



# Mumbo Jumbo

*Ishmael Reed*

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**Mumbo Jumbo** Ishmael Reed

**The Classic Freewheeling Look at Race Relations Through the Ages**

*Mumbo Jumbo* is Ishmael Reed's brilliantly satiric deconstruction of Western civilization, a racy and uproarious commentary on our society. In it, Reed, one of our preeminent African-American authors, mixes portraits of historical figures and fictional characters with sound bites on subjects ranging from ragtime to Greek philosophy. Cited by literary critic Harold Bloom as one of the five hundred most significant books in the Western canon, *Mumbo Jumbo* is a trenchant and often biting look at black-white relations throughout history, from a keen observer of our culture.

## Mumbo Jumbo Details

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Author : Ishmael Reed

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# From Reader Review Mumbo Jumbo for online ebook

## Nathan "N.R." Gaddis says

Dionysian counter=punch to the Apollonian order enjoyed by all Atonists. It swings! To say we have it coming is an understatement. I had it coming, what with after all that faith=in=fiction mumbo jumbo I was jiving upon reading my Mano Mano Mano. Makes no difference what I say. Jes Grew is upon you. You know I'll tell history different. But that's cuz I'm a stuff'd shirt. Besides, Osiris is no more dead or alive than Odin and Zeus ; and ancient Egypt still makes for great fiction, and fiction --- *fiction is where it's at*. You know what Emma says about revolutions and dancing? Yeah, it's like that. Bread, sure, but Roses too and there's no need to insist upon your dialectic. More Reed please.

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## Chloe says

I'm often leery when friends of mine lend me their favorite books. How soon do you expect me to read this? You know I have a stack of books the size of an end table still to read, right? What if, though this has never before happened in the 25+ years I've been a regular reader, I should lose or damage the book? Most intimidating of all, what if I don't like the read or what if I find it to be so bad that my opinion of you as a friend is changed due to your devotion to these pages? After more than a few heated arguments about the merits of a particular book with friends I've had to place myself at a bit more of a remove from things. It's this same reason why I never recommend my favorite books for monthly book club reads. I take reading more personally than most, apparently.

So it was with much trepidation and nervousness that I accepted my friend James' copy of this book. Battered and well worn, with passages underlined and bracketed from multiple read-throughs, this was obviously a well-loved book. I felt as though we were at a turning point in our friendship and this slim volume would be the pivot upon which the whole relationship would turn. So I guess it's a good thing that I ended up rather enjoying this light-hearted romp.

Taking place in Prohibition-era New York City, Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo* charts the rise of ragtime and jazz as an infectious thought meme of liberation and fertility called Jes Grew beating its tattoo of freedom from hierarchical society straight from the heart of ancient Egypt. Regular readers of science fiction will recognize many similarities with the idea of the Sumerian namshub that Neil Stephenson used with such aplomb in his seminal work, *Snow Crash*. Arrayed against this meme are all the conspiratorial powers of white society, from the simple Freemasons to the Knights Templar, who will stop at nothing to discredit and destroy this nascent movement before it infects New York at large and undoes centuries worth of work at bringing order to society and keeping the dark races under their thumb.

I know, this sounds so very much like every other work of conspiracy fiction ever published and I would have rolled my eyes so hard at some points that they would have dropped from my head and onto the table, if Reed's style weren't so whimsically refreshing. He doesn't take his words too seriously and neither should the reader. Throwing in a great amount of history with references to Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement and cameos from major figures of the Harlem Renaissance, Reed paints an eminently enjoyable take on race in Western history and, between bits of buffoonery, offers a solid critique of the subtle racism that infects so

many of our actions to this day. I especially enjoyed his group of art thieves who would liberate indigenous icons from those graveyards of culture, museums, and return them to their rightful homes among the tribes of Borneo or the descendants of the Olmec. I kept hoping for an Indiana Jones moment where a character could say that "it belongs in a museum" only to get pistol-whipped and told that it belongs to the people who created it.

There are a lot of references packed into this slim volume and one reading can not hope to catch all of the nuance of Reed's work. I see now why James had so thoughtfully underlined many of his favorite passages, it's a great book to quote in conversation and one that I've found myself thinking about quite often in the days since finishing it. I'd never read any Ishmael Reed prior to *Mumbo Jumbo* but he's certainly an author I'll be on the lookout for in the future.

