

## **The Agnostic Musings of African American Popular Novelist Frank Garvin Yerby**

James L. Hill, Professor of English, Albany State University

Born and reared in Augusta Georgia, the heart of the Bible Belt in the American South, Frank Garvin Yerby began his literary career writing black protest fiction in the tradition of Richard Wright, and like many of his contemporaries, he demonstrated conventional religious thought in his early fiction. In the 1940s, however, Yerby abruptly switched from protest to popular fiction. In this historic transition, Yerby modified his protest aim and artistic consciousness, becoming one of America's most avid debunkers of history and myth. Concurrently, with the cumulative effects of his personal experiences as an African American, especially in the South, undergirded by his prodigious research of the history of cultures across the world, Yerby began questioning conventional religious beliefs in his anti-heroic popular novels; and in fact, he actually developed philosophical assumptions and beliefs that counter Christian theology.

Through an examination of general references to religion in Yerby's fiction and a close reading of two of his most important novels, *An Odor of Sanctity* and *Judas, My Brother*, this presentation analyzes Yerby's agnosticism and his philosophical assumptions and beliefs. A novel about ancient Spain, Yerby's adopted country, *An Odor of Sanctity* presents the familiar literary prototype of the Christ figure. The protagonist of the novel, Alaric Teudisson, is a picaresque saint who underscores Yerby's messages that saints are not fanatics who disavow all religions other than their own and that man's godliness is the love he shows for his fellowman and the compassion he develops out of his own suffering. *Judas, My Brother*, on the other hand, continues the philosophical investigations prevalent in Yerby's earlier novels. Using the fictional technique of contrasting characters, Yerby portrays the lives of two characters, the Prophet Jesus and his counterpart Nathan. Written to demythologize the origins of Christianity, *Judas, My Brother* documents events and details of history that Yerby considers contrary to the popular conceptions of Christianity; and included in this novel are twenty-eight pages of footnotes to substantiate Yerby's agnosticism and philosophical claims.

### **Between Philosophy, Race and Religion: The Agnostic Musings of African American Popular Novelist Frank Garvin Yerby**

From his growing up in the Jim Crow section of Augusta, Georgia to his becoming the American King of the Costume Romance, Frank Garvin Yerby did indeed make history both as an African American writer and American writer. Yerby, who published thirty-three novels between 1946 and 1985, was one of the most prolific writers of the Twentieth Century and the first African American to write a best-selling novel and have a book purchased by a Hollywood studio for a film adaptation. Sales of his novels during his career totaled more than 62,000,000 copies hardback and paperback; and three of his early novels, *The Foxes of Harrow*, *The Golden Hawk* and *Saracen Blade*, were made into movies, and a fourth, *Bride of Liberty*, was adapted as a one-hour television show. According to Russell B. Nye in *The Unembarrassed Muse*, Yerby ranks as one of the five most popular writers of the second half of the Twentieth Century (Nye, 1970).<sup>1</sup> Despite his unprecedented achievements both as an African American and American writer, however, Yerby never enjoyed the critical acclaim of many of his African American contemporaries, including Richard Wright, Willard Motley, Margaret Walker, William Attaway and Arna Bontemps, to name a few.

The American South in general and the Augusta community in particular greatly influenced some of Yerby's early convictions, shaping him in at least two distinctly different ways. Typical then of the racial climate of most towns of its size in the Deep South, Yerby's hometown Augusta was controlled politically by the Cracker Party, a local reactionary political organization

---

<sup>1</sup> 1. Russell B. Nye, *The Unembarrassed Muse* (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 49-51.

in power; and as in other Southern communities, segregation and social and economic oppression of blacks were the order of the day. Since Yerby was fortunate enough to have avoided working in the Augusta community as some other Paine College students did, he seems to have avoided some of the harsher realities of racial discrimination then prevalent in Augusta; and while living in the South shaped the realistic perspective from which he views the traditions and culture of the South, Yerby was, on the other hand, adversely affected by the South's racism and segregation. Favorably, Yerby spent the first twenty years of his life in Augusta and gained a firsthand knowledge of Southern mores and customs—the subject he eventually chose for much of his fiction.

