
BLACK AMERICAN LITERATURE AT YEAR 2000:

A NEW PRESENCE

BY ROBERT B. STEPTO



During the 1960s, as the civil rights movement expanded, there was a feeling in U.S. literary circles that black American literature was in the midst of a second renaissance, following the Harlem Renaissance of the pre-World War II era.

A case certainly could be made for this view. The 1960s saw the emergence of the Negro Ensemble Company in New York City, and countless smaller theater troupes across the country, as well as the more radical black arts movement in both drama and poetry. Publications proliferated, from new titles from major publishing houses to new journals to extensive efforts to republish hundreds of out-of-print titles -- such as the reissuance, in 1969, of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Furthermore, the first courses in black American literature appeared in the catalogs of a number of colleges and universities. On the one hand, students worked toward graduation by studying black American literature; on the other hand, a demand suddenly sprang up for qualified teachers of this literature.

What began in the 1960s surged in the decades that followed, and surely appears to be continuing as a movement and as a literary tradition at the turn of the new century. This expansion has been so dramatic that one is tempted to say that the second renaissance is over, not because "the Negro is no longer in vogue" (the fate of the Harlem Renaissance), but because the black American is both in vogue and in the mainstream. It is fair to say

that if the Depression of the 1930s killed the Renaissance of that era, prosperity has enabled the second renaissance to thrive. Today, black American literature is no longer so marginal, so novel or so limited in its readerships that its fate is uncertain. Today, virtually every strand of writing in the United States includes a wealth of prominent black American authors, to the extent that no one definition of the black American writer prevails.

While it is obvious that black American talents are working in all major literary genres, what may be less obvious is what new directions they are taking within those disciplines. In fiction, for example, while historical accounts are not new, what does seem intriguing is the fresh effort to write the stories of slavery. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), for instance -- which may have been the catalyst for her Nobel Prize for Literature -- is a striking example of the new imagining of slavery. Rather than offering the familiar tale of the revolt-leading male slave (versions of which began in 1853 with Frederick Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*), it presents the story of Sethe, a female ex-slave who killed her child rather than see her subjugated. Then, too, Charles Johnson's stories and novels are fresh in terms of vision and sensibility. The opening premise in his National Book Award-winning 1990 novel, *The Middle Passage*, is that the Negro hero is so hapless that when he stows away aboard a ship to avoid marriage he unwittingly chooses a slave ship. This is the essence of blues humor, born of slavery. Yet it took until a decade ago for an author to risk finding that humor in the story of

the agonizing middle passage from Africa to the Americas that was at the heart of the slave trade.

In other words, black American writers of literature are self-confident enough these days to be able to come at a well-worn subject in a different way -- even expressing criticism of something they might not have criticized before. In that sense, they are following in the wake of historians of the African American experience of the last quarter of the past century who paved the way for new perspectives.

In keeping with the adage that new experiences occasion new stories, black American writers of late have been writing about new venues and neighborhoods, new schools, friends and work situations. This may be part of the reason why they are reaching new audiences. As a result, Terry McMillan -- in books like *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998) -- can depict successful black women finding love in varied surroundings and gain a wide readership as well. Darryl Pinckney, in *High Cotton* (1992), can attract and amuse readers with his take on the corporate lunchroom. Andrea Lee's *Sarah Phillips* (1984), Trey Ellis' *Home Repairs* (1993) and *Right Here, Right Now* (1999) and Connie Porter's *All-Bright Court* (1991) represent the work of three young writers who, in symbolizing a middle-class milieu, incisively render relatively new black situations.

Equally fascinating is the rise of black American writers in the so-called sub-genres such as science fiction and crime thrillers. Octavia Butler -- in books such as *Kindred* (1988), mixing 20th-century black sensibilities with 19th-century history in a time warp -- has brought a new perspective to black American literature. Walter Mosley has advanced the status of the black American mystery story beyond the earlier work of George Schuyler, Chester Himes and Ishmael Reed by combining that form with the black migration narrative. With Easy Rawlins as his protagonist in books such as *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), Mosley's novels are vivid because of the confrontation of black migrants from Texas and Louisiana with present-day Los Angeles, California. Striking within the mystery genre is the presence of several women writers. In books such as *Blanche Among the Talented Tenth* (1994), Barbara Neely deftly transforms a familiar black character in popular culture -- the maid -- into the savvy, observant sleuth

housekeepers often are or can be. Valerie Wilson Wesley's novels, including *Where Evil Sleeps* (1996), focus on Tamara Hayle, a private investigator who -- through her particular circumstances of being black and a single parent -- finds both insight and personal motivation. And Pamela Thomas-Graham, in *A Darker Shade of Crimson* (1998) and other novels, has brought the mystery novel, and a black heroine, into the hallowed campuses of Ivy League universities.