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### **Dusty Myers says**

In brief: *Mumbo Jumbo* tracks the growing infestation of "Jes Grew" from Chicago eastward as it heads to 1920s NYC. Everyone in the Harlem Renaissance is at least named, and often appears in a scene or two. Cab Calloway. Langston Hughes. What Jes Grew is is a need to dance and shake your booty, and it turns out that this urge has been suppressed by a certain fascistic group dating back to Ancient Egypt. The Knights Templar—so beloved by a lot of backward looking storytellers nowadays—are painted as especially evil and, well perhaps even more so, stupid and buffoonish.

In the end, I think *Flight to Canada*—about lots of the writers of the antebellum/transcendental era of U.S. lit—is a more engaging book, and a funnier one. But that's probably because I got all the jokes.

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### **John Pistelli says**

Thomas Pynchon's freewheeling narrator of *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) tells us, "Well, and keep in mind where those Masonic Mysteries came from in the first place. (Check out Ishmael Reed. He knows more about it than you will ever find here.)" Similarly, the underground cult classic compendium of conspiracy, Robert Shea and Robert Anton Wilson's *Illuminatus! Trilogy* (an important influence on both Alan Moore and Grant Morrison) opens with this epigraph from Ishmael Reed's 1972 novel, *Mumbo Jumbo*: "Someone once said that beneath or behind all political and cultural warfare lies a struggle between secret societies." Anyone seeking the crossroads where modern or postmodern literature, the occult, and fringe politics converge should acquaint themselves with Reed's strange and brilliant book.

*Mumbo Jumbo* is set during the 1920s, "[t]hat 1 decade which doesn't seem so much a part of American history as the hidden After-Hours of America struggling to jam. To get through." America is experiencing an outbreak of the phenomenon ("*an anti-plague*") called Jes Grew, essentially Reed's name for the culture of the black diaspora, especially as expressed through music, whether ragtime, jazz, or blues (the name derives from an epigraph attributed to James Weldon Johnson's *Book of American Negro Poetry*: "The earliest Ragtime songs, like Topsy, 'jes' grew," both an ironic appropriation of a racist artifact [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] and a refusal of individualist proprietary attitudes toward culture). As in the 1890s with its ragtime vogue, the Jazz Age threatens to overwhelm "Western Civilization" with a pleasure-loving and peaceable way of life opposed to the sterile and exploitative lifeworld of, locally, "neuter-living Protestants," or those whom Reed more broadly calls Atonists, or monotheists (worshippers of the sun):

The Atonists got rid of their spirit 1000s of years ago with Him. The flesh is next. Plastic will soon prevail over flesh and bones. Death will have taken over. Why is it Death you like? Because then no 1 will keep you up all night with that racket dancing and singing. The next morning you can get up and build, drill, prowess putting up skyscrapers and...and....and...working and stuff. You know? Keeping busy. [Reed's ellipses.]

The novel, though relatively short, tells the labyrinthine story of the agencies trying to advance or stop the spread of Jes Grew.

On the pro side, there is the novel's hero, the Harlem hounigan PaPa LaBas, proprietor of the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral. He teams with a cadre of magicians from Haiti—itsself under U.S. occupation—stationed on a Marcus Garvey ship in New York harbor as they strive to recover the fragmentary text or scripture of Africa's diaspora magic, dance-dictated in the night of time by Osiris to Thoth. In the absence of this book, Jes Grew is only an aural, oral, and bodily tradition and is therefore at a disadvantage under monotheism's textual onslaught, its Bibles, Korans, Constitutions, Interpretations of Dreams, Communist Manifestoes, academic treatises, high literary traditions, and yellow journalism. Similarly, the novel also bears a significant subplot about a group of art "thieves" who strive to liberate the works of the global East and South from Europe's and America's museums; in his portrait of this multicultural group, Reed charts some of the fissures and fractures among people of color, noting that, for instance, a common enemy in European empire does not necessarily make for frictionless comity between black and Asian peoples.

