



The Return of Simple

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Between 1943 and 1965 Langston Hughes, one of the most talented and versatile writers to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance, delighted readers of the Chicago DEFENDER and the NEW YORK POST with the ideas and opinions voiced by his fictional folk character Jesse B. Semple. Though numerous Simple “stories” (they are actually conversations between Simple and a more educated acquaintance, set in Harlem saloons) have been collected in five previous volumes, more than half of the pieces in this new collection have not been published in book form. Arranged by the editor under four subject groupings—Women; Race, Riots, Police, Prices, and Politics; Africa and Black Pride; and Parting Lines (Miscellaneous)—Simple’s conversations cover a wide range of topics, running the gamut from bedbugs to race riots. His views on the various social and political issues he addresses represent the unique perspective of the lower-class African American male. Yet, as Simple expresses his ideas on life around him, his remarks often transcend the categories of race, class, and gender and enter the realm of the universal.

The Simple stories are justly famous for their humor, but Hughes was not aiming to be merely amusing in them. Simple’s conversations with his more educated and refined companion reflect the tensions and conflicts that Hughes struggled to resolve in himself. The mood of one of Simple’s conversations may shift suddenly from the lighthearted to the somber. As Arnold Rampersad (Hughes’s biographer) observes in his introduction, an undercurrent of sadness runs beneath Simple’s narratives, and Simple’s sense of humor is at times all that prevents him from sliding into deep despair.

This collection will appeal to readers who have previously made Simple’s acquaintance or who are overhearing his barroom bits of wisdom for the first time.

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