Black Americans traditionally have made significant contributions to poetry and drama, and they are doing so today as well. Rita Dove -- honored with a term as poet laureate of the United States in the early 1990s as well as a Pulitzer Prize -- certainly is one of the more exceptional poets of the current generation. Her latest collection, *On the Bus With Rosa Parks* (1999), her seventh, is a wide-ranging venture into family relationships, building upon the motif and affection that is at the heart of her earlier volume, *Mother Love* (1995). Dove has distinguished herself recently as a playwright, with *The Darker Face of the Earth*, her take on Sophocles' Oedipus, set on a Southern U.S. plantation during the 19th-century slave era. It is being staged at various venues across the United States. In collections such as *Thieves of Paradise* (1998) and his earlier *Neon Vernacular* (1993), among others, Yusef Komunyakaa, another Pulitzer Prize-winning black American poet, has distinguished himself through fierce takes on war and race, even as he is caught up in images of art and music, with a style that resonates with hints of blues and jazz. And Marilyn Nelson, whose poetry invariably has reached deep into memories of her own childhood as she focuses on interfamilial relationships and women's status in society, deals with freedom and status and black American heroism in a recent volume, *The Fields of Praise: New and Selected Poems* (1997).

In drama, the issue is frequently not just what is new and important but also what is accessible in written text form. Fortunately, publishers retain in print many of Langston Hughes' timeless dramas of years ago, and continue to publish the ongoing series of works by Pulitzer drama honoree August Wilson, a cycle of 20th-century dramas -- one set in, and reflecting, each decade -- that includes *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars* and *Fences*. These pieces

overflow with memory and history, strong characters and intergenerational lessons. His latest work, *King Hedley II*, recently had its world premiere at a resident professional theater in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, even as his last piece, *Jitney*, is making its way to Broadway.

For the first time since the 1960s and 1970s, when works by James Baldwin, Charles Gordone, Joseph Walker, Amiri Baraka, Ron Milner and others found their way to the printed page, publishers are amenable to issuing play texts. As a result, besides Wilson, readers can turn to collections by Pearl Cleage (*Flying West and Other Plays*, 1999) and Suzan-Lori Parks (*The American Play and Other Works*, 1995) and the quite riveting performance art pieces by Anna Deavere Smith. Smith worked first in the aftermath of racial tensions in Brooklyn, New York, in 1991, and similar strife in Los Angeles, California, in 1992, to produce two pieces of documentary theater -- blending journalism, oral history and drama -- that she has taken to a number of theaters across the United States. She reproduced these one-person stagings in two volumes, *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* (1993), and *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992: On the Road: A Search for American Character* (1994).

Some young playwrights, about whom favorable word of mouth is spreading, have yet to see their works on the printed page for mass audiences. One of the more gifted of these writers is Cheryl L. West, a onetime social worker, whose early piece centering on an AIDS patient, *Before It Hits Home*, was followed by *Jar the Floor*, a hearty, hilarious and yet heartbreaking piece about four generations of African American women gathering for the 90th birthday of the oldest of their number. West is decidedly in the tradition of Lorraine Hansberry and August Wilson in her embracing of family and in the contemporaneity of her work.

No discussion of black American literature can ignore the literature of the public forum -- both the achievements of black writers in nonfiction and the rise of the black public intellectual and the books accompanying that ascent. The academy has played a role in this, since many intellectuals and authors have held academic positions and are in the forefront of developing courses in African American studies. Still, these individuals would not have such public

personae without the new venues now available in our generation -- in print journalism, electronic media and other outlets. The jazz expertise and social commentary of Stanley Crouch (*Always In Pursuit*, 1999), the complexities of feminism and love in the writings of bell hooks (*All About Love*, 2000), personal family histories such as the blended heritage of journalist James McBride (*The Color of Water*, 1996) and the erudition of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., on diverse components of African American history and experience (*Colored People: A Memoir*, 1994; *Ten Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, 1998), all are components of black American literature as it flourishes today.

In assessing how black American literature has taken on the significance it currently boasts, we should note that it is prominent and pervasive because it has a full life of its own outside the academy. Toni Morrison clearly is not dependent on an academic audience. August Wilson no longer needs a drama school environment for initially mounting his plays. A raft of writers -- including Barbara Neely, Walter Mosley, Terry McMillan -- are highly popular while remaining outside the "canon" of black American literature. One factor is the proliferation of book clubs in the United States in the past decade; enrollment is as pervasive in African American communities as elsewhere, and African Americans tend to read the works of their fellow African Americans. To be sure, many book clubs are seeking out books that can be regarded as life-changing or inspiring, rather than works for the college course outlines.