Against Jes Grew's supporters is the Wallflower Order, who are in their time of Jazz Age extremity forced to call in white intellectual and ageless Knight Templar Hinckle von Hampton (Reed's satire on white Harlem Renaissance impresario Carl Van Vechten), who plans to defeat black insurgency by coopting it. He starts a little magazine called *The Benign Monster*, the title itself suggesting the intelligentsia's gentrification of radical energies, and seeks a "Talking Robot"—i.e., a black intellectual who will mislead black audiences back to the monotheistic path of Atonism. Hinckle's pathetic struggle is actually portrayed with some sympathy amid the satire—I got the sense that, racial polemics aside, Reed knows he has more in common with a modernist literary intellectual than with a Voodoo magician. Nevertheless, Reed unsparingly excoriates European literature from Milton to Freud to Styron:

John Milton, Atonist apologist extraordinary himself, saw the coming of the minor geek and sorcerer Jesus Christ as a way of ending the cult of Osiris and Isis forever. [...] Another Atonist; that's why English professors like him, he's like their amulet, keeping niggers out of their departments and stamping out Jes Grew before it invades their careers. It is interesting that he worked for Cromwell, a man who banned theater from England and was also a hero of Sigmund Freud. Well the mud-slingers kept up the attack on Osiris, a writer Bilious Styronicus even rewriting Osirian history in a book called the *Confessions of the Black Bull God Osiris* in which he justified Set's murder of Osiris on the grounds that Osiris made "illicit" love to Isis who, he wrote, was Set's wife. He was awarded the Atonists' contemporary equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize for this whopper.

In fact, an overhasty reading of *Mumbo Jumbo* might lead one to expect that its ideological conflict is a matter of black vs. white—because in modern Europe and America, it *is*. But Reed's most ambitious joke is delivered in a climactic thirty-page summing-up that parodies detective-novel exposition resolutions, conspiracy theories, and religious revelations all at once. PaPa LaBas, attempting to arrest Hinckle von Hampton, explains to a Harlem society gathering that, "if you must know, it all began 1000s of years ago in Egypt."

The conflict between Jes Grew and the Atonists dates back to the fraternal quarrel between Set and Osiris in

the Egyptian pantheon: Osiris learns the arts of peace and plenty at college from Ethiopian and Nubian students, and he disseminates this gnosis throughout the world, particularly to Native Americans. Set, by contrast, is "the stick crook and flail man," advocates for discipline and thus eventually ends up worshipping Aton, the transcendent sun god, and beginning the monotheist cult that in various iterations—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Marxist, psychoanalytic, and capitalist—would war throughout history on Jes Grew and the liberation it stands, or dances, for. Moses himself is revealed to have effectively swindled the secrets of Osiris for himself, which resulted in his getting only the negative side of the magic; this negative side became monotheism as we know it, everything that "the people of the book" have wrought.

In other words, all human culture, like the human race itself, comes out of Africa: European cultures are without autochthony or autonomy and are only offshoots, even where they are most racist or conservative, of one or another side in an intra-African quarrel, the latest round of which is presumably Kanye West vs. Ta-Nehisi Coates.[1]

Which brings us around to the perhaps less salubrious politics of the novel. *Mumbo Jumbo* is not really "woke" or "PC" or whatever we're calling it now. For one thing, it expresses sufficient quantities of anti-Islam sentiment to get Reed brought up on hate speech charges in Europe, as he seems to think that Islam is, no less than any other form of religious or secular monotheism, an attempt to repress the authentic black mysteries. It is the black Muslim intellectual Abdul who comes into possession of the scripture that is the novel's quest object, and he burns it: "Censorship until the very last." And despite the attractions of Reed's emancipatory occultism, what does his displacement of Hebrew religion with Egyptian magic, his execration of Moses, Marx, and Freud imply? A reader can surely be forgiven for detecting a classically anti-Semitic subtext here. And, as befitting the work of a male author who has been known to worry that feminism is a tool of the white power structure used to disarticulate black and brown traditions and scapegoat men of color, the novel's female characters tend to be either helpmeets or harridans (or both), even the goddesses Isis and Erzulie.

On the other hand, the lessons of *Mumbo Jumbo* might well be applied to today's cultural appropriation debate. Reed's position is quite subtle: he mocks and derides cultural exploitation and co-optation at the level of production, which is the point of his satire on modernist literary culture's attempts to capture and neutralize the energies of black rebellion; on the consumption side, however, Reed seems to see the diffusion of Jes Grew as humanity's only salvation—to see black culture as a force that, at the level of the dancing body, takes over whites rather than being taken over by them. The novel, I therefore take it, counsels against castigating every white person who takes a selfie while wearing an item of non-western origin, even as it also takes aim at corporations, universities, and other institutions profiting from the creativity of populaces they exclude and exploit.[2]

