

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

An Anthology of Nonfiction, Fiction, Poetry, and Drama

Demetrice A. Worley ♦ Jesse Perry, Jr.

Foreword by Nikki Giovanni



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About the cover

The illustration on the cover is a detail from *Family Tree*, a quilt designed by Wini McQueen in 1987. This quilt was part of the exhibition "Stitching Memories," organized by the Williams College Museum of Art, Macon, Georgia. Ms. McQueen, an African American artist who calls herself "a storyteller working in old world methods modified by new world technology," used mixed media to create the images on the quilt, including the transfer of photographs to cloth. *Family Tree* is shown in its entirety on page 318 and is reproduced here by permission of the artist and the Museum of Arts and Sciences, Macon, Georgia.

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This book is dedicated to my friend and husband, C. Nickolas Goloff, who believes in my abilities and shares in my dreams; to my parents, Ernestine R. Worley and Thomas D. Worley, Jr., who nurtured my early desire to read and write; and to my brothers, Timothy D. Worley and Michael D. Worley, who never let me get away with anything.

D.A.W.

This volume is dedicated to my wife and best friend, Maxine Gray Perry, who supports me in every professional endeavor; to our sons, Desmond and Derrick, their wives and children; to our son, Brian, and to my sister, Mary J. Morris; to my brother, Willie, and to the memory of my late father and mother, Jesse and Caroline Perry, and to my late brother, Benny.

J.P.J.

About the Authors

Dr. Demetrice A. Worley teaches African American Literature at Bradley University, where she is also Director of Writing. Among her many interests are the importance of and use of multicultural literature in the classroom and the relationship of writing theory to writing practice.

Dr. Jesse Perry, Jr., has been very actively involved in the field of language and literature education as a teacher and administrator since 1959. His most recent position was Program Manager (K-12), English Language Arts, San Diego City Schools.

Foreword

NIKKI GIOVANNI

A few years ago, *Voyager II* crossed our galaxy heading toward the Dog Star. We don't know a lot about the light that Earth sees but we know the brightest star in the galaxy is beyond the influence of the yellow sun. Galileo would be proud. I'm a Trekkie. I like the concept of both Space and the future. I'm not big on aliens that always seem to want to destroy Earth and Earthlings. It's almost laughable that the most destructive force in the known universe, the human race, always fears something is out there trying to get them. Freud said something about projection . . . and though I would hardly consider myself a Freudian, I think he had a point.

It's not really a question of whether or not E.T. is Black, his story is the story of sojourning. It doesn't even matter whether he came to Earth to explore or was brought to Earth for less honorable pursuits. He found himself left behind with neither kith nor kin to turn to. He depended, in the words of Tennessee Williams, "upon the kindness of strangers." E.T. didn't sing, but if he had he would have raised his voice to say "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child . . . a long way from home." E.T., had he taken the time to assess his situation, may have lifted his voice to the sky to say "I'm going to fly away . . . one of these days . . . I'm going to fly away." When the men with the keys captured him, taking him to the laboratory to dissect him, to open him up in order to find what he was made of, he might have hummed "You got to walk this lonesome valley . . . you got to walk it by yourself." But E.T., like Dorothy, had friends who came to his rescue. Dorothy returned to Kansas more sensitive, more aware of her world. E.T. returned to space having, I'm sure, a mixed view of Earth. Black Americans settled here, making a stand for humanity.

It is an honorable position . . . to be a Black American. Our Spirituals teach "I've been 'buked and I've been scorned . . . I've been talked about sure as I'm born." We maintained an oral tradition and created a written one. Phillis Wheatley, a slave girl, wrote poetry while others sang our songs. We did both because both are necessary. Hammer, while different from, is not in contrast to Frederick Douglass. Two Live Crew is in a direct line with Big Mama Thornton and all the other blues singers who sang what is called the "race music." (The "good" people would not allow it in their

it in their churches or homes.) But we have survived and thrived because of our ability to find the sacred in the secular. "Oh, pray my wings gonna fit me well," says the song but whether they fit ill or well we wear what we have with style.

Style has profound meaning to Black Americans. If we can't drive we will invent walks and the world will envy the dexterity of our feet. If we can't have ham we will boil chitterlings; if we are given rotten peaches we will make cobblers; if given scraps we will make quilts; take away our drums and we will clap our hands. We prove the human spirit will prevail. We will take what we have to make what we need. We need confidence in our knowledge of who we are.

