Books of The Times

Three First Novels on Race

By JOHN LEONARD

THE BLUEST EYE. By Toni Morrison. 164 pages. Holt, Rinehart & Winston. $5.95.

COALITIONS. By David Rounds. 298 pages. Outerbridge & Dienstfrey. $5.95.

TO WALK THE LINE. By David Quammen. 236 pages. Knopf. $5.95.

We have, this morning, an embarrassment of riches—three books, each a first novel, each distinguished, each having to do with relations between blacks and whites in the United States, and each sadly doomed to synopsis and a nosegay of adjectives because of space limitations.

Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" is an inquiry into the reasons why beauty gets wasted in this country. The beauty in this case is black; the wasting is done by a cultural engine that seems to have been designed specifically to murder possibilities; the "bluest eye" refers to the blue eyes of the blond American myth, by which standard the black-skinned and brown-eyed always measure up as inadequate. Miss Morrison exposes the negative of the Dick-and-Jane-and-Mother-and-Father-and-Dog-and-Cat photograph that appears in our reading primers, and she does it with a prose so precise, so faithful to speech and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry.

Taking Refuge in 'How'

It all takes place in Lorain, Ohio, a sort of black Winesburg. We are told at the outset that Pecola Breedlove, age 11, is impregnated by her own father; Pecola will live and her child will die. "There is really nothing more to say," writes Miss Morrison, "except *why*. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in *how*." She proceeds to tell us how, and thus explains why, in a series of portraits of "ideal" domestic servants, high-yellow children, preachers, drunks, whores and those abiding black women who so torment our Daniel Moynihans:

"Then they were old. Their bodies honed, their odor sour. . . . They had given over the lives of their own children and tendered their grandchildren. With relief they wrapped their heads in rags, and their breasts in flannel; eased their feet into felt. They were through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror. They alone could walk the roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia, the fields of Alabama unmolested. They were old enough to be irritable when and where they chose, tired enough to look forward to death, disinterested enough to accept the idea of pain while ignoring the presence of pain. They were, in fact and at last, free. And the lives of these old black women were synthesized in their eyes—a purée of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy."

I have said "poetry." But "The Bluest Eye" is also history, sociology, folklore, nightmare and music. It is one thing to state that we have institutionalized waste, that children suffocate under mountains of merchandised lies. It is another thing to demonstrate that waste, to re-create those children, to live the lie and die by it. Miss Morrison's angry sadness overwhelms.

In "Coalitions" David Rounds, a 28-year-old newspaperman, examines four lives—those of a young white doctor and his black wife; a young black storyteller and the blind white girl with whom he becomes involved. The locale is Boston. The event toward which the novel moves is a demonstration against racist unions and "equal unemployment." The tension derives from the ideas each of the four characters has about himself and the others, ideas that are both sexual and ideological. The confrontations are so abrasive as to be wounding; the accommodations are earned the hard way; dreams and deceits are stripped down to their motivational gearwork, resulting in a nakedness that is almost embarrassing.

A Piling of Monologues

Mr. Rounds takes risks, plunging into the minds of very different people, piling one interior monologue on top of another, sinking his teeth into every scene and refusing to let go, refusing to forgive too cheaply. "Coalitions" is one of the best psychobiographies of a white liberal I have seen, and it is a measure of its honesty that one feels there isn't as much hope for these people as they permit themselves to believe.

David Quammen is a 22-year-old Yale graduate, now off at Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship. Like the protagonist of "To Walk the Line," John Scully, he spent a summer working in the Chicago ghetto. His novel about that experience deals with a white radical organization trying to connect with the black community, and failing. There is a partial, human connection—between Scully and a young black militant named Tyrone Williams—but it is predicated on a lie. Scully does not know what he thinks he knows; if he knew what Tyrone Williams knows, he probably couldn't stand the knowledge.

What distinguishes Mr. Quammen's book is its humor, its lack of self-pity, the electric quality of the prose and a sense of the energy that flows between people, often to destructive effect. If "To Walk the Line" sometimes seems written to the specifications of Leslie Fiedler—black man lies to white man out of love—it rings as true as a knife bounced off steel. The meetings, the flirtations, the failures, the motion and the milieu, while not a substitute for Scully's experience (there are no substitutes; we are all simply going to have to live through the shredding of our most cherished myths), instruct and disabuse. The disabusing is of paramount importance, because it's far too late for any connections to be easy.

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