Finally, I have not yet mentioned the novel's form. I have made it sound too linear, too much like a thriller with philosophical weight. But it is rather a collage and a montage, written in telegraphic prose, splicing in quotations and images, doing without quotation marks, transitions, or the pretense of God-like objectivity. One of its dedicatees is "George Herriman, Afro-American, who created Krazy Kat," and the novel's style of radical juxtaposition and teasing polyglot wordplay is a fitting homage to Herriman's brilliant Jazz Age achievement in comics. Reed's ludic style protects his conspiracy theory from seeming like the work of a mere crank, though I'm sure he believes the spirit, if not the letter, of it. The novel promotes play and humor as against the droning solemn seriousness of monotheistic religion and literary culture:

LaBas could understand the certain North American Indian tribe reputed to have punished a man for lacking a sense of humor. For LaBas, anyone who couldn't titter a bit was not Afro but most likely a Christian connoting blood, death, and impaled emaciated Jew in excruciation.

Nowhere is there an account of Christ laughing. Like the Marxists who secularized his doctrine, he is always stern, seriously and as gloomy as a prison guard. Never does I see him laughing until tears appear in his eyes like the roly-poly squint-eyed Buddha guffawing with arms upraised, or certain African loas, Orishas.

So, if you are looking for a serious laugh, I highly recommend *Mumbo Jumbo*.

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[1] Note that, by the terms laid out in *Mumbo Jumbo*, Coates, despite a superficially Reedian invocation after Zora Neale Hurston of "the bone and drum," is arguably the authoritarian Atonist, promoting the traditional cypto-montheist political left as the black man's salvation in a white man's magazine, while West disseminates magickal-musical thinking far and wide in a popular idiom on a populist platform, even quoting Carl Jung's contemporary avatar Jordan Peterson just as Reed approvingly quotes Jung. My point is not to side with West over Coates or Reed over the western world, but to get the tally right; I will say that "left" and "right" are becoming ever less reliable guides to cultural politics, though the comrades tell me that that is itself a right-wing position. "[A]s gloomy as a prison guard" indeed.

[2] Speaking of appropriation, Ted Gioia notes all the elements E. L. Doctorow seems to have lifted from *Mumbo Jumbo* for his own *Ragtime*, published just three years later. It's not for me to judge who has the right to what; I will only suggest that Reed's novel is about a hundred times more interesting than Doctorow's.

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## **MJ Nicholls says**

Reed is the sort of impish satirical crank whose Promethean intellect and restlessly zesty creativity tingles my funnybones, but whose books always leave me yearning for more logic, understanding and clarity. No exception here. This one is your all-out postmodern "metatext," splicing citations and references and photos from other texts into the body of the main text—a satire about a dancing pandemic called Jes Grew—and despite the presentational panache of the novel, nestling beneath is really another relentless absurdist farce, albeit one written by a dazzling hyperbrain. More to the point: the references of whatever African-African late 60s cultural moment under analysis are entirely lost on a 26-year-old whitey from Backwoods, Scotland, so the book deserves a more clued-in reader. In terms of the language, Reed has dropped the wizardry from his first two books *Yellow Radio* and *Freelance Pallbearers*, which is a shame, because his skill in that regard is nonpareil.

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## **Jeff says**

Let's talk about "Jes Grew," the mysterious ethos ubiquitous among the dramatis personae in Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*. Let's recognize three phases of it, before the press of reforming Christianity in the First Reconstruction; during the period of the minstrel hall performer "blacking up"; and in the variegated cultural historiography of the "recording" era -- essentially, what got down onto disc between 1891 and the height of the record industry boom from which the Satirist narrates his *Dunciad* -- let's say, 1970, as a date of Reed's writing the book.

Mumbo jumbo is Reed's reminiscence of slavery's clusterfuck; when the passing back and forth of peoples and cultures, European, African, Creole, Voodoo, high yellow and Christian, violent, pastoral, democratic,

authoritarian . . . it all is perfectly indiscernible, a nightmare of un-learnability. Into this milieu, and to parody DuBois, came the Reformer, the school-marm, First (Radical) Reconstruction, Douglass's narrative is a harbinger of the trickster, Sandy Jenkins' "brew," his root, gonna save Douglass's ass, only it provides rather a key to "reading" the slave system's code as an "outside": the Christian ethos of authoritarian casuistry: Jes Grew. Reed's Chapter 52 follows in two parts after Apuleius in exposing the full-throated Osiris myth as a fertility rite (Jes grew) with anachronistic reading of Vietnam thrown in for good measure (the narrative in which this myth embeds itself is set in Twenties Harlem), as well as an origin story for the people of the Book. The satire historiographically perches itself out on a ledge overlooking Black Studies by incorporating Black Studies as the text of which it is *outside*. This no doubt exerts a fascination -- a fascination in being lost superficially while understanding a whole lot more than one might have thought.