Thanks to one particular book club, sponsored by television personality and actress Oprah Winfrey, debuting books by African American novelists Breena Clarke and Cleage received unprecedented publicity. In *River, Cross My Heart* (1999), a story centered on the politics and power of faith-based communities, Clarke, a young Washington, D.C., native, depicts the dynamics of her native city during the 1920s, in the throes of segregation. Dramatist Cleage's *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1998) is an offbeat, unexpectedly humorous look at some of life's crises and tragedies, dappled with its author's inherently pungent imagery. The same held true for *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, a story about the impact of a family's transit from Haiti to the United States. This

first novel by Edwidge Danticat -- a Haitian-American writer who, in a span of less than a half-decade, has become known by a wide readership as a luminous portrayer of the recent history of her native country -- also was a selection of Oprah's Book Club. This one, however, is destined to have a second life among students, for its critical and artistic value.

Indeed, in a tentative way, Danticat's writings are evidence that while black American literature now has a robust life beyond the academy, it also has a continually evolving place within it. Think here less of the courses in place, some since the 1960s, but rather of the certain conviction that black American literature is vital as a field of study for anyone seeking to know the literature of the United States. The number of graduate students including black American literature among their oral examination fields is rising; so, too, are the numbers of dissertations addressing black American authors -- particularly when combined, intriguingly, with writers representing various groupings. And the roster of universities in other countries granting higher

degrees for the study of black American literature is also on the ascent.

What of the future? Two issues readily appear. First, will black American literature continue to be mainstreamed? How will promising works continue to become the stuff of conversation in the marketplace? Second, how "national" will black American literature remain in a world that is increasingly more global in approach and transnational in outlook? In part, this will depend on how, or whether, the definition of black American writer will evolve. Will the writer be an inhabitant of the Americas as a whole, of the circum-Atlantic world, or just of the United States?

The issue may have been with us for some time, but this might be a propitious time to reframe and renew the debate. ■

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PROFILE:

JOHN EDGAR WIDEMAN -- *HIS OWN MAN*

At a time when black American literature is thriving, when authors of long standing are lionized as they run familiar courses and new writers surface to be categorized into well-worn compartments, there -- *sui generis* -- is John Edgar Wideman.

It is difficult to itemize the disparate elements of his personal history without seeming to strain credibility. Consider: Born in Washington, D.C., in 1941, and raised in Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), he is the son of a working-class family, a onetime basketball hero at the University of Pennsylvania, a Rhodes scholar at Oxford University, holder of a degree in 18th-century literature, a novelist and memoirist with an endless string of enviable critical success and faithful readership, a married man and the father of a star player in the U.S. professional women's basketball league. He is an esteemed professor of English at the University of Massachusetts. Among other honors, he

won the PEN/Faulkner Award for his fifth novel, *Sent For You Yesterday* (1983), the only prize judged and funded by writers. Indeed, he has been called "the black William Faulkner," and "the softcover Shakespeare" -- a reference to the folio of paperback editions of his various titles.

And then there is the other side of the frame.

He is the author of *Brothers and Keepers* (1984), centering on the relationship between a successful man and his imprisoned sibling, convicted of murder and sentenced to life behind bars. It is not a novel. It is a family memoir. And he is the author, among other magazine articles, of a searing piece in *Esquire* some years ago about a father and a son who, having gone astray, killed a classmate. It, too, is nonfiction.

Two lives lived. It's the stuff of stories. But it's all true.

His personal traumas, one can imagine, have enriched his creative gifts. But the reader will not know anything more than the writer wants revealed, in books such as *Fatheralong: A Meditation on Fathers and Sons, Race and Society* (1994). As he

said in a *Washington Post* interview, "I'm not putting up my life as material to explain anything to anyone. I'll put it this way. It's a formulation. My life is a closed book. My fiction is an open book. They may seem like the same book -- but I know the difference."

Most likely, this writer -- because of his literary gifts -- would have been as profound, as impassioned and as insightful if none of the tragedies had befallen his family, no matter what subjects he might have explored. What his eyes have seen, what his ears have heard in the inner cities of Pittsburgh and elsewhere, including the music, have given his fiction a depth and a fragmented beauty that few of his peers can match.

