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The Signifying Monkey: A Theory Of African-American Literary Criticism



Synopsis

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s original, groundbreaking study explores the relationship between the African and African-American vernacular traditions and black literature, elaborating a new critical approach located within this tradition that allows the black voice to speak for itself. Examining the ancient poetry and myths found in African, Latin American, and Caribbean culture, and particularly the Yoruba trickster figure of Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey whose myths help articulate the black tradition's theory of its literature, Gates uncovers a unique system for interpretation and a powerful vernacular tradition that black slaves brought with them to the New World. His critical approach relies heavily on the Signifying Monkey--perhaps the most popular figure in African-American folklore--and signification and Signifyin(g). Exploring signification in black American life and literature by analyzing the transmission and revision of various signifying figures, Gates provides an extended analysis of what he calls the "Talking Book," a central trope in early slave narratives that virtually defines the tradition of black American letters. Gates uses this critical framework to examine several major works of African-American literature--including Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*--revealing how these works signify on the black tradition and on each other. The second volume in an enterprising trilogy on African-American literature, *The Signifying Monkey*--which expands the arguments of *Figures in Black*--makes an important contribution to literary theory, African-American literature, folklore, and literary history.

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Customer Reviews

I purchased Gates' "Signifying Monkey" and found myself nodding at almost every paragraph. I was nodding in appreciation of the clarity, nodding in recognition of meaning that I had lost that freshman year but eventually found upon reading "The Signifying Monkey", and nodding because literary theory was being applied to African-American literature. Mimesis and Gates finally came together. The chapter on the trope of the "talking book" is my favorite. Bakhtin (did I spell that correctly?) himself a literary theorist became even more palatable as a result of my reading this text. I'm glad that I own this book. I'm constantly referring to it. It's turned into a "pleasure-reading" book for me. It can for you as well. Thanks Professor Gates

This is a fine piece of literary scholarship. It really created a whole way of looking at texts. I use it every year in my Postcolonial Studies class. More examples from popular culture could help.

Professor Gates' tome on the Signifying Monkey is a thoughtful and fascinating exposition on some of the West African sources of American folklore that are seldom appreciated as a result of the forced expatriations involved in the slave trade. Unfortunately, the book is just slightly dry unless accompanied by a first rate recitation of the Signifying Monkey legend as it is retold in the milieu of the Twentieth Century African American "Toast." I am delighted to report that this can now be experienced by newcomers through the wonderful performance of Rudy Ray Moore, which is available on the CD Greatest Hits. When Dr. Gates' reader is able to reread his Signifying Monkey in light of Mr. Ray Moore's, a whole new world of perception and enjoyment will follow. The synergy of these two works is splendid and neither one is quite so valuable without the other.

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