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## point of view

Keith Boykin on *Gentleman Jigger*

February 1, 2008

Introducing *Gentleman Jigger*by [Keith Boykin](#)

With all the evidence of homosexuality and same-sex relationships in the Harlem Renaissance, I've always wondered why so few books were written about the subject at the time. Surely, homophobia played a role in these decisions, but it always seemed odd that many of the defining literary and cultural figures of the time were so visible and open about their sexuality in some ways, but so guarded in other ways.

Now there's a "new" book coming out that helps fill in the gaps. It's the first new work to come out of the Harlem Renaissance in quite some time. Written between 1928 and 1933, Richard Bruce Nugent's novel *Gentleman Jigger* tells the story of Stuart, an openly gay Bohemian heir to one of Washington D.C.'s elite black families. Stuart joins the young intellectual crowd in Harlem dubbed the "niggeratti" and later moves to New York's Greenwich Village and becomes sexually involved with a "young hoodlum."

These days we might call the "hoodlum" by a different name: "trade."

Richard Bruce Nugent was one of the leading lights of the Harlem Renaissance, collaborating with Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman and others to create the 'little magazine' called *FIRE!!* in 1926. He spent most of his life in New York City before moving to Hoboken, New Jersey in 1979, where he lived until his death in 1987.

This new novel was never published for two reasons, explains editor Tom Wirth. First, Nugent "was not willing to cut it back and eliminate the considerable amount of reference to homosexuality that was in it," Wirth explains. "It talks about gay relationship openly," he said. Second, the subject matter of the book overlaps with Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring*, which was published in 1932. "Thurman beat him to the punch," Wirth said.

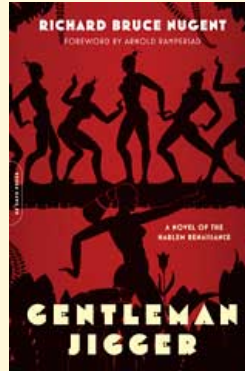
So how was it discovered?

In an interview this morning, Wirth told me it was tucked away in Nugent's papers. "I'm his heir and it's one that I knew about when he was alive...but it was scattered...the manuscript was all over the place, mixed up with all the other manuscripts, so I had to reconstruct it." Wirth said it took almost 10 years to reconstruct Nugent's original story. "It was a pretty substantial editing job," he said.

Now, almost 80 years after it was written, the book was published by Da Capo Press on January 7, 2008. Did Nugent know this work would one day be published? Wirth replied: "He knew I was going to take care of his manuscripts and papers and paintings and art, and so forth...I'm a collector and I keep things in as much of an archival manner as I can...He knew care would be taken. He was certainly interested in publication but he was also not at all amused by marketing himself, the whole networking thing, which was also one of the reasons why he was not more commercially successful."

Wirth said Nugent "had some hopes" the manuscript would be published "but he was also prepared to face the fact that it might not be."

So how would Nugent react to learn that his words were getting new life some 80 years after he penned them? "I'm sure he would be very pleased," said Wirth.



Richard Bruce Nugent's novel *Gentleman Jigger* was released by Da Capo Press in January, 2008.

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#### About Keith Boykin

Keith Boykin is a host of the BET television show *My Two Cents*, an award-winning author, and a former member of the administration of President Bill Clinton.

Boykin's *Beyond the Down Low*, which challenges emerging stereotypes of black men who have sex with men, was a New York Times best seller in 2005 and was released in paperback in 2006.

This article is reprinted from [Boykin's blog](#) with permission.



Keith Boykin

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