



You Can't Do That!

by Alvin Greenberg
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Little Marais, Minnesota, New Year's Day, 2005--As I sit down to write this, I'm about three quarters of the way through Edward P. Jones' Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Known World*, a book I hadn't intended to read at all. I had read several reviews of it when it first came out and thought I knew all I wanted to know about it: that it was a brave and admirable first novel that explored challenging and controversial material, namely the world of black slave owners in the ante-bellum South. But with a few exceptions (OK, I'll grant you *War and Peace* and *A Tale of Two Cities* and especially that postmodern take on the genre, John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*), I've never been much interested in historical fiction, so I figured I'd pass on this one, too. I did pause over it when I spotted it on the "New Paperbacks" table at Barnes and Noble in December, but I was on a Christmas shopping mission that day and besides, there were several other unopened books waiting for me at home, so I turned my back on it and got on with my shopping.

Then my wife gave it to me for Christmas.

There's an obvious moral in this, of course: Never turn your back on something you don't really know anything about. But that's not exactly what this is about. What this is about is what I, eager as ever to start playing with my Christmas toys right away, learned when I entered that unknown world of Jones' fiction. I learned much, of course—as expected—about that little known world of slave-owning blacks in his imaginary but ever-so-well-imagined Manchester County, Virginia; I learned—though in a different way, through the detailed lives of a wide array of fictional characters—what we should all have learned long since about the hardships and brutalities inflicted on these southern blacks, enslaved and free alike; and I also learned—and this is what I want to talk about here—some things about writing.

Not a hundred pages into the novel, in a scene that continues to follow the precipitating event of the novel, the death of the slave owner Henry Townsend, Jones describes one of the slave children who goes skipping down the lane in clear violation of the solemnity of the occasion, prompting a speedy adult reprimand:

"Tessie would soon be six years old and being the child of her parents who she was, she listened and stopped skipping. Tessie would live to be ninety-seven years old, and the doll her father was making for her would be with her till her last hour. She and the doll,

missing the corn-silk hair Elias her father had put on it, would outlive two of her children, and the doll would outlive her."

Wait a minute! I thought as I read that passage, you can't do that. You can't give away the future, the fate, of a character whom we've only just met and barely gotten to know yet. That's just not . . . done. But, of course, Jones had done it—and had gone on to do it again and again throughout the novel, each time deepening, enriching, the historical depth and breadth of the novel, the lives of these people he'd given life to, the reach of the novel. Like Tessie, he'd violated the rules; with Tessie as an analogy, he'd even announced he was violating the rules; but unlike Tessie, I slowly began to see, he was getting away with it. He was not only shortcutting what I'd always found the most tedious aspect of historical fiction—the overly detailed development of generation after generation of characters—but he was saying, in effect, Look, there's all sort of things you're not "supposed" to do in your writing, but, if you use them wisely, they can work for you and your reader in surprising ways. He was reminding me, once again, how important it is, as a writer, to read as a writer, to keep an eye not only on what's going on in the writing, but how the writer is doing it. And—by no means incidental to the theme of this marvelous novel—he was showing us all how important the search for freedom is.

Alvin Greenberg's latest book, *Hurry Back*, won the 2004 Idaho Prize from Lost Horse Press. A reading and book launching party will be held at the Log Cabin Literary Center on Thursday, April 21, at 7:30 P.M.