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The Art of Living

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American Book Review, Volume 41, Number 6, September/October 2020,
pp. 18-28 (Review)

Published by American Book Review

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/abr.2020.0094>



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BOOK REVIEWS

THE ART OF LIVING

Marc C. Conner

GRAND: A GRANDPARENT'S WISDOM FOR A HAPPY LIFE

Charles Johnson

Hanover Square Press

www.harlequintradepublishing.com/shop/
books/9781335015860_grand.html

160 Pages; Cloth, \$19.99

There is a rich tradition in Zen writing of the “art of” narrative. Eugen Herrigel inaugurated the form with his classic *Zen in the Art of Archery* in 1948; Robert Persig contributed his brilliantly idiosyncratic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* in 1974. These are books that take a trade or practice and use it to convey the fundamental truths of the life well lived. Charles Johnson, who has forged a remarkable artist’s life in over twenty-five books ranging from novels to works of philosophy to cultural essays to short stories to children’s tales, has created a similar sort of book in *Grand: A Grandparent’s Wisdom for a Happy Life*. Johnson does not choose a trade or craft for the vehicle of his wisdom, however. He goes right to the source and produces a book that could offer “fertile and essential ideas for the art of living.”

The book does have its own conceit that enables the transmission of wisdom. It is constructed as a series of ten chapters, each of which offers advice to Johnson’s eight-year-old grandson, Emery Charles Spearman, and guide the young boy to help him navigate the tempestuous waters of life as he grows into adulthood. Within these ten chapters, Johnson characteristically explores a diverse range of writing styles — first-person confession, philosophical argument, speculative essay, short story, epistle (indeed the entire work can be understood as a letter to his “Dear Son,” not unlike Benjamin Franklin’s classic *Autobiography* [1791]), historical reflection, and more. This is paradigmatic of much of Johnson’s work, such as his short-story collections *Soulcatcher* (2000) and *Nighthawks* (2018), which similarly employ a wide variety of genres and styles. For Johnson proudly inhabits a wide range of writing modes, constructing what he has called a house of fiction that it offers its visitors many rooms.

Thinking about the book as a house or home is a helpful way to approach *Grand*. For this book begins with a meditation on place: “Once upon a time,” it opens, in classic storytelling fashion, “the cluttered study where I’ve written books of all kinds for twenty-six years, and drawn all manner of cartoons and illustrations, was all my own.” This is Johnson’s *sanctum sanctorum*, his office/study that was specially designed by architects, where he has created over the decades in his Seattle home. But every good story turns on the moment when a new character enters, and so eight years ago Johnson’s grandson Emery was born and “apparently this room inspires him, too, because he now calls it *his* office. I watch in wonder as he, a beautiful and brilliant boy who feels at home in a room of books and artistic tools, takes over my workspace for his

projects.” Emery’s presence in Johnson’s life is an irruption, a happy invasion, and a transformation of Johnson’s relations to both time and space. The resulting book is, like all works of art, an offering or gift not just to Emery but to the generations of the future that he embodies. It is truly wisdom for living a fulfilled life for a world that is desperately in need of such guidance.

Hence Johnson’s first exploration takes us, not into Emery’s future, but into Johnson’s (and by extension Emery’s own past), specifically the past of Johnson’s own father and the patriarchs who preceded and continue to influence Johnson’s life and work. Johnson has written at length about his own father in multiple formats, from several seminal essays to the great Evanston chapter in his 1998 novel *Dreamer*. In *Grand*, he returns to the central themes he has adumbrated in those other writings: his father’s work ethic, his pious Christianity, his endurance, his attitude towards race and racism, and his ability to build. Like the great Irish poet Seamus Heaney, who in his early poem “Digging” (1964) honors his forebears by creating the written work that emulates their work of human hands, Johnson pays homage to his forebears in the note he places on the title page of all his books: “A Work from the Johnson Construction Co.” Johnson begins

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with the fathers partly to emphasize the nobility and usefulness of their ethos, and partly to honor those who have come before, as an early lesson in right living for Emery and all readers — “honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land.”

Hence, while the book is certainly a meditation on space, it is equally a meditation on time, as we see when Johnson thinks about what he hopes to accomplish with *Grand*:

Naturally, I love watching Emery in the present. But I sometimes worry about his future. What will his world be like as he grows into adolescence, then young manhood? Do I have any “wisdom,” based on my seventy-one years of experience, worth sharing with him? Are there any perennial truths that I — as a writer, artist, academically trained philosopher, Buddhist practitioner, martial artist and former journalist and college professor — can impart to Emery that might make his journey through life easier or more rewarding?

Again, like Franklin, Johnson takes himself and his own experience as his subject, as a way to convey to his grandson the lessons he has learned through an extraordinarily rich and diverse set of lived experiences. Yet this is also a book about Johnson’s own time, his very epoch — the past that formed him, the present in which he is situated, and the

Charles Johnson

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNER

GRAND



A Grandparent’s Wisdom
for a Happy Life

future that will ensue — and it’s about Johnson’s judgments of his time and the responses to this age that he thinks are most appropriate for not just personal well-being, but for the well-being of the community, the polis, and indeed of the nation. In this, the most apt comparison might well be Frederick Douglass, whose ever-expanding life stories became increasingly focused on the age that surrounded him and to whom he stood as, in Emerson’s phrase, a “representative man”

What then constitutes the wisdom Johnson offers to Emery, and by extension to a world that is sorely in need of such guidance? A major component of what he wants to convey to Emery is the importance of claiming and developing his individual self: “What he should always remember is something I told his mother as she was growing up: namely, there has never been anyone in this world exactly like him. There will never be anyone in this world exactly like him again.” Yet — and here perhaps we see Johnson’s difference from the heroic individualism of the American tradition in Franklin, Emerson, and Douglass — Johnson also insists that the self is not an essence, it is not a fixed entity that must be constructed and to which one must insist on fixity. Rather, “self-examination will be necessary for him at every stage and season of his life, because he is a process, not a product.” This is one of Johnson’s fundamental truths, evident throughout his entire body of work, as he melds American and African American individualism with the Buddhist (and existentialist) conviction that the self is always a process of evolving understanding.

