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YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE



by Bebe Moore Campbell. New York: Ballentine Books, 1992. 433pp. Paper \$6.99. ISBN: 9780345401120.

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pp.303-305

YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE is an excellently written, fictionalized account of the lives of several people set in the fifties as a rural Mississippi community reacts to impending school racial desegregation and the killing of a fifteen year old black boy who had the misfortune of speaking French in the direction of a white woman. I've used this book to facilitate discussion on issues of race, gender, the law, class, and politics in several of my law school classes such as Race and the Law, Gender and the Law, and Civil Rights.

Fiction can serve a real and important role in uncovering and examining non-fictional truths, especially truths on sensitive topics like race. Often a barrier to honest race talk is the defensiveness that Americans use as a barrier to block communication when confronted by racial historical facts. The use of literature to examine ourselves by examining fictional characters can be an indirect means of achieving direct racial discourse and progress.

This book could be especially beneficial in a class on Race, Law and Politics, or Race, Law, Economics and Politics, or Race, Gender and Political (De)Construction. YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE provides an excellent critique of the state of liberal politics which may seem to advance the status of black and other women in this country. Deeper analysis of those policies, however, reveals that present political systems continue to perpetuate the present inferior status of poor and minority women in this country. This review will focus on such a use of this book.

At least three characters are symbolically important. Clayton Pinochet is the privileged, white son of one of the wealthiest men in the county. The relationship between Clayton and his father is strained at best. Clayton was raised primarily by the family's black housekeeper and at heart, Clayton has compassion for others. Yet Clayton regularly requests and accepts financial support from his father, riches his father garners from his various politically oppressive moves against black people and poor white people in his county.

Marguerite is Clayton's young, uneducated, black kept woman. Ida is an acquaintance whom Clayton befriends and to whom he gives limited assistance. Ultimately Ida learns that she is Clayton's half-sister. She is his father's illegitimate mixed race child, who has been disowned almost from birth by their father.

Clayton gives some financial support to both Marguerite and Ida, but he stops short of regarding them as true friends and companions. Although the unattached Clayton teaches Marguerite to read, provides economically for her, [*304] and loves her both emotionally and sexually, he cannot bring himself to commit to a martial partnership with a black woman. When she begins to read and to really understand the ideas she reads, she outgrows Clayton, as he is not growing in racial truth, or in his own personal truth about the double life he lives. Clayton remains his father's son. He despises his father, yet cannot risk separating from his father's resources and oppressive politics.

Similarly, although Clayton helps Ida and her family on a number of occasions, he cannot regard her as an equal heir. After his father dies, Ida learns that she is Clayton's half sister and demands an equal inheritance and recognition. Clayton surprises himself by vowing to fight her, even though he believes that she is his father's child. He then learns a great deal about himself. He learns that when his own inherited money is on the line, he can emit the same supremacist and patriarchal views of his father, and do so as well as his father did.

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A professor using this book in a class can draw parallels between Ida and Marguerite and other poor women or women of color in the country. They struggle to advance economically and politically by trying to maintain some semblance of relationship with or entitlement from white liberal charity givers. Clayton may represent their white (male) liberal saviors. Liberal politics and welfare systems (just like Clayton's actions) may help to improve the state of black womanhood in the short run. Yet, these saving moves are rarely complete steps toward equal treatment and secure futures.

This book can also be used to critique the welfare system and to question why it comes up short in helping these women toward achieving long term equality. For white male liberal politicians to provide complete long term assistance, they would have to move from a position of limited, sympathetic handouts, to a position of empathetic equality building. For white male politicians to make this leap, they would have first to save themselves by confronting their own racism and realize that to lose the relationship of their black or impoverished kindred is worse than losing their positions of power over them, just like Clayton in the story. Similarly, black and poor women, like Marguerite and Ida, must risk outgrowing their saviors and risk changing their known limited assistance for unknown freedom and liberation.

This book was an interesting read for the reviewer. I am a 51 year old black woman, raised in the Deep South. My mother raised six children mostly as a single parent after her divorce. We spent a number of years receiving welfare benefits. I have also received food stamps at some time during my own adult life. I saw firsthand how liberal politics often bailed us out but also added to some of our struggles. I don't want to be misunderstood here: the political and economic efforts of the system kept us from starving and helped in many temporary ways. Yet, in a more permanent sense, some policies seemed to fall short of moving those dependent ones toward equal opportunity. From this perspective, this book can be used to critique the political power of various groups and to question some policies as being more of an updated plantation [*305] system and less a system based on equality and opportunity.

When I read this book with several white, northern, female law professors we used the novel to question the relationships between white women and women of color. YOUR BLUES AIN'T LIKE MINE can also be used to consider the mutually dependent relationships between poor whites and people of color. Several characters provide great insights into those complex dynamics.

In conclusion, I encourage other professors to read this novel. I believe readers will find some characters of interest for whatever courses they teach to address racial and gender dynamics, topics that too often in our courses go unexplored.

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