In novels such as *Damballah* (1981), *Hiding Place* (1981) and *Sent For You Yesterday* -- familiarly known as *The Homewood Trilogy* -- he

penetrates, incisively, the Pittsburgh neighborhood of his youth as it was and as it is. *The Cattle Killing* (1996) is a period piece, centered on a yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia. *Two Cities* (1999), his most recent novel, is set against a backdrop of present-day Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, and constructed along musical lines -- blues, jazz, Motown, gospel, classical and funk.

Wideman has observed that he once yearned to write books that both his family in Pittsburgh and literary scholars could read and enjoy. The fact that his books have a wide following in the mass-market audience, and that a two-day international celebration of his work was slated for April 2000 at the University of Virginia, indicates that he may have achieved that seemingly elusive objective.

-- M.J.B.



OTHER BLACK AMERICAN WRITERS

EDWIDGE DANTICAT is an awarding-winning Haitian American writer. Born in Haiti in 1969, she lived there until the age of 12, then joined her parents in the United States, where she had difficulty fitting in with her peers. In her isolation she turned to writing about her native country, and about Haitians in America. This resulted in her highly acclaimed first novel *Breath, Eyes, Memory* in 1994, which she followed in 1995 with a collection of short stories, *Krik? Krak!*, and with the novel *The Farming of Bones* in 1998. Garry Pierre-Pierre of *The New York Times* has heralded Danticat as "the voice of Haitian Americans."

JAMAICA KINCAID is acclaimed for her lyrical style. Doris Grumbach, writing in *The Washington Post Book World*, has said that Kincaid's style intensifies "the feelings of poetic jubilation Kincaid has...for all life." Kincaid was born Elaine Potter Richardson (she changed her name in 1973) in Antigua, and left that

country at the age of 17 to work as a nanny in the United States. She began her literary career as a contributor to *The New Yorker* magazine. Her best known works -- which draw on her West Indian background -- include the novels *Annie John*; *Lucy*; and *The Autobiography of My Mother*; and the short story collection *At the Bottom of the River*.

JAMES McBRIDE, the son of a black minister and a white Jewish mother, has worked as a jazz saxophonist and as a journalist with *The Washington Post* and *The Boston Globe*. His much-praised 1996 memoir, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother*, is an outgrowth of an essay about his mother that he wrote for the *Globe* in 1981. It combines an account of his own New York City childhood with his mother's life history. In a review of *The Color of Water* in *The Nation*, Marina Budhos writes that "McBride's memoir is not only a terrific story, it's a subtle contribution to the current debates on race and identity."

Novelist and short story writer **TERRY McMILLAN** has achieved a high-level of success since publication of her first novel, *Mama*, in 1987. McMillan, who was born in Michigan in 1951, is a storyteller whom one

reviewer characterizes as writing with an "authentic, unpretentious voice" as she tells of the urban experience of African American men and women. Her novels also include *Disappearing Acts*, *Waiting To Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*. Deeply committed to networking other writers, and determined to correct what she considered the publishing industry's neglect of black writers, McMillan edited a collection, *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*, in 1990.

WALTER MOSLEY is best known for his groundbreaking series of tales about a fictional black detective struggling to get by in post-World War II California, but he has expanded his repertoire to include other types of fiction, as well as an examination of the American economic and political machine, *Workin' on the Chain Gang: Shaking Off the Dead Hand of History*, published in January 2000. Born in Los Angeles in 1952, Mosley achieved popular and critical success with his tales of black detective "Easy" Rawlins -- *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990), *A Red Death* (1991), *White Butterfly* (1992), *Black Betty* (1994) and *A Little Yellow Dog* (1996). But his talents went beyond mere genre fiction: When Mosley published his first non-genre

novel, R.L.'s *Dream*, in 1996, the San Francisco Review of Books proclaimed it "a mesmerizing and redemptive tale of friendship, love, and forgiveness ... without doubt, the author's finest achievement to date."

AUGUST WILSON, born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1945, is one of the United States' most significant playwrights. In addition to other works, he has nearly completed a ten-play cycle chronicling the black experience in the United States, with each play set in a different decade of the 20th century. A number of the plays -- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *Jitney* and *King Hedley II* -- have won honors and awards, including four New York Drama Critics Circle Awards and two Pulitzer Prizes for Best Drama (*Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*). Known for powerful dialogue and emotionally-charged plots, Wilson has been described by *The New York Times* as "a major writer, combining a poet's ear for vernacular with a robust sense of humor (political and sexual), a sure instinct for cracking dramatic incident and passionate commitment to a great subject."

-- Kathleen Hug and Rosalie

