



Collected Stories of Charles W. Chesnutt

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“Charles W. Chesnutt was the first African-American writer of fiction to enlist the white-controlled publishing industry in the service of his social message,” writes Professor William L. Andrews. Andrews, whose books include *THE LITERARY CAREER OF CHARLES W. CHESNUTT*, has done a great service by collecting and introducing an affordable new paperback collection of Chesnutt’s challenging and enjoyable short stories.

Chesnutt remains a distinctive figure in American literary history, a talented and artful storyteller as deeply committed to making his professional mark as to conveying his strongly held moral notions. Chesnutt succeeded in changing the literary landscape in an important way; beginning with his first story in *THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY* in 1887, he paved the way for black writers who followed, from James Weldon Johnson to Charles Johnson.

This book includes Chesnutt’s two story collections in their entirety. The “Uncle Julius” stories from *THE CONJURE WOMAN* (1899) are framed with quaint formality, with a white Northern narrator playing straight man to an elderly ex-slave, who spins improbable but poignant and pointed tales of plantation life. The narrator tells us that Julius “would speak of a cruel deed . . . with furtive disapproval.” On the killing of a free black by a slave, for example: “En bein’ ez it wuz a free nigger, in dey wa’n’t no w’ite folks ’speshly int’rusted, dey wa’n’t nuffin done ’bout it, en de conjuh man come en tuk his son en kyared ’im ’way en buried ’im.” This surely was powerful stuff at the time, appearing as it did in a prominent national magazine. *THE WIFE OF HIS YOUTH AND OTHER STORIES OF THE COLOR LINE* (1899) examines questions of racial identity among middle-class, light-skinned African-Americans, mostly in the North.

“I want fame; I want money,” wrote Chesnutt in 1881. Though he published three novels in swift succession, Chesnutt’s dream of commercial literary success fell short. He remains an important figure; this collection is an accessible introduction to his work and life.

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