

John Killens: 'Decolonizer'

CHICAGO — "The nigger image is a white invention but make no mistake—black writers are using the same technique," John Oliver Killens, writer in residence at Howard University, told members of a panel at the first annual Conference of the Black Academy of Arts and Letters.

"Why haven't black writers written about black heroes?" Killens asked novelists Sam Greenlee and Ishmael Reed, who were also panelists, and the all-black audience.

Killens is vice president of the academy, started in 1969. Saturday, he delivered a paper on the need for black writers to find a black identity.

Killens said recently in a Washington Post interview he believes his job as a writer is to "decolonize" the minds of blacks.

"That's the way I see my responsibility—to create positive images, to debrainwash my people," he explained. Killens, at 56, is the author of four novels, a book of essays and a children's biography of slave rebellion leader Denmark Vesey.

He conducts writers' workshops, open to registered students and community residents, at Howard and Columbia universities. He lectures frequently to college audiences and community organizations. He's working on several books, including a biographical novel on Alexander Pushkin and a children's novel on black folk character John Henry, and writing a screen play of his World War II novel, "And Then There Was Thunder."

Still, Killens, who has been at Howard since last fall, is ambivalent about the direction blacks and black literature are taking.

"I am encouraged and discouraged by black writing of the last generation," he commented. "In the 1960s, the poets started aiming their work at black audiences. The poetry is full of identification with blackness. But most of the playwrights and novelists are still looking at us through the eyes of whites—looking at us as niggers.

They're creating the same stereotyped characters as white writers."

Killens continues: "It's sad there are so few love stories about blacks. I don't mean syrup stuff but genuine accounts of affection between people. Another thing is that the focus in most black writing is on the northern cities.

At the same time writers were talking about 'it's nation time,' they were forgetting that nationhood means land. There's no land in the cities except dirty pavement."

Killens, who started writing while in the Army during World War II, is equally unhappy about militant black protest.

Sitting in his Mount Pleasant apartment (he spends three days a week here and four in New York), Killens said, "There's been no revolution among blacks. There've been revolutionaries looking for a revolution like a playwright looking for a revolution like a playwright looking for a play. After the civil rights movement in the 1960s, many young blacks were disappointed and drifted into mysticism."

"There're a lot of black students who talk a good game, but they haven't read much and they have no program. Too many of them are trying to get high. We need some long-distance runners, some people who have vision. Long-distance running takes planning, discipline."

But, he said, he's optimistic. "I have some good people in the workshops. George Davis, who was in the Columbia Workshop, had a novel published. I've another student whose novel is being considered for publication.

"If this trend of blacks writing and buying more books, continues it will encourage black writers to produce more. If you're writing for a black audience, you can have more muscle in dealing with white editors."

—Hollie I. West