

Week 4 Discussion

edited minimally, for style

Transformation and Speculative Fiction

Cheyron: In the beginning of *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* there is an epitaph about death. This selection from Katharine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider" reminded me of Zeke's questions about death from *A Visitation of Spirits*. The continuation of the conversation regarding the soul after death is an interesting way to connect the two works and begin *Let the Dead Bury their Dead*. Kenan does an amazing job of infusing science fiction elements into "mundane" living of rural southern blackness outside of the better-known tropes of hoodoo or voodoo. Kenan was ahead of his time in this regard.

Kyrsten: I think this is a really fascinating thing to bring up, as I think it aligns with the interview we were asked to listen to for this week. As far as I am aware, Kenan is not viewed as a sci fi writer, but I really like how he infuses his interests in speculative fiction within his stories of Black rural life. There is an almost melding of the genres, where we can view this rural life as alien in and of itself, as something different from the everyday that people are accustomed to in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries (more specifically the kind of suburban life that people associate with American living). And I feel that his interview shows us that even as he shifted genre for his writing aspirations, he stated himself that he didn't want to give up all things speculative, despite the seemingly stark contrast in telling these rural Southern stories. I also want to say that I enjoy his epigraphs in his books. I think sometimes they can be misused by authors, but Kenan seems extremely particular about what he chooses to use, and they seem to work for both his novel and this book of short stories.

Cheyron: Thinking about how the rural South is somehow time locked in a bubble that prevents the change that is happening around it does feel alien. Like, how is it that just this *one* place is still functioning in the 1980s as if Emancipation was just a few years ago? What force is holding it in the past, how are they so adamantly defying progress for *so long*? Aliens. The only obvious answer (lol). Kenan does a good job of creating this backdrop within the stories when he introduces transplants *back* to Tims Creek or visitors passing through Tims Creek. I think about

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the section in *A Visitation of Spirits* when Jimmy drives Zeke to the hospital just a town or two over. In that short of distance *everything* is different and strange and changed from their homes. The hospital is integrated, the restaurant is a chain, complete with bad service and poorly made (meaning made with little care) food. The gas station doubles as a mechanic shop and has Pac Man, which neither elder has ever seen, just sitting there, encouraging loitering. The world outside of their town is vastly different from the world in their homes.

McKenzie Spears: I remember reading in *Understanding Randall Kenan* that he actually was looking to receive a degree in science and then he changed to creative writing. There have been many instances where it is mentioned that Kenan has a scientific aspect to his writing similar to Octavia Butler but is not a science fiction writer himself. Though I would imagine that it would be easy for him to incorporate some of his interests into his writing.

Kyrsten: Yes, I would say that I agree that Kenan isn't classified as a sci fi writer and that he was no longer trying to be a sci fi author, but I do love this genre infusion he works with. What I think is so great and fascinating about his work is getting to have a conversation like this. For me, I think that genre is, and should be, this ever-changing and fluid thing. And this is where I view Kenan and this discussion we are having here; he is not one thing, not just writing about Black southern rural life, not just speculative fiction, not just magical realism, not just southern gothic.

Kyrsten: Even though the interview was short, I want to say I thought it was really great to hear Kenan speak about his life and his writing. He mentions how when he was five his family member talked as if the person who had recently died was coming and speaking to them and helping them. This seems like such a formative memory for Kenan, and I think he mentions this as potentially a clear moment of influence for his own work. The way that it seems spirits are so intertwined with his family, and perhaps his culture, helps give a better understanding of the ways in which spirits are wholly intertwined into his works.

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“The Strange and Tragic Ballad of Mabel Pearsall”

Oakley: I was thinking about this, too. Listening to the interview felt very familiar because he molded his own experiences into his writing so well. I think there are many stories in this first half of the book that hint at those southern Gothic ideas you mention because of the alienation, isolation, destruction, and violence that Kenan makes fully aware of in the stories. I think a great example is “The Strange and Tragic Ballad of Mabel Pearsall,” because she is alienated from her family, and they don’t understand her. Mabel does react because her emotional pain is made real as a headache that she cannot cure. She finally shows violence that was not foreshadowed in the story when she throws the baby.