Yerby did not, however, totally escape the indignities of living in the Jim Crow South. Occasionally, he received affronting stares from whites when he and his lighter complexioned sister Ellena were together, and as he told this author in a letter (Yerby, 1974), the police in several Southern states and even in the state of New York harassed him when they mistakenly thought his first wife, Flora Helen Claire, was white.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the first twenty years of Yerby's life in the South may well have been as he describes them in a letter to the author: "I lived (existed is a better word, for I dwelt spiritually an alien and a stranger, in a totally foreign land) in Augusta, from 1916 to 1936."<sup>3</sup> (Yerby, 1973) Leaving the South at age twenty, Yerby migrated to the North to escape the harsh realities of Southern life; and in the same letter, he indicates his attitude toward the South: "I was fed to the backeye teeth with Augusta, and the South, and believed (poor young fool that I was!) that the North would be better."<sup>44</sup> (Yerby, 1973) Subsequently, Yerby's attitude about life in the South became a powerful motivation in his literary decision to chronicle the inglorious legends of the "Old South."

Like most African American writers of his era in America, Frank Yerby began his career writing protest stories, and like other writers, he illustrates in his stories the imposition of social and racial conventions on the lives of African Americans and the limited responses available to them. In fact, it was social protest fiction that actually prompted Yerby's entrée into the world of the new vogue of historical romance popularized in the Thirties. After his first attempt to publish a protest novel failed, Yerby decided he could best employ his talents as a writer in another arena of fiction; and deserting the ranks of black protest writers, he turned to historical fiction. When he talked with George Joel of Dial Press, the only publisher who had shown any interest in his protest novel, Yerby convinced Joel to let him try writing a historical novel. On the basis of twenty-seven pages Yerby wrote one night after working twelve hours in a Long Island airplane plant, Joel gave him a book advance of \$250. The result was, of course, the popular, widely read and historic *The Foxes of Harrow*.

In 1946 with the publication of his first novel, *The Foxes of Harrow*, Yerby made an abrupt transition from protest to popular fiction writer, prompting many of his contemporaries to question his motives. Despite the misgivings of some about his venture into popular fiction, the reception of *The Foxes of Harrow* brought Yerby immediate success never before equaled by an African American writer; and the popularity of the book reached unprecedented heights for a novel written by an African American. Within two months, *The Foxes of Harrow* sold over 500,000 copies, and by the end of 1946, its sales had exceeded one million copies. Additionally, the novel was reprinted in condensed form in *Negro Digest*, *Omnibook* and *Liberty*. Twentieth

---

<sup>2</sup> . Frank Yerby to James L. Hill, 24 February 1974, "in author's possession."

<sup>3</sup> . Frank Yerby to James L. Hill, 7 September 1973, "in author's possession."

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

Century Fox purchased the screen rights for the novel and sought internationally known actors to portray the roles. *The Foxes of Harrow* became Yerby's passport to national prominence, to the "fast lane" in American popular fiction and to unparalleled literary success; and it is historically important because it established a commercially successful formula for Yerby's novels and set the stage for his reception in America.

Like many writers of first novels in the popular fiction genre, Yerby established an identifiable fiction formula in *The Foxes of Harrow*, one he replicated variously but consistently in subsequent novels. Amid the trapping and conventions of the Southern historical romance, Yerby's first novel introduced a fictional pattern that generally includes (1) a protagonist who is alienated from society by misfortunes of birth or personal convictions, (2) a villainous antagonist, (3) a loyal companion or friend who understands and aids the protagonist, (4) several beautiful women who are attracted to the protagonist, (5) one or more oppressed minority groups—blacks, poor whites, slaves, serfs, etc., and (6) a significant historical focus—an important historical event or issue. Cementing the ingredients of Yerby's success formula are an adventurous protagonist, exteriorized conflict, and literary sex. (Hill, 1980).<sup>5</sup> In *The Foxes of Harrow*, as indeed in many of his subsequent novels, Yerby portrays characters who resemble the common person, even as their bizarre exploits, fascinating sex lives, heroic struggles and efforts to gain respect and make a name for themselves exact the suspension of the reader's disbelief.

