



Remembering the Past in Contemporary African American Fiction

Keith Byerman

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With close readings of more than twenty novels by writers including Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Gloria Naylor, and John Edgar Wideman, Keith Byerman examines the trend among African American novelists of the late twentieth century to write about black history rather than about their own present. Employing cultural criticism and trauma theory, Byerman frames these works as survivor narratives that rewrite the grand American narrative of individual achievement and the march of democracy.

The choice to write historical narratives, he says, must be understood historically. These writers earned widespread recognition for their writing in the 1980s, a period of African American commercial success, as well as the economic decline of the black working class and an increase in black-on-black crime. Byerman contends that a shared experience of suffering joins African American individuals in a group identity, and writing about the past serves as an act of resistance against essentialist ideas of black experience shaping the cultural discourse of the present.

Byerman demonstrates that these novels disrupt the temptation in American society to engage history only to limit its significance or to crown successful individuals while forgetting the victims.

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