I was intrigued by this story’s stream-of-consciousness. It seems like the audience is given a ticket into the mind of Mabel with the ability to read her thoughts. We can understand her frustration with her children and her husband, but what stood out to me was when we questioned whether Patricia’s baby was her husband’s baby. She would say, “The baby with Allen’s lips. But are they Allen’s lips, Mabel? Of course they are” (136). She second guesses her thoughts and then revalidates herself. By the end of the story she can’t take it anymore. I also found it bothersome that the principal, someone who I would assume doesn’t see her as much as her family does, is the only person who questions if she is all right—not her children or her husband

Tanner: I did not think about it Kenan’s prose as stream-of-consciousness, but now that you have said that, I totally agree. Especially with the repetition of her name throughout the story, it’s as if Kenan is almost taking a quick break to figure what he wants to do with Mabel’s story. I love the many faces we meet in Tims Creek, a place that if you drove through, you would not expect to find so many dynamic characters. Tims Creek reminds me of places that Stephen King creates in his novels.

McKenzie: Mabel was one of the characters I really liked reading about because of the way Kenan presented the story in a certain literary structure. To me, it had somewhat of a creepiness to it because of how miserable Mabel was in her life and the contemplation of whether the newborn was actually his. At the very end, when Mabel is trying to rock the baby to sleep, her

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mind just immediately shuts down, while she only hears the screaming of the child and just throws him across the room. I think she was so depressed in her life that she closed off all her senses to the world and just acted.

Kourtney: I feel as if Mabel's brain is a song that is on constant repeat. Each verse, lyric playing louder than the time before. Those constant sounds makes it hard for her to grasp reality and leaves her very uneasy. She overcompensated for everyone but herself, and in the end, it ended the life of a baby. I really like this short story because it was chaotic, but it was like within those lines I could feel her screaming for help.

“The Origin of Whales”

Kourtney: In all of the stories, Tim Creeks (and its community) tries to keep up the morally Christian persona. In a way Kenan both highlights and mocks the community as a whole. The community has problems that they think are “not of God,” such as homosexuality, adultery, incest, and murder. Hence the title, *Let the Dead Bury their Dead*, a biblical line but also a literal one. Tims Creek is Kenan's home, but it is also a burial ground that is rooted in oppressive Christian values.

Kyrsten: In the chat I mentioned the story “Whales,” and how it feels almost as if it is the calm in this storm of stories and is perhaps the story that is meant to show the blending of the past and present in a subtle way. Perhaps show the ways in which the stagnant Tims Creek isn't as stagnant as it seems. Maybe there can be shifts and changes in the town if Aunt Essie and Thad can come together like they do. I especially like the final lines when Thad is thinking of physically reaching out to Essie, but instead just verbally asks if she is going to help him with his homework (almost like a lost moment of connection). Now, I say all of this because a thought that keeps coming to me is the uncanny. The uncanny is when you recognize but don't recognize something. You have this moment where something seems normal but there is something about it that is off. I feel as if there is a level of uncanniness in Kenan's writing, in all of his stories. I feel as if Tims Creek and its inhabitants are the uncanny things, that we are meant to have a level of uncanny recognition in them – maybe it is something of ourselves, others we know, society,

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maybe a little of all of that, but I continue to have these moments where I am grasping at something that I cannot put my finger on.

Cade: I liked the way that “Whales” suggested so much more than it showed. From this story, I felt as though Kenan was watching as hairline cracks form in the composition of Tims Creek – the oncoming decay of Aunt Essie’s generation. The idea of belief is brought up in two different but connecting ways: one, with the idea of learning to like collard greens, which in itself is a way of coming to believe something, a shift from one’s initial perspective. Then afterwards comes Essie’s turn to disbelieve, when the boy asks her about evolution. Though these two, divided by generations, share many things such as play and meals, their division shows in the way they participate – she is now too old to run and play, she is more accustomed to the eating habits of those with less choice in their diet. This comes to a climax when, after stating her disbelief in evolution, she receives a phone call which seems to suggest the further decay of another member of her generation. One may expect her to tell the boy what the call was about, but instead, she leaves this issue “to die” in a way, in exchange for time with the new generation, or the future.