This insistence on the ever-changing nature of all reality is another key tenet of the book. Johnson asserts, “Nothing is, nor can be, permanent, including this universe itself.” And this leads Johnson to assert that “the fact of impermanence leads him inexorably to an ethical position” — the ephemeral nature of all things is a warrant for the preciousness of all things, and especially of sentient life. Everything, he states, dies — “and most often so that something else may be born.” The book’s commitment to the principle of ongoing life is part

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of its majesty, a principle that Johnson connects to jazz, the “unique contribution to American music and culture” that insists upon improvisation and “being open to the rich possibilities of the present moment.” This leads to what Johnson describes as the “overabundance of meaning” in the world, and his conviction that we are most fulfilled “when we are devoted to giving, not to accumulating.” The alignment of Johnson’s Buddhism, existentialism, Christian heritage, ethical commitment, and American and African American cultural practice is part of what makes this book (and indeed all his writings) so remarkable. And in this moment of outrage over racial injustice, and suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic, this bountiful assertion of the beauty of living is welcome perspective indeed.

It is crucial to emphasize two historical figures who are prominent in *Grand*: James Weldon Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr. Johnson calls our attention to James Weldon Johnson’s most lasting contribution to American culture, the “black national anthem” he composed as a young man to commemorate Lincoln’s birthday, “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” What the book celebrates in that achievement is not just this one central expression, but the entire range of J. W. Johnson’s achievement as a poet, composer, lawyer, novelist, editor, NAACP general secretary, and political lobbyist — in short, for what C. Johnson describes as Johnson’s “luminous life — a cornucopia of creativity.” This is certainly a version of Charles Johnson’s own life, and the model he wants Emery to follow as a richly fulfilling and culture-creating existence.

King has long been a figure of major focus for Johnson. In addition to *Dreamer*, he has published numerous essays and studies of King’s life, and the correspondence of King’s own evolving life philosophy and Johnson’s is profound. In *Grand*, he turns to King’s early sermon, “The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life” (1967), and emphasizes those three elements for Emery’s consideration: to love oneself properly, to understand the interconnectedness of all things and people, and especially to quest always for the divine.

Johnson concludes his meditation on King with that final emphasis: “Like King, Emery — and all of us — should never ignore the spiritual register in our lives.” Johnson is and has always been that rarest of things in our materialistic twenty-first century world: a deeply religious writer and thinker, whose mind is always attuned to the ways in which the spiritual world calls to us and the warrant we have to respond. Here, without preaching and without doctrine, he gently urges Emery and his readers to attend to the world that is larger than ourselves.

In the book’s final chapters, Johnson describes the fulfillment, discipline, and insight he has gained from his lifelong practice of the martial arts — a practice young Emery has already begun

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— and invokes the great Shotokan karate teacher Gichin Funakoshi to underscore the relations between faith and discipline. This inquiry reaches a crescendo in the final pages, where Johnson describes his own most fundamental learning experience — becoming a father:

For me, having a child — a being completely helpless and dependent on me for its survival — meant that when I was in my twenties I had to stop being a child myself ... [and use] that special relationship between parent and child as a daily opportunity to reduce — as a caregiver — one’s own self-will and selfishness for the sake of loved ones.

The principle that love is sacrifice, a verb of offering of one’s very self in a grace-filled gesture towards others, pervades this book and indeed all of

Johnson’s work. Close companion to love is beauty, the object of all artists, regardless of the medium. Love and beauty, he claims, “will fill them with thanksgiving, deepen their sense of wonder, and awaken a fearlessness in their heart.” When at the book’s conclusion Emery comes padding into their study in the early morning hours, he confirms the symmetry with which the book began: “He goes right to the corner of the room where I keep a few small penlights, grabs one, and hurries out. He knew exactly where they were, of course. Since this cluttered study has become as much his workplace as mine.”

Finally, although the voice and structure of this book depend on an intimate connection with Johnson’s grandson, we would err to think that *Grand* is therefore the most personal of all Johnson’s writings. For in fact the consonance of this book with all of Johnson’s work confirms that those writings too are letters of counsel, wisdom, and love, offered to his readers in his efforts to share the art of living with the world.

Marc C. Conner is the President of Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, NY, where he is also professor of English. His books include The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable (2000), Charles Johnson: The Novelist as Philosopher (2007), The Poetry of James Joyce Reconsidered (2012), The New Territory: Ralph Ellison and the Twenty-First Century (2016), Screening Modern Irish Fiction and Drama (2016), and The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison (2019). In 2012 the Great Courses program released his twenty-four lecture series titled How to Read and Understand Shakespeare, and in 2016 a thirty-six lecture series titled The Irish Identity: Independence, History, and Literature. He and his wife, Barbara, have three sons.

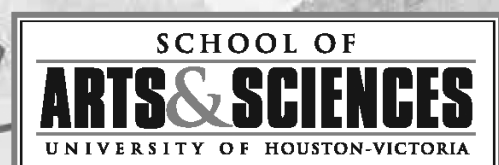
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