

Our National AOIP Leadership Invites Our Readers To...

Take Pride in African American Authors

The Quest for Literacy and Self-Respect

HISTORY proves that the ability to read and write can be crucially liberating. In his autobiography (1845) Frederick Douglass made it dramatically clear why his master's prohibition against teaching him the alphabet compelled him to learn it: "I now understood what to me had been a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man's power to enslave the Black man....From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom.... Though conscious of the difficulty of learning without a teacher, I set out with high hope, and a fixed purpose, at whatever cost of trouble, to learn how to read."

Like Douglass, African American writers have always been in the vanguard of their people's quest for social justice and self-respect. Therefore, it is necessary to "reach out" deliberately to find and read their work to establish a pact of communication between writer and reader that strengthens a shared cultural heritage. The importance of this bond in our history is evident in the development of El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, who, in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964), states: "I can remember accurately the very first set of books that really impressed me.... It's called *Wonders of the World*. It's full of pictures of archeological finds, statues that depict, usually, non-European people.... Then *Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois gave me a glimpse into the Black people's history before they came to this country. Carter G. Woodson's *Negro History* opened my eyes about Black empires before the Black slave was brought to the United States, and the early Negro struggles for freedom."



If Black writers fail to develop an audience, they will have difficulty being published. Therefore, readers should help establish and protect the legacy of African American expression and sustain its potential development by buying books and ensuring that they be stocked in libraries, taught in schools, printed by publishers, and reviewed by critics.

Even after books are published, if they are soon sequestered on warehouse shelves or allowed to go out of print that too is a serious problem. African American librarians and educators complain that many books printed by major publishers during the 1960s and early 1970s that conveyed positive ideas about and images of Black life are now unavailable. Is it possible that some of those uplifting texts could have lessened

the kinds of cultural alienation and psychic violence that plague so many African American youths today? When books go out of print, each generation that comes along has to recreate a heritage—has to begin again to introduce its children to a sense of an affirmative racial identity and to the potential they have.

Black writers of children's literature and young adult fiction such as Brenda Wilkinson, Walter Myers, Alexis DeVeaux, Joyce Hansen, Jim Haskins, Eloise Greenfield, John Steptoe, and Camille Yarbrough deserve a larger readership. Brenda Wilkinson's comments about her novel for young adults, *Not Separate, Not Equal* (Harper & Row, 1987), give some insights into why the writer's efforts are not always rewarded by the marketplace. "It's the story of six Black stu-

dents who are the first to integrate an all-White high school in Georgia around 1965. It tells of a time of contrasts, when the effects of integration were both positive and negative—for example, some Black teachers lost their jobs. It also deals with the color caste that can still prevail in some Black communities. I wrote the book based upon things I knew in my own life, and I felt the need to write about what is still happening now in young adults' own experience. But publishers are now focusing on 'classics' in young adult literature, and also a book like mine is not easy to sell in hardback. Libraries and bookstores mainly pick them up once they are in paperback. *So Not Separate, Not Equal* did not sell as well as it could have."

Sustaining a Cultural Heritage

REGARDLESS of the erratic nature of distribution and sales, in slightly over two centuries, African American writers have established a tradition that is a testament to the resourcefulness of their imaginations and the enduring strength of their wills. In 1773, Phyllis Wheatley, a slave in Boston who was born in Sierra Leone, was the first African American to publish a book, *Poems on Various Subjects*. William Wells Brown published the first Black novel, *Clotel; or The President's Daughter*, in 1853. Both books were published in London, England, not the United States. If they were still alive, Phyllis Wheatley and William Wells Brown would probably be astounded to see whole sections of African American publications in bookstores from coast to coast. And they would be proud to learn that poets like Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks and novelists like James Baldwin and Toni Morrison are interna-

(Continued on Page 8)

"Pulling Ourselves Up By Our Own Bootstraps"...A Series