

Such Sweet Thunder

Vincent O. Carter

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Every few months, it seems, a publisher announces the rediscovery of a “lost masterpiece.” While Herbert Lottman, a correspondent for *Publisher’s Weekly* and a friend and longtime champion of the author, never uses that term in his foreword to this novel, he does claim that the book, published forty years after it was written and twenty years after Carter’s death, is “destined for the small shelf of memorable literature, certain to be printed and reprinted over the years.”

In 1963, when Carter was trying to sell his manuscript, it was not what most publishers were looking for from an African-American writer. As the Civil Rights struggle was increasingly met with uncivil resistance, publishers wanted the literary anger of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, or James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*, not Carter’s modernist inflected prose. His prose can be challenging to follow at times—stream of consciousness with a healthy dose of musical rhythms and black dialect:

He passed the cool entrance of the YMCA building with its glass doors and polished brass handles ... His ears were suddenly beset by a din of phrases and initials spread themselves across the off white pages of the Voice in fuzzy black letters. Annual YMCA Membership Drive Gits Underway. Mr. L. P. G. Chan, B.A., M.A., Ph.D., DET, NATIONAL Secretary of the Urban League, speaks out against race prejudice ... against social injustice ... against ... for Warner Oland’s Credit Union ... Station ... League of Nations ... I pledge allegiance to the A.E.I.O.U. fifty cents you went away.

The novel tells the story of Amerigo Jones, a young African-American growing up in Kansas City during the Depression, protected and encouraged by his parents and tempted by the vices that surround him in his poor neighborhood.

The book has some of the classic problems of a first novel. Carter sometimes gets so enamored of his language that the larger elements of narrative are overlooked. While individual scenes and characters are evocatively drawn, there is not much of a plot. Amerigo wanders from one scene to another, and the novel’s beginning with Amerigo in World War II is never really tied in thematically. Problems like these keep the book from being a masterpiece, but there are passages in the book that are certainly masterful.

Carter published only one book in his lifetime, a memoir of his own youth in Kansas City, and it took him sixteen years to find a publisher for it. In 1963, the publication of *Such Sweet Thunder* would have announced the arrival of a new literary talent to watch with interest. Forty years later, the book’s arrival makes readers wonder what literary levels Carter might have achieved had his efforts been met with more encouragement while he was alive.

ERIK BLEDSOE (May / June 2003)

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