

Week 1 Discussion

edited minimally, for style and flow

Memory, Place, Community

Oakley: The first line in “Remembering Randall: A Written Roundtable” stood out to me. Crank writes, “We were all dear to Randall.” Although I have not read any of Kenan’s work, I do feel like I am able to have a connection with him because of this. Not only did the tributes mention how much Kenan meant to them, but it was important for Crank to mention that Kenan was aware of the significance of the particular people in his life, not only to support him but to inspire his own writing.

May: Someone that can make everyone feel important to them has to be a beautiful person; it’s much easier to pick and choose the type of people you want to be around.

Kyrsten: This concept of community and unity seems important to both Kenan and the people he surrounded himself with. Not only are we seeing that he saw the people in his life as important, but also that those people hold him in high regard. I am thinking of the LGBTQIA+ community, and how that is part of Kenan himself. Pride, as we are seeing now during pride month, is all about community and togetherness, coming together as a force of oneness to help fight for rights and acceptance. I am not sure if that is something we will see with Kenan’s work, but I think as a Black queer man, we cannot discount the important need and understanding of community, and we are seeing that Kenan built this through these reflections of those who knew him and were influenced by him.

Cheyron: There is something about the South and its impact on its artists that is really felt in the memorials. In *Understanding Randall Kenan* Crank talks about a draw to “return home.” I am excited to read his work because that draw is seen in other Southern Black artists, specifically in interviews Ernest J. Gaines did about Pointe Coupee as his muse. I’m thinking about the time period Kenan was writing in, and how different the *particular* southern landscape created in his novels is from what we think of as “traditional” southern spaces (plantations and New Orleans); I think there is something fascinating about authors such as Kenan and Gaines choosing rural areas

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as the focal point. When I mean rural, I am not thinking about rolling fields, but dust, musk, and antiquity. The kind of antiquity that doesn't have the patina of old money, but the earthiness of survival. In *Understanding Randall Kenan*, Kenan's family is discussed not from a point of pity but of love and respect for existing *in spite of* all of the barriers to their happiness and peace. When Gaines talked about his community, when anyone from Cherie Quarters talks about that community, there is that same reverence. They talk about the good memories in spite of being forced into a broken system.

May: I am very excited to read Kenan's work due to his ability to go beyond the traditional southern spaces and ideas. Being from New Orleans, I can see why people "love" it but at the same time I'm interested in seeing the south in a deeper sense. Deeper than good food & fun but actually understanding why these artists have such a draw to return to their hometowns in the south.

Cade: Randall Kenan's greatest accomplishment – an accolade not claimed lightly, in light of his reputation – might reside not within the pages of his books, but the hearts of those who read them. His honorary North Carolinian heritage is indicative of the way he was able to strike at the heart of the subjects of his works; though he may not be a physical native, his brilliance and his patience for the spirit of the South proved to be far more important to readers. In remembrances of Kenan, just as often as he is recognized for his literary gift he is also referred to as a beloved friend. This bridging of the gap between a figure and a person is rare in writers of such acclaim, but one perfectly in line with the kind of impact his writing leaves. Despite his "imaginary South" being of an almost magical-realistic nature, readers such as Tom Rankin have been almost unable to remove Kenan's poignant mythologization of Southern communities from their reality – these are not just stories, they are deeply moving pieces, with power "to change the world," just like Kenan's beloved fantasy roots.

Kourtney: I don't see many writers being loved for both their writing, or as you stated their literary gift, and their good heart. That makes me wish I would've taken the time to actually read his work before he passed away—and eventually meet him. His idea of the South and his incorporation of magic will be interesting.

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Oakley: Kenan became more than a writer of fiction but a voice on “issues of race and American identity.” He stepped beyond the bounds of writing fictional stories and created work that meant something not only to himself but to other people who needed to know that he was on their side. I haven’t read any of his work, but I am anxious to see whether I agree with his colleagues that his work, like you said, has the “power to change the world.”