

Reed, Ishmael (2/22/1938-)

Novels, essays, poems, songs, plays, edited works; newspaper cofounder, book press cofounder

Perhaps the most widely reviewed African-American literary figure since **Ralph Ellison**, Ishmael Reed has created a distinct niche in American letters. His experimental works often parody both the white and the black establishment. In addition to being a novelist, poet, teacher and essayist, he is a songwriter, television producer, publisher, magazine editor, playwright, and founder of the Before Columbus Foundation and There City Cinema, both of which are located in northern California. Reed and **Amiri Baraka** are probably the most controversial African-American literary figures alive today. An innovative poet, Reed uses phonetic spellings and wordplay blended with what he calls new-Hoodooism, offering an alternative cultural tradition for African Americans. Despite criticism from other African-American writers and from feminists, he remains committed to his satiric commentaries.

Two of Reed's books have been nominated for National Book Awards, and he has received numerous honors, fellowships, and prizes, including the Lewis H. Michaux Literary Prize, awarded to him in 1978 by the Studio Museum in Harlem. He has taught at Harvard, Yale, and Dartmouth, and for more than 20 years he has been a lecturer at the University of California at Berkeley.

Reed was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee. In 1942 he moved to Buffalo, New York and grew up in the city's working-class neighborhoods, attending Buffalo public schools. Later, he graduated from the State University of New York at Buffalo. In 1960, he married Priscilla Rose, but they divorced a few years later, after which Reed settled in New York City. There, he helped found an underground newspaper, *East Village Other*, and participated in several cultural organizations, experiences that helped shape his artistic development.

By the late 1960s Reed had published and won critical acclaim for his first novel, *The Free Lance Pallbearers* (1967), a parody of the African-American confessional narrative. His second novel is a parody as well: *Yellow Black Radio Broke Down* (1967) targets Western pulp fiction and what Reed sees as its repressiveness of American society. In the work, Reed also introduces his theory of neo-hoodooism, a blend of voodoo, West African religious practices, and nonlinear time.

During this time, Reed had begun teaching at the University of California at Berkeley, and in 1970 he married Carla Blank. In the ensuing decade he helped establish the Before Columbus Foundation and cofounded both Yardbird Publishing and Reed, Cannon and Johnson Communications. He also published his first major work of poetry, *Conjure: Selected Poems 1963-1970* (1972), which garnered him a Pulitzer Prize nomination. In addition, he produced the mystery parodies *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), set during the **Harlem Renaissance**, and *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* (1974), featuring voodoo trickster detective PaPa LaBas.

Mumbo Jumbo was the work that first achieved wide celebrity for the author, and it is considered by several scholars to be his best, along with *Flight to Canada* (1976), in which Reed parodies the **slave narrative** form. *Mumbo Jumbo* is a mythic/magic epic centered in such places as New Orleans and Harlem during the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. The story depicts the struggle among Jes Grew, purveyors of the black cultural impulse, and supporters of the Western monotheistic tradition, whom Reed calls the Atonists. Reed incorporates illustrations, footnotes, and bibliographies in parody of the documentary conventions of black realism.

Throughout the 1980s, Reed won critical respect more for his poetry and his essays than for his novels. His 1980s poetry was collected in *Such as New and Collected Poems* (c. 1988), which blends black dialect with mythical elements. His essays were collected in *God Made Alaska for the*