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### **Smiley Yearwood says**

Published in 1972 but set in the 1920s it's one of the best novels of Ismael's 50-year writing career and is written in a free styling jazz style to match the jazz era it brings to life. Photographs, newspaper cuttings, handwritten notes and footnotes all feature throughout. The style is sometimes hard to follow, sometimes frustrating but in the end, it's rewarding and leaves you feeling slightly inebriated. Mumbo Jumbo is a work of slightly absurd and unfettered imagination.

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### **Jonathan says**

Some great, witty, justifiably angry writing here, and some wonderful use of fragmentation and sampling but somehow it never cohered for me and, at times, I did actually find my interest waning a little, which is not a good sign for such a short book...

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### **Phil Overeem says**

For various and sundry reasons, it took me over twenty years after finding out about it to read this book. I advise you not to procrastinate as long as I did. Challenging, hilarious, thought-provoking, and still utterly relevant, MUMBO JUMBO leaves you wondering where "Jes' Grew" is growing now, and just how off the tracks our cultural train may be running. If I could find Mr. Reed's contact info, I'd write him; the book will foster loads of questions. If you have read it, I suggest you check out any of Kip Hanrahan's CONJURE recordings, in which a stunning variety of black musicians (Allen Touissaint, Alvin Youngblood Hart, David Murray...that ain't close to all) bring many of the elements of MUMBO JUMBO to life, often with Mr. Reed reading over them. These recordings may be hard to find in hard copy form. If you don't mind subscription downloads at a super-cheap price, eMusic carries them.

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### **David says**

The writing in here is impressive on a language level, and it is definitely thought provoking at the same time that it's entertaining. I had a bit of an easier time with this one than The Free-Lance Pallbearers. That, of course, doesn't speak to the quality of the work or how interesting it is, just how approachable it was for me.



Both books make me intrigued about Ishmael Reed as a writer and I'll definitely pick up something else of his at some point. A very skilled writer with significant things to say.

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## **Bill says**

Another one of those life-altering books. Takes two of my favorite things, satire and history, and completely turned it on its head. I don't know what kind of writer I'd be without Ishmael Reed.

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## **Daniel Polansky says**

Part alternate world fantasy, part meta-critique of the aesthetic values of Western Civilization, Mumbo Jumbo is probably best understood as an evocation, a Working, to use the book's own vernacular, mockingly(?) supposing itself to herald or call forth a leveling of the white power structure and the birth of a new, multicultural age. This is Crying of Lot 49 meets The Fire Next Time, fascinatingly clever, innovative in a dozen ways. There's so much great stuff in here that the missteps, in particular an abrupt third act switch in the narrative style, are particularly frustrating, but even still anyone reading it will come away with the certainty that Reed is an absolute original. Between this and the (somewhat superior) Journey to the North I really cannot fathom why he seems to be little read.

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## **Zadignose says**

Mumbo Jumbo is an innovative novel with its own original voice, which unfortunately turns rather clunky somewhere in the middle, and doesn't quite recover in the end. The strength of the novel is in its playfulness. There are some good parodic moments, and while the book indulges in some far flights of fancy in developing its conspiracy theories, it knows how to have fun with its own conceits, rather than deliver its material too dryly.

There are certainly messages of social relevance within the work. In that way it's a kind of coded text (though you don't need an enigma machine to puzzle it out... think something more like Pig Latin). While I'm sure we're not meant to take it as literal truth, with 1000 year old white Knights Templar plotting in a grand conspiracy to keep the black man down because of the danger inherent in his dance, there's certainly plenty of fair criticism of:

- art institutes as a form of cultural piracy,
- patronizing patrons who damn with faint praise,
- generational disconnect that prevents the youth from learning from the legacy of their elders,
- white America's contempt for Haiti and ignorance of its history,
- wishy-washy white do-gooders whose sympathy is suspect and unreliable,
- the indoctrination of some black folks to have contempt for their own race once they've been given a chance

to rise one or two steps above their brethren,

-and the hypocrisy of belittling native Afro-Caribbean spiritualism in favor of the white man's goofy Bible or Quran, as though those religious traditions were less "primitive" for the virtue of having been blessed by contact with Western Culture.