On the surface, the absence of an overt protest seems another glaring distinction between Yerby and his contemporaries of African American fiction. The costume romances Yerby chose to write, however, were not entirely outside the pale of protest fiction. In lieu of the overt racial protest of mainstream African American fiction, Yerby's novels reveal a distinct transformation of the protest aim. Modifying the protest impulse evident in his early short stories and using history and social and philosophical commentary, Yerby retains in various modified ways the original aim of protest fiction. His social criticism includes but transcends matters of race, exposing injustices perpetrated against blacks, debunking myths of American and Western cultures, arguing the realities of history and commenting on human values. Not surprisingly, the same racial attitudes Yerby conveys in his black protest stories pervade his popular fiction, sometimes in obvious and sometimes disguised ways.

Yerby, apprenticed in the tradition of protest fiction, adapted protest to the medium of popular fiction and continued to attack racism, hypocrisy, and oppression. In fact, as he established himself in the arena of popular fiction, Yerby adopted a special mission—use of historical data to debunk the inaccuracies of myths and legends in the historical periods and cultures about which he wrote. In his use of historical data, Yerby reveals gross historical inaccuracies, corrects common misconceptions, reaffirms historical truths and comments on human nature.

A second dimension important in any assessment of Yerby's fiction is his philosophical assumptions and convictions. From his extensive exploration of history and from his personal experiences, Yerby has evolved several philosophical tenets which he believes and incorporates into his fiction. He maintains: (1) that God does not concern Himself with the affairs of men, (2) that the only sins for which one suffers or is punished in life are weakness, defenselessness and stupidity, (3) that justice in life has absolutely nothing to do with morality, ethics, fair play, or the concepts of good and evil, and (4) that one's success in life is determined by his intelligence

---

<sup>5</sup> . James L. Hill, "Between Philosophy and Race: Images of Blacks in the Fiction of Frank Yerby," *Umoja* 4 (1990), 5-16.

and strength and his willingness to use them in pursuit of his goals (Hill, 1980)<sup>66</sup> Further, when one considers race and racial conflict in Yerby's fiction, his philosophical assumptions translate into several theses: (1) that specific African tribes—Cromantes, Fantis, Ashantis and Dahomeans—were never as successfully enslaved as other tribes—Whydahs, Nagoes, Pawpaws, Angolans, Congoes and Eboes; (2) that it was out of defenselessness or weakness that Africans submitted to slavery in the Americas; (3) that Africans, like native Americans, should have chosen to die honorably rather than be enslaved; (4) that there were far too few rebellions by a people enslaved against their will; and (5) that the amalgamation of specific groups—Blacks and Whites in particular—in a multiracial society is improbable.<sup>77</sup> (Hill, 1980)

Though Yerby's beliefs may be covertly or obliquely presented, each of his convictions is curiously operative in his fiction and impacts on his characterization. In most of Yerby's novels, his philosophical assumptions and convictions evince in the actions of the characters of his stories, either in their amoral codes of behavior or questions about their fates. In his first novel, *The Foxes of Harrow*, for example, Stephen Fox wins his fortune by gambling and slaving; in *The Golden Hawk*, Kit Gerado amasses his wealth by sea piracy; in *Fairoaks*, Guy Falks is a slave runner; and in *Jarrett's Jade*, James Jarrett seduces the minister's wife, steals her and the minister's farm.

Further, Yerby subscribes to the view that man must be a self-reliant individual, one who in actuality determines his own outcome in life. With neither a God nor a system of ethics on which he can depend, Yerby concludes, man must depend on his own capabilities. In the spirit of social Darwinism, therefore, the individual must rely on his strength and intelligence and his willingness to use these attributes in the achievement of desired goals in society. In his pursuit of his goal, he assumes any role that the world forces upon him, disregarding both ethics and societal mores.

