New generation speaks in ‘Fire This Time’

August 11, 2016

FILED UNDER ENTERTAINMENT, METRO

Posted by FCEditor

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SPECIAL TO THE FLORIDA COURIER

Not long after George Zimmerman killed Trayvon Martin, Jesmyn Ward – the author of the novels “Where the Line Bleeds” and “Salvage the Bones,” and a memoir, “Men We Reaped” – decided to enlist the writers of her generation to address the specters of race and history in America, as James Baldwin had with “The Fire Next Time” in 1963.

Ward envisioned a collection of essays, memoirs, and poems that deal with the past, in a section called “legacy,” with the present, in a section called “reckoning,” and with the future, in a section called “jubilee.”

The result, is not “as tidy” as Ward thought it would be. The 18 contributions in “The Fire This Time” range widely, from a “defense” of the husband of Phillis Wheatley, the 18th-century African-American poet; to an analysis of murals protesting police harassment, to reflections on fatherhood; to the art of storytelling (and “the stank from whence black Southern life, love and labor came”); and to the changing forms of White rage.

The subtle and overt

Taken as a whole, “The Fire Next Time” serves as a powerful reminder that meaningful discussions about Black lives mattering must “acknowledge the plantation, must unfold white sheets, and the black diaspora.”

They must reckon with the fact that Garnette Cadogan, a visiting scholar at The Institute for Advanced Knowledge at New York University (who is now writing a book about walking), was handcuffed by the New Orleans police when he was a student because he waved hello to them – and badgered by the cops in New York City because he was jogging to the subway at Columbus Circle.

And, as Carol Anderson, a professor at Emory University, indicates, discussions must address the more subtle, less overtly racist manifestations of White rage that take the form of reductions in local, state, and federal government employment, where there is less discrimination in hiring, retention, and pay; voter suppression initiatives; stand-your-ground laws; and a mortgage foreclosure crisis that hit Black Americans harder than any other group in the United States.

Little optimism

As it documents that African-American intellectuals and activists are finding a collective voice, Ward acknowledges that the volume also testifies to the exhaustion of many Blacks, who are tired of teaching their kids “that America sees them as less, that she just might kill them,” and who feel futile “in the face of this ever-present danger.”

It is understandable, it seems to me, that expressions of optimism about the future are rare in “The Fire This Time.”

“Of course you can see why anyone would want to be black; being black is fun,” the poet Kevin Young writes.
"Don’t tell anybody."

Claudia Rankine, a professor of English at the University of Southern California, suggests that real change will not come until and unless there is a “rerouting of interior belief,” but implies that at the moment “a lack of feeling for another” reduces the likelihood of “a sustained state of national mourning for black lives.”

Danticat’s confession

In the last essay in “The Fire This Time,” Edwidge Danticat, a Haitian-born writer of fiction and non-fiction for adults and children, confesses that she wants to look forward, to have a dream, to tell her daughters that they have the power to at least try to change things, “that their crowns have already been bought and paid for and that all they have to do is put them on their heads.”

But, she writes, the world, and people who are hostile and violent “for reasons that have nothing to do with your beauty, your humor or your grace, but only the color of your skin…keep tripping me up.”

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