



Kenan, Randall (b. 1963)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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African-American writer Randall Kenan delineates the richly nuanced internal landscapes of the diverse inhabitants of his fictional community, Tims Creek, N. C.

"She liked that small world [of the classroom]; for her it was large," the omniscient narrator observes concerning a young woman preparing to become a teacher in one of Randall Kenan's short stories. The same may be said of "Tims Creek," the community of 25,000 situated in the wooded agricultural area of eastern North Carolina that is the invented setting of Kenan's fictions.

Like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and Honoré de Balzac's Paris, Kenan's Tims Creek is a fertile imaginative universe, peopled by generations of his own making whose stories intersect and comment upon each other in ironic ways.

During a Sunday church service at the ubiquitous First Baptist Church of Tims Creek, for example, the title character of "The Strange and Tragic Ballad of Mabel Pearsall" silently contrasts the ignominy of her own life with the dignity of Dr. Streeter, whom Mabel cannot know has been cursed by a son engaged in an incestuous affair with his illegitimate step-sister ("Cornsilk"); and the prosperity of Mrs. Maggie Williams, whose hard-won self-possession is narrated in "The Foundations of the Earth."

Likewise, Rev. Hezekiah Barden, who self-righteously chastises a tenant farmer for operating a tractor on a Sunday in "Foundations," reappears in "Ragnarok" preaching the funeral sermon of a woman with whom he enjoyed a long-term, adulterous affair.

Perhaps the most extraordinary aspect of Kenan's mythic Tims Creek, however, is its density of black gay men whose sexuality is at variance with the community's evangelical Christian beliefs, yet whose lives are so deeply rooted in Tims Creek that they do not think of leaving it. "I can't hate it now," the narrator of one of Kenan's stories says of Tims Creek. "It's become a part of me. A part of my internal landscape." Kenan's most impressive accomplishment is his delineation of richly nuanced "internal landscape."

Biography

Born in Brooklyn, N. Y., on March 12, 1963, Kenan was raised first by his grandparents and then by a great-aunt in Chinquapin, N. C., a rural community of 1,000 that is the prototype of his fictional Tims Creek.

He enrolled at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he majored initially in physics, but graduated in 1985 with a degree in English and creative writing. His early concentration on science explains the competence with which he draws upon such fields as geology and botany, as well as his observations of wildlife, in his writing.

An instructor's recommendation brought him to the attention of novelist Toni Morrison, then an editor at Random House. Kenan moved to New York City where he worked first as an "office-boy-in-waiting," but

eventually as assistant to a senior editor at Random House's prestigious subsidiary, Alfred A. Knopf.

Kenan's novel, *A Visitation of Spirits*, was published in 1989, and a collection of stories, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, followed in 1992. Kenan has taught intermittently as writer-in-residence or guest lecturer at Vassar College, Sarah Lawrence College, Columbia University, the University of Memphis, Duke University, and his alma mater, the University of North Carolina, while traveling across America and Canada to collect the oral histories that appear in *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (1999).

In 1994 Kenan published a brief biography of gay African-American novelist and essayist James Baldwin, whose work clearly possesses great moral and artistic authority for Kenan.

At present Kenan, who has discussed with interviewers a novel-in-progress tentatively titled "The Fire and the Baptism," is continuing to delineate the "inner landscape" of Tims Creek.

"Integrity. Dignity. Pride"

When, in *A Visitation of Spirits*, Horace Cross gets into a playground fight with a white boy who stole his comic book, his aunts (all schoolteachers themselves and mindful of their family's position in the black community) surprise him by commending his having stood up for himself, despite their prohibitions against fighting.

The incident is the occasion for young Horace to observe of those family members who grew up under segregation: "There was an armor one wore to beat the consequences, invisible, but powerful and evident [of racism]; an armor he heard in the edge of his grandfather's voice, in the stoop of his great-aunt's walk, in the glint of their eyes when they encountered white people. Integrity. Dignity. Pride."

