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AN INTRODUCTION
TO BLACK LITERATURE
IN AMERICA

From 1746 to the Present

Compiled and Edited with an Introduction by
LINDSAY PATTERSON

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I WISH to thank Emily Evershed, a great editor in every sense of the word, and one that a lucky few meet in a lifetime.

LINDSAY PATTERSON

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Introduction

IT HAS BEEN traditional for intellectuals to dismiss almost entirely the whole body of Afro-American literature as inconsequential and insignificant. When compared with world literature, a great deal of black writing does suffer, not because of technical incompetence but because too often the black writer is imprisoned in his own alienation, which ultimately restricts his scope and limits his subject matter. This is not his fault, for the writer has to contend with everyday problems like every other Afro-American, and it would take a super-human ego to detach himself completely and examine his "soul" and that of his fellow man without bitterness or rancor and with an unimpassioned eye. James Baldwin, recognizing this built-in trap for the black writer, fled to Paris for several years, Richard Wright's politics offered for a time the detachment he needed, and Langston Hughes used humor.

Baldwin, Wright and Hughes, like almost every other black fiction writer, grappled only with their contemporary societies. Few have attempted to use the distant past as a means of achieving objectivity. Perhaps it is because there were no black writers of the stature of Emerson, Thoreau or Hawthorne with whom they could identify, but there are many just as important historically as John Smith, Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, whom black writers could employ to gain a perspective to the present. These early writers are not represented in any standard American literature books but continue to rot virtually undisturbed in the rare book sections of a few libraries. Thus the black writer has been cheated out of a wellspring; but more than that, he has been made to feel that his ancestors contributed only a "shuffling" stereotype to the literary developments in this country.

The present-day black writer, in his search for a positive identity, would do well to ferret out hundreds of pre-Civil War tracts, letters, sermons and narratives for investigation. There are writers such as Venture Smith, James W. C. Pennington, William Craft, Samuel E. Cornish, Martin Delany, David Ruggles, Henry Bibb, James Meachum, Robert Purvis, William C. Nell, Henry Box Brown, Richard Allen, William Wells Brown, Benjamin Banneker and Hosea Eaton, who reveal a version of life in early America completely omitted or distorted in our literature and history books.

Also, it is not enough to have literature books for just one particular ethnic group. If we are to survive as a nation, every American should become acquainted with every other American's contribution. This is a point, I think, that cannot be stressed enough. And it is a sad fact that graduates of our finest institutions of higher learning leave their campuses without any knowledge of American history as it really is. These are the people who head, for the most part, the social and economic institutions in our country. And if they are not aware, how can we expect the man in the street to change his attitudes?

This book is more or less an introduction to black literature, from the earliest prose and poetry the black writer has produced to the latest. The selections are placed chronologically, and should be helpful in aiding students and scholars in tracing the history, thought and status of the black man in this country since his arrival.

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