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Decline and Fall of Jes Grew

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

MUMBO JUMBO By Ishmael Reed. 223 pages. Illustrated. Doubleday. \$6.95.

Trailer (as in a film): The Mayor of New Orleans, "spiffy in his patent-leather brown-and-white shoes . . . sits in his office," with Zuzu, "local doo-whack-a-doo and voo-do-dee-odo fizzig . . . sprawled upon his knees . . . inhaling from a Chesterfield cigarette in a shameless brazen fashion." The telephone rings with an urgent message from



Ishmael Reed

a downtown infirmary that "what was once dormant is now a Creeping Thing" and that if it "becomes pandemic it will mean the end of Civilization As We Know It." Cripes! What is this Creeping Thing? Why, it's Jes Grew — an antiplague, which, instead of causing the body to waste away, enlivens the host, infecting it with an uncontrollable urge to "Wiggle and Wobble, to clap hands and sing. It 'is electric as life and is characterized by ebullience and ecstasy.'" So called because, like Topsy and the earliest ragtime songs, it "jes' grew," Jes Grew is now, in the 1920's, threatening the uptight heart of Protestant America. End of trailer. Title page, credits dedication! And "Mumbo Jumbo," Ishmael Reed's documentary third novel, commences to unfold itself.

What Had Gone Bad

Any attempt on my part to accurately explain just how it unfolds itself would deal a death-blow to the mind's ability to absorb plot summary. But that trailer (as in a film) ought to give you a rough idea. As Mr. Reed quotes Carey McWilliams talking in Studs Terkel's "Hard Times" (1970): "After the stock market crash, some New York editors suggested that hearings be held; what had really caused the Depression? They were held in Washington. In retrospect, they make the finest comic reading. They hadn't the foggiest notion what had gone bad." (Mr. Reed's italics.)

But Mr. Reed knows "what had gone bad," and he has dramatized it all in his satirical-philosophical-vaudeville-minstrel-show of a detective story. It was the threat of the pandemic Jes Grew eating its way into the hearts and minds of the American people. To be sure, Warren Gamaliel Harding was elected President "on the platform 'let's be done with Wiggle and Wobble.'" (Mr. Reed cites Robert K. Murray's "The Harding Era" as the source for that.) But it was the Jazz Age, the time of speakeasies and flappers and dance-crazes. Cakewalks and ragtime. The Harlem Renaissance was happening. Jes Grew was obviously rampant, threatening even downtown New York and Wall Street.

And President Harding himself was rumored to have "a touch of the tarbrush," as the English used to put it. (When asked by Republicans to deny it, Mr. Harding replied, according to Mr. Reed's citation of J. A. Rogers's "The Five Negro Presidents U.S.A.": "How should I know. One of my ancestors might have jumped the fence.")

So the powers in charge of America—whom "Mumbo Jumbo" identifies as the Wallflower Order, an organization with ideological roots reaching all the way back to the enemies of the Egyptian fertility gods Osiris and Isis, in league with Hinkle Von Vampton and Hubert (Safe-cracker) Gould, a couple of thousand-year-old members of the Knights Templar (12th-century "Poor Fellows of Christ" who saved the Second Crusade "from annihilation by 'Islamic hordes'")—these powers combined to put a stop to Jes Grew. Southern Marines are sent to Haiti to stamp out the Voodooism that may be behind it all. President Harding is poisoned in his railroad car. The stock market is caused to plummet.

The Reed Grand Design

All of which adds up in its zany phantasmagoric way to more or less what Mr. Reed has been trying to tell us all along, in his two earlier novels, "The Freelance Pallbearers" and "Yellow Back Radio Broke Down," and in his anthology of black writing, "19 Necromancers From Now": namely, that the Afro-American cultural tradition that he calls Neo-Hoodooism is alive and well and has roots going back to pre-Christian times, when along came a cat named Moses who stole the Book from the Temple of Osiris and Isis in Koptos but got the message all wrong. All that the tradition lacks now is a Sacred Text, and if "Mumbo Jumbo" doesn't quite provide it, Mr. Reed's next book might.

The only trouble with the Reed grand design is that in trying to resurrect the Neo-Hoodooist black esthetic, it keeps having to expropriate the tools of Western culture—the printing press, the photograph, the European narrative tradition, the English language, and other such diabolical instruments of the anti-Jes Grew conspiracy. It is therefore hard to take seriously the seriousness behind his comedy.

Still, there remains the comedy in front of the seriousness, and that is sufficient to make "Mumbo Jumbo" by far the best book Mr. Reed has yet written. In his earlier novels, all his energy seemed to be sapped by the process of inventing fictional propaganda, and by the time the words were on the page there was little left for a reader to latch on to. But by making use of actual history in "Mumbo Jumbo," Mr. Reed gives his readers a point of reference and thereby adds enormous muscle to his writing. For a change, it is not only funny but interesting to read, regardless of whether one is friend or foe, regardless of whether one is a happy victim of Jes Grew or part of the conspiracy to wipe it out.