

NEW BOOKS

****Bubber Goes To Heaven**, by Arna Bontemps, illustrated by Daniel Minter. Recommended for ages 6-12. Publication date: December 10, 1998. by Oxford University Press, 198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016. Hardcover, \$17.95. ISBN: 0-19-512365-4.

Arna Bontemps (1902-1973 and Daniel Minter (1961-):
Shared Images of African Americans in the Rural South

About the book:

This October the birthday of Harlem Renaissance author, Arna Bontemps, was celebrated across the country — from Garrison Keillor's radio broadcast — to the four day 10th anniversary symposium held at the Arna Bontemps African American Museum by Charles James of Swarthmore College on the renewed interest of Bontemps's works for children, Oxford delighted guests and participants with a sneak preview of Bontemps's previously unpublished story, *Bubber Goes To Heaven*, which will be released this December. Editorial Director Nancy Toff discovered the manuscript in 1992. When she learned that some of Bontemps's and Langston Hughes's unpublished writing might be in Yale University archives, she took the first train to New Haven. There, in the Beinecke Library's James Weldon Johnson Collection of Negro Literature, Toff found a gold mine of forgotten letters and manuscripts from the two authors. *Bubber Goes To Heaven* jumped out at her immediately. Scribbled on the manuscript's title page was a note from Bontemps, written in Chicago in 1942: "This one failed to find a publisher. It was written in 1932 or '33. I used to think it was pretty cute, but that may have been because I was living in Alabama. One of these days I am going to read it again."

Bontemps may have reread *Bubber*, but he never did find a publisher for it. Only in 1998, sixty-six years after Bontemps wrote the story, did Toff recognize its brilliance. "It is a gem," Toff proclaims. "A wonderful, rich portrayal of Southern life in the 1930s."

Arna Bontemps was born in Alexandria, Louisiana in 1902. *Bubber Goes To Heaven* reflects his rural Southern roots. The dialogue, filled with expressions such as "Sho nuff," "Shucks," and "ain't that fine," is written entirely in Southern dialect. Bubber's home is a cabin in Huntsville, Alabama. He and his friends go raccoon hunting and fishing. They gather together at church.

The story of *Bubber Goes To Heaven* is reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz*. While raccoon hunting with his uncle, Bubber falls out of a tree. He wakes up to find himself in heaven, a tidy village populated by angels, with a town square, market, identical white houses, and a community church. Bubber spends several days with the angels. They invite him to Sunday school and coach him on how to use his new angel's wings. In an attempt to fly, Bubber jumps off the roof of his new home. He finds himself back in his Alabama cabin, full of memories of his trip to heaven.

Bontemps's heaven provides an interesting image of utopia. Heaven is extremely clean and neat. The angels scrub the identical white stoops of their houses every morning. There is no hunger — all food is free — and no unemployment. Everyone appears grateful for the opportunity to work. As Bubber notes, "It was no wonder...that people tried so hard to make heaven their home. Even the washerwomen had plenty of work and nothing to worry about." Heaven's community is also entirely black. The characters seem to embody Southern black stereotypes, like Sister Esther, whose head is "tied in a red handana" and whose face "resembled very closely the large black woman whose picture Bubber had seen on boxes of pancake flour." In front of the revered court house at the center of town is a statue of Abraham Lincoln, guarded by a policeman and a wrought iron fence.

The Illustrations

Nancy Toff was determined to publish *Bubber Goes To Heaven*, but concerned about finding an illustrator who could capture Bontemps's deep Southern sensibility. She was lucky. Julia Bowles, editor of the *International Review of African American Art*, suggested Daniel Minter, a young African American artist who specializes in the tradition of African wood carving. As soon as she saw Minter's work, Toff realized that he was perfect for the job. The depth and texture of Minter's woodcuts and linoleum block prints matched the richness of Bontemps's highly visual language.

In addition, Daniel Minter grew up on a farm in Ellaville, Georgia. He understood Bontemps's rural South perfectly. "I grew up in Bubber's world," explains Minter. "Reading the manuscript, I felt like I had traveled back home. Things don't change quickly in the South. Even though the story was written in the '30s, I recognized the characters and understood their language. Those were people from my family, my church, and my hometown."

Though it was the story that originally attracted Minter to *Bubber Goes To Heaven*, he became increasingly fascinated with Bontemps's characters. "I think that Bontemps made a conscious attempt to create stylized characters," says Minter. "His characters are all black stereotypes. He uses black language. And he does so for a reason. For a long time, black people have suffered under negative stereotypes. Blackness was — and still is, with Bush's Willy Horton — seen as threatening and despicable. By taking those black stereotypes and using them to tell a positive story

about a loving, hard-working, and deeply religious black community, Bontemps makes an effort to reclaim them."

Minter follows a similar agenda in his art. Like Arna Bontemps, he consciously exaggerates the "blackness" of his characters. His faces, carved from linoleum blocks, are printed in midnight black ink. They feature large slanted eyes, wide noses, and big lips. Minter understands that audiences may react strongly to his images. "If someone told you your black skin color and facial features made you a despicable person, you wouldn't want to see or use them in literature or art," he explains. "You would want to erase them. I try to do the opposite. What I try to do is take those very features that we have been told are despicable and exaggerate them. I want to show the features of black people. Like Bontemps, I want to take possession of those negative stereotypes by displaying them to the fullest in my art."

Bubber Goes To Heaven provides a powerful image of the black community in Alabama of the 1930s. Through words and illustrations, Arna Bontemps and Daniel Minter have created a timeless, universal portrait of African American life.

****Santa & Pete: A Novel of Christmas Present and Past**, by Christopher Moore and Pamela Johnson. Publication date: November, 1998, by Simon & Schuster, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. 176 pages with 2 color-woodcuts throughout. Hardcover, \$14.95. ISBN: 0-684-85495-3.

"This heartwarming holiday story...delivered with humor and easily assimilated historical details, is inspirational in the best sense, grounded in truths of human nature and ethical conduct.

In a genre where a blatant tug on the heartstrings often takes the place of substance, this affecting and illuminating story is a standout."

—Publishers Weekly (starred review)

About the book:

Each year at the holiday season, children everywhere rejoice in hearing the story of Santa Claus. However not many people are aware that another extraordinary tale lies behind the holiday myth. Seldom told, it is the inspirational saga of faith and friendship between two men — one black and one white — who brought the spirit of Christmas to this country's first settlers. Based on an old Dutch legend that dates back more than 1,000 years, about St. Nicholas and Black Peter, his Moor companion, it is the hereditary property of every family in America. Now in *Santa & Pete*, Christopher Moore and Pamela Johnson reinterpret this newly discovered, multicultural fable for current and future generations.

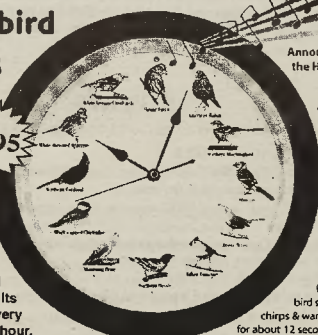
During the era of the religious crusades, St. Nicholas, known today as Santa Claus, was accused of being a spy. Quickly tried, convicted and sentenced to death, he was imprisoned in a cell on a cliff to prevent his escape. On the eve of his scheduled ex-

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