So, okay, there you have it. Depending on your perspective, you may feel the book scores some points, or you may find its reliance on archetypes and some of its cartoonishness to be a little off-putting.

Then, there's the important theme, perhaps the more poignant one, of the elder who's seen it all, but can't get the kids of today to understand the nature of the conflict and the struggle that he's been through. He's a celebrated relic of sorts, respected in a token way, but not really understood, and his culture will not be passed on. The historic struggle of soul vs. no-soul is sure to rise again, and the hope resides in the fact that the next generation will write its own texts and find its own solutions. Since they can't grasp their own history, we can just anticipate that the old struggle will return as the new struggle.

Our crumbling bridge between past and future, PaPa LaBas, was already suffering from a degree of self-doubt and disconnect from his own roots, so his position seems to be a mix of tragedy and hope. He knows a lot about what has been lost, and what is *being* lost, while he can only guess at what will come to replace it. And he has reason for anxiety, knowing that dangers lurk, which the too credulous and apathetic new generation doubts or fails to suspect deeply enough, so that they remain unarmed.

So, hey, that sounds mostly good, so where's the downside? Well, the book succumbs to the author's temptation to explain a bit too much, and to take some of the book's fancies a little more seriously than we might have expected from the earlier developments. Not that the book "explains" in the way I have done here (yeah, I'm dry and not fun, and I'm secretly a member of the Wallflower Order), but rather there's a long expository section in which the details of a conspiracy spanning all of human history are laid out. Along the way, some of the humor gets a bit sour, as the author indulges in intentional anachronisms that for some reason don't seem to fit the tone of what surrounds them (e.g., having the ancient Egyptian prince/god Set order his authorities to pull over carriages on the side of the roads and issue tickets and warrants in a parody of modern America's police harassment of black motorists). It's not that I object to such things on principal, but as I characterized it at the beginning of this review, "clunky" is the best way I can think to describe this section of the book that brings a halt to the semi-mystery/caper novel we were reading before.

I had a feeling that the author would have better pursued one of two contrary options:

-Best would be Option A: Leave out almost all explanation. Keep it in your head as a secret key to the novel which doesn't need to be exposed to the reader.

-Second Best would be Option B: Go Whole Hog. Develop and expand that whole expository section into an engaging, sprightly narrative on par with what came before, don't worry about the fact that it swells the novel to twice its current size, and *still* don't explain everything. Maybe find a way to weave it more seamlessly into the framing narrative.

But the least good option, Option C, is the way the book went, which was to just tell everyone what your idea was, even though the narrative progress is brought to a grinding halt. And then we discover that the plot that we thought was still developing is now shortly terminated. Then we get a confusing epilogue which gets across the theme mentioned above relating to PaPa LaBas as the bridge...

Ultimately, it was a good read, something I'm glad to have given my time to, but reading it involved some frustrations and disappointments too. I'm hoping that I'll find another Ishmael Reed book that I can embrace more enthusiastically, with less reservations.

Final point: Ishmael Reed cleverly set out to make me feel guilty for criticizing his book before I had the opportunity to do so. This book, and some of the author's comments outside of this book, criticize the critic who imposes conventional, conservative expectations upon a work, one who is too ready to slight the accomplishment of a black artist who takes risks to express himself in a mode outside the mainstream. That plus the fact that I can't dance basically makes me a soulless sucker, but as an Atonist, I just can't deny my own legacy.

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### **Andrew says**

Ishmael Reed takes a lot of Pynchonian ideas (massive conspiracy theory, fundamental novelty) and puts a distinct Afro-futurist spin on them, and the result is phenomenal. What makes "Mumbo Jumbo" unique is its remarkable merger of formal experiment (incorporation of visual material, novel typography, freewheeling plot structure) and sheer enjoyment. I've never had more fun demanding the downfall of static white society.

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### **Houston says**

Never has a novel been gifted a more appropriate title.

For me, it's like the work of William Burroughs: important, perhaps, but hardly enjoyable.

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### **Steve says**

Here is the template for Conspiracy Operas like Illuminatus! and Foucault's Pendulum. A fast, funny, poetic read that offers yet another parable for the Way Things Work Behind the Scene. This is the novel that set the pace. The idea of Jes Grew is so convincing that I think I may have been stricken with it. That's all- gone muggin'.