Otherwise, the individual suffers for his weaknesses, stupidity or defenselessness. This philosophy is, according to Yerby, "a new theory of law: the guilt of the victim. That sheep have no rights. That when they tempt the lion by being sheep, it is they, not he, who sin!"<sup>88</sup> (Yerby, 1962). Yerby illustrates in his fiction, however, that man is susceptible to blows of an abstract fate which is referred to variously as chance, luck, God and destiny. If indeed there is a God, according to Yerby, what evidence is there that he cares about what happens to men?<sup>9</sup> Eugene Stovall, author of the recent semi-autobiographical novel *Frank Yerby: A Victim's Guilt* explores the origins of Yerby's disbelief in God and concludes that "Yerby is agnosticism's most articulate spokesman. He regales in his freedom from the numbing fear that death inspires in most people. In his characters Yerby is forced to come face to face with his most deeply held belief: "the victim's guilt."<sup>10</sup> (Stovall, 2)

Thus, in most Yerby novels, the individual struggles constantly against a blind fate; but if God, fate or chance is indifferent to man's desires or actions, the individual's struggle is ultimately with himself. For the protagonists in Yerby's novels, therefore, the struggle in life becomes a matter of exercising one's individual will. In *Floodtide*, for example, Ross Parry allows himself to become an unwilling partner in the crimes of Morgan Brittany; and in *The*

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Frank Yerby, *Griffin's Way* (New York: Dial Press, 1962), 118.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Eugene Stovall's official web site, "Frank Yerby: A Victim's Guilt," <http://www.FrankYerby.com/html/victim.html> (accessed February, 11, 2005).

*Dahomean*, the protagonist's fate is to be sold into slavery, despite his authority and wealth. While Yerby's philosophical convictions permeate all of his novels, they are nowhere more prominent than in two of his most important novels, *An Odor of Sanctity* and *Judas, My Brother*.

Yerby's novel about Spain, *An Odor of Sanctity: A Novel of Medieval Moorish Spain*, might have been expected. Having lived in Spain for over a decade when he wrote it, Yerby had traveled extensively in the country and engaged in research. An ambitious novel in its scope and its intent, *An Odor of Sanctity* provides an expanded treatment of the theme of the spiritual man, a subject Yerby had examined earlier in *Captain Rebel* in 1956. In *An Odor of Sanctity*, Yerby presents a rounded portrait of what may be called a picaresque saint. Combining the traditional anti-heroic elements of the picaro and the modern image of the fictional saint, Yerby creates the image of a character dedicated not so much to the supernatural god as to what remains of the sacred in the ravaged human community.

Alaric Teudisson, son of a Visigoth count, is an outcast in his own family because he is effeminate and he hates war. When his brother, Ataulf, is ambushed and injured, Alaric volunteers to go to Cordoba to bring a Jewish physician to remove a dangerously lodged arrow; but distracted by a woman, he returns too late to save his brother's life. After he redeems himself by employing his knowledge of history to construct weapons to defend his father's castle, he marries his dead brother's fiancée, Clothilde, rejects her when she commits adultery in his own house, and is captured by the Berbers. Sold as a slave to a pederast, a Moor noble, Alaric is rejected because his battle scars mar his beauty. He then joins the service of a merchant whose daughter Jimena has been raped by the Berbers, and when the Nobleman betrothed to Jimena abandons her because of the rape, Alaric marries her. Returning to Cordoba, he becomes a successful merchant and subsequently goes to war, where he is injured during the war and returns a changed man. After Jimena dies, he takes a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to regain the faith he had in his youth. Following his return, he marries Natalie al Wallid, performs miracles and lives a peaceful life until the execution of his wife causes his death.

After achieving position and wealth in Cordoba, however, Alaric tires of material things. His dissatisfaction results in his alienation from the kind of life he had once desired. He becomes a skeptic, who questions mankind, society, even God. It is not until his traumatic war experience of seeing the death of friends and almost killing his own son that Alaric begins his transformation of character. Unlike his earlier treatment of anti-heroes, who begin as rogues and emerge saintlike eventually, Yerby's portrayal of Alaric in the last third of *An Odor of Sanctity* explores the whole question of sainthood. Having suffered severely during his life, Alaric is a spiritual man when he returns from war. He leads a reformed life, shows enormous compassion for humanity and is credited with performing miracles. In this image of the spiritual man, Yerby raises the question of whether miracles are divine acts actualized through the faith of the performer or through the faith of the believer in miracles. It is through this tragic but common bond with humanity, therefore, that Alaric achieves spirituality and is able to perform miracles.

