

AFRICAN AMERICAN AUTHORS

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tionally renowned.

There are many books about African American culture and history written by non-Blacks (historians, sociologists, political theorists, psychologists, anthropologists etc.) that are scholarly and humane in exploring and describing African American life. But what is uniquely valuable for the Black reader is to engage in a pact of communication with a writer who has been on the inside of our life experience. One whose world view is shaped by the insights, community inheritances, and memories that are distinctly African American.

African American authors offer a panorama of experiences from ancient civilizations in Africa to the modern era of multicultural fusions from within the African diaspora. They create and draw upon a rich oral tradition—blues lyrics, folktales, spirituals, work songs, sermons. Stylistic influences and thematic similarities become clear when one reads works from different periods. For example, the narratives from the era of slavery repeat the theme of feeling like an outsider in a strange land. That motif takes on different forms in poems written in the 1930s in the folk idiom by Sterling Brown and in contemporary novels such as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Perhaps what is most important is that such works, in celebrating the resilience, toughness, and humor of their main characters, exemplify how to cope with or transcend the difficulties due to prejudice and poverty that have marred the African American's existence. Black writers can inspire a confident sense of who we are within a larger cultural and historical context. And this kind of anchoring gives us a sense of pride and direction in our quest to make the world a better, more harmonious place for all humans.

Representative Texts

WHAT are some ways to find specific books on select subjects by African American writers? At times it is even hard to know who is African

American without a familiarity with established names or a photo on the backcover or overleaf or a specific refs. Therefore, at the end of this article there is a list of books within general categories (autobiography, biography, fiction, history, children's literature, women's studies, and sports) that are in print, reasonably priced, and available at most major bookstores.

Speaking for Ourselves

WHEN *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American newspaper, began publishing in New York City in 1827, an editorial proclaimed: "We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly . . ." It is a tribute to African American writers that they have made much progress in creating a realistic presentation of the race. Our literature records our history and serves as a prophecy for our future. It reminds us that ignorance is not bliss, but a prison. And it challenges the stereotypes that have plagued our people for centuries.

Today African Americans are still engaged in the struggle for literacy to empower themselves. They should also become more involved in reaching out to read and collect the works of fellow Blacks. A major reason why is presented by Leothy Miller Owens, the president of Nkiru International Book Enterprises Inc., which began in 1978 and has its headquarters in Brooklyn, New York: "It is extremely important to collect books by Black authors simply because they don't stay in print very long and large quantities of them are usually not printed. The reason offered by major publishers to justify small printings is usually that Black people don't read. However, African Americans are reading more than they have in their history in the U.S. because there is a large literate community. And that community *must* collect Black authors to control the archives of Black culture, which in

the past have been exploited economically by non-Blacks."

Experience in America (Oxford U. Press, 1982).

"... *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."

—El Hajj Malik El Shabazz

A Selected Bibliography

Autobiography

Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (Beacon Press, 1988).

Winnie Mandela, *Part of My Soul Went with Him* (W.W. Norton, 1985).

The Autobiography of Malcolm X (with Alex Haley) (Grove Press, 1964).

Biography

Gail Lumet Buckley, *The Hornes: An American Family* (Knopf, 1986).

David Henderson, *'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: The Life of Jimi Hendrix* (Bantam Books, 1978).

Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, *Balm in Gilead: Journey of a Healer* (Addison-Wesley, 1989).

Fiction

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Vintage Books, 1980).

Paule Marshall, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (Vintage Books, 1969).

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (University of Illinois, 1980).

History

Mary Frances Berry and John W. Blassingame, *Long Memory: The Black*

Eric Williams, *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969* (Vintage Books, 1984).

Ivan Van Sertima, *They Came Before Columbus: The African Presence in Ancient America* (Random House, 1976).

Children's Books

Camille Yarbrough, *The Shimmer-shine Queens* (G.P. Putnam, 1989—ages 10-13).

Leo and Diane Dillon, *From Ashanti to Zulu* (Dial Books, 1976—all ages).

Alexis DeVeaux, *An Enchanted Hair Tale* (Harper and Row, 1987—ages 5-8).

Women's Studies

Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (William Morrow, 1984).

Imamu Amiri Baraka and Amina Baraka, editors and compilers, *Confirmation: An Anthology of African-American Women* (Quill, 1983).

Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (Vintage Books, 1983).

Sports

Arthur R. Ashe Jr., *A Hard Road to Glory (A History of the African American Athlete), Vols. I(1619-1918) and II(1919-1945)* (Warner Books, 1988).

Earvin "Magic" Johnson, *Magic's Touch* (Addison-Wesley, 1989).

Don Baylor (with Claire Smith), *Don Baylor* (St. Martin's Press, 1989).

"...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."

—Frederick Douglass