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### **Andrea says**

A challenging and jubilatory postmodern (re)vision of the mythical powers that be, MJ is a short but intense ride through the underbelly of the jousting hidden forces shaping history, religion, culture, and race relations, and it all comes to a head in the jazzy arena of 1920's Harlem:

After a first flair-up in 1890's New Orleans, HooDoo/Voodoo forces are once again alive and on the rise as Jes Grew, the 'psychic virus' spreads and infects its carriers with the irresistible urge to jam, dance, and otherwise just get funky. But the staid Atonist watchdogs, the Wallflower Order of the Knights of Templar, are vigilant and they intend to put a stop to the epidemic before it gets the upper hand... And so begins a riotous and keen-eyed romp from Harlem to ancient Egypt via Haiti, jam-packed with real and fictional characters, references, and imagery.

As bizarre as the synopsis sounds, IR manages to inject even more weirdness in his novel by prankishly fiddling with the form: merging text with paratext, inserting seemingly random and/or displaced photos and graphics throughout, experimental punctuation... Some readers might find this to be pure 1970's (oblige) gadgetry, but I loved the photos and graphics, which I found mostly oblique and off-center, but not unrelated. As a whole, this novel was a unique and engrossing reading experience for me; while some parts were definitely rough going and had to be read and (what the?) reread, and, to be sure, the multitude of references was daunting, it was worth the effort. I'd take a half star off because there was some suffering involved, but I can't, so I'll go for the big five!

Finally, a few quotes for the sheer pleasure of some very irreverent humor:

*"To blazes with your election, man! Don't you understand, if this Jes Grew becomes pandemic, it will mean the end of Civilization as We Know It?"*

*"People hated Set. He went down as the 1st man to shut nature out of himself. He called it discipline. He is also the deity of the modern clerk, always tabulating, and perhaps invented taxes."*

*"Lazarus was a zombie!"*

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## **Simon Robs says**

"Time is a pendulum. Not a river. More akin to what goes around comes around." Mumbo Jumbo be our current politic or realpolitik and Jes Grew and it Templars still banging in da streets all over dis land, lordy we gots troubles many don't kid yerselves shit going down. Da pendulum done swung and we swamped like this here book will eat yer lunch and spit it out. Readit and weep. Out ya'll.

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## **Peter Landau says**

What a tasty gumbo MUMBO JUMBO by Ishmael Reed is! It's so thick I'm tempted to eat it with a fork, but I'm going to use a spoon, so I can get every last drop! It's chock full of story, images, excerpts, news items, memos, letters, history, mystery, myth, all glued together with hoodoo, which is to say magic. It reads like John Dos Passos' USA TRILOGY, with its kaleidoscopic collage technique, but it's a lot funkier and funnier. Who says you can't laugh at white supremacy? This is the history of a race that has had its history erased. It should be required reading.

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## **E. C. Koch says**

This novel is what critics have in mind when they describe the postmodern text as collage. Mumbo Jumbo combines mystery, history, citation, and photography into a single novel about the conflict between Eastern (Black) and Western (White) Civilization. And that's a huge theme. Reed allows this conflict to manifest itself in multiple ways in the novel, which, for the reader, might come across as a lack of clarity (more on this in a minute). Set in 1920's Renaissance Harlem, the Wallflower Order - the organization of square, non-dancing, white, Western hegemony - is trying to contain and quash Jes Grew - the intangible, undefinable spirit of blackness - that has broken out again in America and is headed for Manhattan. Jes Grew comes in the form of music and dancing and is what the Wallflower Order wants the black community to eliminate by way of conforming to white society instead of allowing it to mix in with the melting pot (these eugenically inflected terms are apropos). It turns out that Jes Grew has its origins in ancient Egypt and Moses and the Knights Templar and the Masons and has successfully been kept down throughout history but never eradicated. Reed's grand vision, then, is to depict the Bible as a black text appropriated by whites, which also works to depict how Western civilization is a failed attempt to keep black culture at bay. Reed is working in the postmodern idiom on a few different levels. He's dismantling one grand narrative by constructing an even grander one, he's playing with textual representation (and therefore fooling with Western logocentrism), and is limning the impurity (à la Derrida) that allows Western culture to signify. This novel, at the end of the whole everything, is protean, and as such, can be difficult to follow and seem poorly composed. And this criticism reveals Mumbo Jumbo's greatest accomplishment: Any criticism leveled against it can be explained away as Wallflower Order thinking (which it probably is).

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