



Abandoning the Black Hero: Sympathy and Privacy in the Postwar African American White-Life Novel (The American Literatures Initiative)

John C. Charles

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Abandoning the Black Hero is the first book to examine the postwar African American white-life novel—novels with white protagonists written by African Americans. These fascinating works have been understudied despite having been written by such defining figures in the tradition as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Ann Petry, and Chester Himes, as well as lesser known but formerly best-selling authors Willard Motley and Frank Yerby.

John C. Charles argues that these fictions have been overlooked because they deviate from two critical suppositions: that black literature is always about black life and that when it represents whiteness, it must attack white supremacy. The authors are, however, quite sympathetic in the treatment of their white protagonists, which Charles contends should be read not as a failure of racial pride but instead as a strategy for claiming creative freedom, expansive moral authority, and critical agency.

In an era when “Negro writers” were expected to protest, their sympathetic treatment of white suffering grants these authors a degree of racial privacy previously unavailable to them. White writers, after all, have the privilege of racial privacy because they are never pressured to write only about white life. Charles reveals that the freedom to abandon the “Negro problem” encouraged these authors to explore a range of new genres and themes, generating a strikingly diverse body of novels that significantly revise our understanding of mid-twentieth-century black writing.

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