The history of American racism unfolds in Kenan's Tims Creek saga. The story "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead" records how pre-Civil War plantation owners derisively bestowed grandiose names like "Pharaoh" on those slaves whose native African dignity they wished to mock, and recalls as well the violent "spite" with which whites burned down a church "with some runaway slave girls, girls running away from [enforced] prostitution in New Orleans."

More than a century later, Percy Terrell, patriarch of the current generation of a wealthy but mean-spirited white family to whom nearly everyone in Tims Creek is in debt, sexually blackmails the town's only black undertaker into selling him below market value his family's homestead ("Run, Mourner, Run"). Although he will level the property to build a new textile mill, he complains that "Niggers shouldn't own something as pretty as Chitaqua Pond," dismissing out of hand an African-American family's right to a "homeplace." His sons, for sport, kill a dog that is the only companion of an elderly black man ("Things of This World").

Little wonder that in *A Visitation of Spirits* Horace Cross's family is so embittered by white mistreatment of blacks that they cannot bear to see their beloved nephew and grandson socialize with whites at the integrated county high school, leaving him in a racial no-man's-land: "He [Horace] had heard the menfolk around the barber shop and in the fields talk about the white man; he had heard his aunts and the womenfolk hiss and revile the name of whites; he had heard his grandfather lecture and spin yarns about how black folk had been mistreated at the hands of the white man. He had heard. He was hearing. But did he understand?"

Kenan's fictions are equally rich in acts of resistance to racism, however. Tims Creek was founded by a group of 18 runaway slaves who hid in a swamp so dangerous that it was avoided by whites. The "maroon community" (as the runaway slaves are called) eventually drained and farmed the area, building a town when it was safe to do so following emancipation.

That founding spirit of resistance continues through later generations. In *A Visitation of Spirits* the elderly Ezekiel Cross boasts that as a youth he had robbed at gunpoint the white man who had refused to pay him his wages for picking cotton, and of the white judge letting him off with just a whipping because, even though the boy had the right to his wages, the community could not allow a black person to pull a gun on a white man.

"Integrity," "pride" and "dignity" describe the quiet resolve of Mr. John Edgar as he avenges the death of his beloved dog by shooting one of the Terrell clan's favorite hunting dogs, and then returns home to wait on his porch to be arrested ("Things of This World").

Even Percy Terrell is impressed by black undertaker Raymond Brown's self-possession when an armed Terrell, accompanied by his three sons and his hunting dogs, bursts into Brown's bedroom to photograph him during a homosexual encounter. "Now, boys, I want you to look-a-here. I respect this man. I do. I really do. How many men do you know, black or white, could bluff, cool as a cucumber, caught butt-naked in bed with a damn whore? A white boy whore at that."

Brown may lose his land finally, but Terrell's victory is a Pyrrhic one, Terrell demeaning himself by the arrogant and disdainful way in which he imposes his will upon those less fortunate or less socially powerful than himself.

The consequences of such violent disregard for the elemental rights of blacks are dramatized in "Tell Me, Tell Me," in which Ida Perry, widow of a superior court judge, thinks she is being haunted by a boy of color who had been beaten, thrown into the ocean, and left for dead by her then-fiance over fifty years before when the boy stumbled upon her and Butch's first awkward attempt at lovemaking. Ida's inability to address consciously the consequences of her lifelong failure to resist Butch's destructive willfulness dramatizes in miniature the predicament of the post-civil rights movement South in which so many persons of good will who were not themselves motivated by racial bias must live with the consequences of their failure actively to resist racism.

Gay Self-Assertion

"Hatred is a form of fear," the historical Booker T. Washington allegedly observes in an "unpublished diary" that is the basis of Kenan's story "This Far." The statement, however, is less likely to have been made by Dr. Washington than by James Baldwin, Kenan's literary mentor, who likewise explored in his fiction the relation of fear to hatred, and of racism to homophobia. Like Baldwin, Kenan is especially adept at exploring the psychology of self-hatred.