As he illustrates in the characterization of Alaric, however, Yerby does not believe that the saint is a fanatic who disavows all other religious beliefs which conflict with his own. Instead, the saintly man will conclude as Alaric deduced: "... that to discriminate between the nonsense of one or another faith was an impossibility; that all were false, and all were true."<sup>11</sup> (Yerby, 1954) According to Yerby, a man's godliness is the love that he shows toward his fellowman and the compassion he develops for others out of his own personal sufferings. There

---

<sup>11</sup> Frank Yerby, *An Odor of Sanctity* (New York: Dial Press, 1965), 434.

is a God, he points out, but God's concern is not with the affairs of men. In *An Odor of Sanctity*, for example, Alaric declares:

...I worship Him—or It, the life force behind the universe, the great and icy mind that disregards us totally, holding us, justly, to be unworthy of either heaven or hell, save those paltry ones we create in our own hearts—from afar off, knowing it doth not matter.<sup>12</sup> (Yerby, 1965)

Yerby also points out in *An Odor of Sanctity* that the Moors did not destroy other faiths which conflicted with theirs; they practiced religious toleration.

If *An Odor of Sanctity* is his text on philosophical investigations of religion, *Judas, My Brother* is certainly his polished sermon. Written to demythologize the origins of Christianity, this novel documents facts contrary to the popular conceptions of Christianity. Yerby, repeating the techniques he used in *The Saracen Blade* (1952), created a story of two men: Nathan bar Yehudar, the narrator-protagonist of the novel; and Yeshu'a ha Notzri, the Prophet Jesus. Born on the same day but in different cities, both are Jews, whose physical resemblances are almost identical. Yeshu'a (Jesus), rejecting worldly pursuits, dedicates himself to serving His Father. He gains a reputation as a prophet who performs miracles, becomes the leader of a religious sect and provokes Roman and Jewish leaders into crucifying him. Principally, however, *Judas, My Brother* is the story of Nathan, the Thirteenth Disciple.

Unlike the ascetic Yeshu'a, Nathan pursues the pleasures of the world. Son of a wealthy Zadokite Jew, he has grown up in two worlds: the secular life of his father and the religious life of his uncle. He becomes an outcast in his family when he elopes with Helvita, the daughter of a centurion soldier. In Rome, he finds work as a gladiator to support his wife. When Helvita commits suicide after being raped by Nathan's Roman friends, Nathan returns to Galilee with his uncle and tries to live the life of an Essene. After returning to Galilee an outcast, Nathan proposes to live a normal life by taking Yohannah, Yeshu'a's sister, as his wife. Promising Yohannah that he will protect Yeshu'a, he unwittingly becomes more involved in the religious affairs of his counterpart. He tries unsuccessfully to prevent Yeshu'a from provoking Roman and Jewish leaders and fails to avert the Crucifixion. When he is mistaken for Yeshu'a after the Crucifixion, he cannot bring himself to destroy the faith of Yeshu'a's followers; however, he eventually returns to Galilee, where his distraught wife awaits him.

As a protagonist, Nathan varies only slightly from the familiar pattern of the anti-hero in Yerby's fiction. He lives in both the secular world of material goods and the religious world of humble means. He is not obsessed with acquiring wealth, but he does seek position. After he becomes a gladiator, he tries unsuccessfully to live the life of a Roman. Failing in this, he attempts to win recognition among the Essenes, but he cannot practice their traditions and beliefs. Having formerly alienated his family and friends, Nathan still desires to achieve reconciliation with them. He gives up his pursuit of worldly pleasures to marry Yohannah and achieve position in Galilee, exchanging his outcast state for another dilemma. Torn between his love for Yeshu'a, Yohannah and secular knowledge, however, he remains partially alienated from their world. His dilemma in the novel is that he is irreparably a Hellenized Jew: "I'm different from the rest of the Jews in one small detail which is, none the less, great; I've been to Rome."<sup>13</sup> (Yerby, 1968) Thus, he can never achieve total reconciliation with the life of the Prushite Jews.