America is no longer a nation of rural people. We no longer go to visit grandmother and grandfather on the farm in the summer. This is no longer a nation where the daily work is done by the body; the daily work is now performed by the mind. The distance between families is no longer a walk, or even, a short drive. Families, for that matter, are no longer clear. Biology no longer defines who we love or relate to. We are now able to make emotional choices. There is so much to be done to prepare Earth for the next century. Humans, who are so fearful of change, are in such a radical transition. The literature of Black Americans can lead the way. As we were once thrown into a physical unknown where our belief in the wonder of life helped forge a new nation, we can help lead Earth into an emotional unknown and seek acceptance for those who are unique. Our literature shows that humans can adjust to the unacceptable and yet still find a way to forgive. Our stories, which once were passed sitting on porches after dinner spitting tobacco juice at fireflies, as Alex Haley's grandmother did, are now passed through the poems, speeches, stories we have written and recorded.

While a bowl of navy beans is one of my favorite meals (with a bit of cole slaw and corn muffins on the side) I still enjoy a smorgasbord. Sometimes a bit of everything creates an appetite while satisfying a hunger. For all the trouble we now understand the voyage of Columbus to have caused, it must have been exciting to live in an age when we finally began to break into a concept of the whole Earth. For sure, we have not done a great job, but we have done a better job than if we had stayed home. This century is rolling on to a close. There is both outer space and inner space to be explored. The literature of Black Americans is, in the words of Stevie Wonder, "a ribbon in the sky." We learn and love the past because it gives us the courage to explore and take care of the future. Voyager II will not come back . . . it has gone too far away. We will not return, we can only visit. But isn't it a comforting thought to realize the true pioneer of Earth is our people? Isn't it the ultimate challenge to accept responsibility

not only for ourselves but our planet? One day, some identifiable life form will come to Earth and ask: Who are these people . . . these Black Americans? And we will proudly present our songs, stories, plays, speeches and poetry. We will proudly say: We are the people who believe in the possibilities.



Nikki Giovanni

Preface

We created this book to provide an anthology of African American nonfiction, fiction, poetry, and drama that would present you with an insight into the richness of African American literature and African American culture. We created this book, also, because we believe that the study of African American literature provides you with an opportunity to better understand yourself and other cultures.

This book begins with a historical overview of African American literature and presents a variety of selections written by black American authors, covering a wide range of themes for a period of time from the mid 1770s to the late 1980s. These works are arranged thematically: Slavery—Time of Trial; Standing Ground; The Folk Tradition; On Being a Man; On Being a Woman; Relationships, Love, and Conflicts; Passing Down Heritage; and Of Dreamers and Revolutionaries. You should view these themes as *starting points* for discussing the literary and cultural issues inherent in each selection.

Each chapter begins with information on the historical and social importance of the theme. Each selection is preceded with a brief biographical note on the author. This background information should serve as the first step on your way to learning more about the themes and the authors.

After each selection, there are questions to guide you as you think about the work. These are questions you can contemplate alone or with others. In addition, at the end of each selection there are reading/writing connection activities. These activities are designed to provide you with some direction as you critically and creatively respond to the literary and cultural issues raised in each selection. A reading journal is the ideal place in which to keep your writings about what you have read. If you are using this book in an educational setting, your instructor might make a reading journal part of your work. If you are reading this book on your own, it would still be a good idea to keep a journal. Your journal will provide you with a central location in which to store ideas and concerns that you may later use when responding in writing to the literary and cultural issues raised in *African American Literature*.

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I would like to acknowledge the people who helped me transform an idea into this book: my co-author, Jesse Perry, Jr., for being a co-believer in the dream; our editor, Sue Schumer, for her gentle but firm guiding hand; my English 229 Afro-American Literature classes at Bradley University for their constructive feedback on the literature as well as the "Thinking About the Selection" and "Reading/Writing Connection" activities; and my graduate research assistants, Charlene Trotman, Sandra Long, and Alan Williams, for gathering necessary information.

D.A.W.

I would like to acknowledge persons who helped to make this publication a reality: my co-author, Demetrice Worley, for her vision and support; our editor, Sue Schumer, for her ability to persuade and compromise when necessary; and former students who represent an American mosaic for their receptivity and eagerness to read and respond to literature of another people.

J.P.J.

The authors and publisher extend a special thank you to Janice Bell Ollarvia, who has served as Editorial Consultant for *African American Literature*. Ms. Ollarvia has taught English for over 20 years in the Chicago Public Schools and has held various administrative positions. Currently she is Assistant Principal for Curriculum and Instruction at Fenger High School in Chicago.

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A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION

Slavery (1700s to 1865)

The Africans who were brought to the United States of America as slaves were faced first with the ordeal of surviving the middle passage—the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean—and then surviving within the institution of slavery. As slaves, they were denied the right to retain their languages and religions. Instead, they were forced to learn a new language, English, and a new form of religion, Christianity.

The fact that there is any evidence of African American literature written before 1865, when the Civil War ended, is remarkable. In many areas it was against the law to educate a slave. Thus, the majority of slaves were illiterate. Some slaves tricked their owners' children into teaching them to read and write. A few slaves were lucky; their owners believed in educating slaves.

We should not confuse illiteracy, however, with a lack of literature or culture. The African literary tradition that the slaves carried with them was an