"He used to say it was harder being black in this country than gay," Gabriel, the white lover of Edward, Mrs. Williams's late grandson, tells her in the course of a visit ("The Foundations of the Earth"). "Gays can always pass for straight; but blacks can't always pass for white. And most can never pass." The most complex situation in Kenan's fiction, however, is being both black and gay in an evangelical community that supports one in terms of race even as it erases the person in terms of his sexuality.

"[T]he possibilities of his being a homosexual frightened him beyond reason," the narrator of *A Visitation of Spirits* explains of young Horace Cross. In fact, Horace is initially so devastated to understand the nature of his attraction to an unabashedly gay high school classmate named Gideon that he cannot even imagine telling Gideon of his attraction. "It was then that he would realize that he was different and vulnerable and that the simple joy of being in love and expressing it with straightforward passion was denied to him."

After praying to be delivered from what his family and church have taught him is a life of sin, Horace dreams of becoming a bird so that he might remain a part of the land that he loves so much, while soaring above it. His internalized homophobia will not allow him even this fantasy of escape, however: "Horace had no alternative but to retreat into a world of guilt and confusion, not understanding the reasons for his

exile" from "the shining city of no limits." He kills himself with a hunting gun belonging to his grandfather.

The difficulty of a black male who eventually accepts his homosexuality but remains unable to come out to those people whom he loves most is dramatized in "The Foundations of the Earth." Following the death in an automobile accident of a beloved grandson who in recent years had unaccountably kept his distance from his family, Maggie Williams is devastated to learn that not only was Edward gay, but that he had been living for several years with a man who is white.

After steeling herself to confront her grandson's surviving partner, she is stunned to witness in the depth of Gabriel's grief the evidence of his love for Edward. A small incident becomes the occasion whereby, by putting two members of her hypocritically self-righteous church community in their places, she frees herself of the shame that she had felt in Edward's sexuality. "How curious the world had become that she would be asking a white man to exonerate her in the eyes of her own grandson; how strange that at seventy, when she had all the laws and rules down pat, she would have to begin again, to learn."

Homosexuality does not always carry such potentially tragic weight in Kenan's fiction, however. "Clarence and the Dead" tells of the "unnatural affection" of Ellsworth Batts, a grieving widower, for five-year old Clarence Pickett, whom Ellsworth believes is channeling the spirit of his dead wife. Uncomfortable with "what begun to look more and more like courting and sparking," the boy's grandfather, Mr. George Edward, "had to clear his throat to reacquaint Ellsworth with the impropriety of doing what he was doing."

Ellsworth's attempt to abduct Clarence is foiled when Miss Eunice, the boy's grandmother, tackles the fleeing pair. Well might the people of Tims Creek get riled at the thought of Ellsworth's "crimes against nature." But in a narrative in which a congregation accommodates a pig at Sunday church services, an elderly farmer is only slightly stymied aiming his rifle after a bucking tractor amputates one of his hands, and a five-year old boy dispenses marriage advice to the community's middle-aged women, such an "unnatural affection" seems perfectly natural.

Such a strategy allows Kenan to undercut the religious prejudices of a rural, southern African American community while still showing respect for that religion's power to hold an oppressed community together. Significantly, the three qualities that members of the older generation instill in Horace Cross ("Integrity, Dignity, Pride") are also the names of highly visible American homosexual rights organizations that work within religious affiliations.

As much a folklorist as a fabulist, Kenan finds in the kinds of stories that he first heard in his rural North Carolina childhood a richness of character and a sharpness of psychological insight that cut to the bone and expose the marrow of human experience. Fascinated by the complexities of human identity, particularly the ambiguities of sexual orientation, Kenan has found in African American oral tradition an acceptance of the irrational upon which all human experience, but particularly black gay experience (on Kenan's authority), is based.

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About the Author

Raymond-Jean Frontain is Professor of English at the University of Central Arkansas. He has published widely on seventeenth-century English literature and on English adaptations of Biblical literature. He is editor of *Reclaiming the Sacred: The Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture*. He is engaged in a study of the David figure in homoerotic art and literature.