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Frank Yerby, *Judas, My Brother: The Story of the Thirteenth Disciple* (New York: Dial Press, 1968), 388.

In *Judas, My Brother*, Yerby attacks the myths of Christianity, the foundation of Western culture. Discounting some of the myths and legends of the Bible, he contends that the celebrated escape of Mary and Joseph into Egypt never occurred; that the actual reason for the disappearance of Jesus' body from the tomb is that He was given a Christian burial; that the birth of Jesus to the "Virgin Mary" was a physical impossibility; and that Judas Iscariot did not commit suicide after the Crucifixion. He cites evidence to support his contention that Gospel writers falsified their writings by romanticizing popular traditions among Christians. Similarly, he explodes the myths surrounding the religious Crusades.

To support his contentions, Yerby documents his ideas with 28 pages of footnotes. Citing the claim that his conclusions are based on thirty years of research, Yerby relies on history, research, authorities and common sense to debunk many of the sacred religious myths. Yerby argues, for example:

- That Jesus was not born in Bethlehem and that the tomb in which Jesus was buried was not guarded for a significant period of time.
- That the Bethlehem story, the wise men, the Miraculous Conception and the flight into Egypt are part of the mythology added after the new religion had left Israel. (Durant)
- That the Gospels of the Bible contradict each other on a number of events and people.
- If a sinless son of God needed baptism, could he accept it from someone of lesser status than he.
- That the late great Albert Schweitzer was correct that Yeshu'a was an Oriental mystic of two thousand years ago whose concepts have little relevance for modern man.
- That all evidences of Yeshu'a's omniscience are later additions to the Gospel story to explain how the Son of God could have been unaware of all of the things he should have known.
- All the Gospels disagree about what female followers were present at the Crucifixion.<sup>14</sup> (Yerby, 1968)

While Yerby's interpretations, convictions and philosophical assumptions may and are often questioned, his fiction does stimulate the reader to reexamine the myths or at least to seek his own answers. In fact, Yerby's representations of society, regardless of culture, always seem to deflate the magnanimity of man because "Man is forever greedy, grasping, vile, his heroism a comedy of errors ..." (Yerby, 1953).<sup>15</sup> Yerby judges human beings by the motivations behind their deeds, whether heroic or not. Yet, Yerby is not a misanthrope, for he respects some historical figures, i.e., George Washington, King Frederick III and the Jewish people. In his explorations of diverse cultures, however, he is relentless in attacking myths, especially when

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Frank Yerby, *Devil's Laughter* (New York: Dial Press, 1953), 206.

they are tainted by greed, cruelty, hypocrisy or lies. For Yerby, therefore, Christianity was no less myth.

### Works Cited

- Nye, Russell B. *The Unembarrassed Muse*. New York: Dial Press, 1970.
- . Yerby, Frank, Letter to James L. Hill, February 24, 1974 “in the author’s possession.”
- . \_\_\_\_\_ Letter to James L. Hill, September 7, 1973 “[i]n the author’s possession.”
- . Stovall, Eugene. “Frank Yerby, A Victim’s Guilt” <http://www.FrankYerby.com/html/victim.html> [Accessed February 11, 2005].
- Hill, James L. “Between Philosophy and Race: Images of Blacks in the Fiction of Frank Yerby,” *Umoja* 4(1990): 5-16.
- Yerby, Frank. *Griffin’s Way*. New York: Dial Press, 1962.
- . \_\_\_\_\_ *An Odor of Sanctity: A Novel of Medieval Moorish Spain*. New York: Dial Press, 1965.
- . \_\_\_\_\_ *Judas, My Brother: The Story of the Thirteenth Disciple*. New York: Dial Press, 1968.
- . \_\_\_\_\_ *The Devil’s Laughter*. New York: Dial Press, 1953.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2008.

---

