

LIGHTNING STRIKES TWICE

a review by Al-Tariq Moore

Randall Kenan. *Black Folk Could Fly: Selected Writings*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2022.

AL-TARIQ MOORE is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Languages and Literatures at NC Central University, where he earned his MA. He also earned a PhD from UNC Chapel Hill and taught for several years in the ECU English Department, during which time he served on *NCLR*'s editorial board. His research interests include Critical Race Studies, twentieth-century African American literature, and Gender & Sexuality Studies.

RANDALL KENAN (1957–2020) earned English and Creative Writing degrees from UNC Chapel Hill. He taught courses at Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University and worked for Random House and Alfred A. Knopf before joining the faculty at UNC Chapel Hill. He is the author of several books of fiction and nonfiction, including the short story collection *If I Had Two Wings*, published by W.W. Norton just before his passing in 2020 (reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2021). His numerous awards and honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Sherwood Anderson Award, a Whiting Award, the John Dos Passos Prize, the Rome Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the North Carolina Award for Literature. He was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2018. Read an interview with him in *NCLR* 2019, an interview essay in *NCLR* 2006, and articles about his work in *NCLR* 2008, 2012, and 2021.

Black Folk Could Fly is Randall Kenan's gift to those who struggle in their embrace of the American South's social, political, and racial complexity. Upon reading the collection of essays, I was moved to reconsider many of my own personal memories and attitudes toward growing up in Eastern North Carolina. Kenan writes of Chinquapin, NC. I grew up in Chocowinity, NC. I have witnessed many of the communal, cultural, and ritual practices he describes experiencing as a child but without much of the perspective he provides. Seeing the South through Kenan's eyes is in many ways an awakening experience akin to the lightning strike he details in his tale "Struck by Lightning." There, Kenan meditates on the shared experience of him and other farm workers being struck by lightning under an oak tree when a storm disrupts their workday. In that moment the differences that previously divided them disappeared, their understanding of God changed, and Kenan's sense of connectedness to the tapestry of *Blackness* shifted. This is, after a fashion, what the book aims to accomplish: a re-examination of Southern ideals and practices as intrinsically expressive markers of race that constantly expand the boundaries of what *Blackness* is and how it may be understood. Further, he notes the influence of both *Blackness* and the American South on the rest of the country. His treatment recalls Octavia Butler's proclamation, "All that you touch you Change. All that you

Change Changes you. The only lasting truth is Change. God is Change."* Kenan's South touches everything, changes everything. In many ways he marks it as America's *home*.

Throughout *Black Folk Could Fly*, Kenan muses on the relationships between food and *Black* identity. Early on in his life he determined that he wanted to travel the world experiencing new people, places, and foods in order to understand how *Blackness* is diversely defined. At the same time, he shares with us his struggle to understand his own *Blackness* and where he fits among the many accepted formulations of *Black* identity that constitute *Black* pluralism. The memoir articulates Kenan's remembrances of foodways as central to the formation of *Black* community throughout his life, whether by consumption, cultivation, or distribution. Food was then and still remains, *the great unifier*. Kenan notes however, that inasmuch as food brings us together, it is also where a great many cultural divides exist. In his view, even in the shared act of cross-cultural consumption – consuming the cultural foods of the *Other* – race unavoidably rears its head in the way we (re)appropriate, acknowledge cultural heritage and belonging, and even gentrify food.

Stylistically, *Black Folk Could Fly* pays homage to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1962), recognizing the oft-tendency towards comparison by readers and critics. Baldwin opens his collection with a letter to his nephew forewarning an

imminent confrontation with the problems of race and racism in America while also extoling the importance of a practice of love. In similar fashion, Kenan opens with "A Change is Gonna Come: A Letter to My Godson." Kenan, however, foresees a rapidly changing racial landscape in which, "barring some racial cataclysm" his nephew's generation "will be the freest people of color this nation has ever engendered: free of racial guilt, free of the burden of representation, free of expectations, high or low" (5). Baldwin's ethics of love, as well as his familiar articulation of the thorny ground of race through simple and everyday example, along with Morrison's compassionate treatment of Southern culture, are crucial to *Black Folks Could Fly*'s thesis. After a fashion, Kenan wants readers to reconsider the South, to look deeper than the violence of racism that plagues its geographic and historic reputation, to see that what we understand and discuss most often as *Southern* simul-



PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL WARD

taneously invokes a discussion of *Blackness*. When we discuss the South we are discussing *Blackness*, and when we discuss *Blackness* we are in many ways discussing the South.

Over the course of twenty-two essays, divided across three primary sections – "Comfort Me," "Where Am I Black?," and "The Eternal Burning" – Kenan's remembrances of eating greens with his great-aunt, raising hogs, a comedic feud with a rooster, attempting to write race as a teenager, Eartha Kitt, Muhammad Ali, and much more,

highlight the irreducibility of *Blackness*: that it is too vast in expression, too sacred in substance, and too deeply historic for any study that limits it to reductive essentialism. The sections and deeply personal essays stitch together a treatise of *Blackness* that is careful to make space for the kind of porosity and boundlessness described in Morrison's construction of *home*. *Black Folk Could Fly* stands on the shoulders of that work while searching for an understanding of *blackness* that feels like home for the racially dispossessed and, most importantly, for Kenan. To put a finer point on it, the book makes clear that *understanding* is its goal rather than *definition* – and that perhaps that should be ours as well. Kenan wants to put meat on the bones, to thicken the substance of discussions about how we digest culture and difference. What better way to do that than through an examination of our relationships to food. ■

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