

Title:

Why Black Literature is Important

Word Count:

990

Summary:

The importance of Black Literature for African Ameican Children's self-esteem.

Keywords:

Poetry, African American literature, African Ameican historical literature, African American Self-esteem

Article Body:

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When I first published my first novel, *The Ebony Tree*, I'll never forget how I found out later that my then, 23 year-old niece ran through the house and screamed with laughter, after she read the book. Now mind you, my niece had always been an avid reader of white romance novels since her early teens, but reading my book was like landing on Mars for her. She reportedly asked her mother, "Mama, did Aunt Maxine make this up? Did you guys actually 'play white'?"

My sister-in-law told her, "Not only did we play white, we dreamed in white. That's all we ever saw in the books or on TV were white characters. It seemed like they had all the fun."

Typically, most Blacks grew up in the 50's with pictures on the wall of white Jesus, white Santa Claus and even white angels. There was nothing in the media or in books that reflected the beauty of blackness. Needless to say, if there were any books beside the Bible in the home, they were not Black books. It sent a silent message that Black was ugly and white was beautiful. This was as negative of an experience as when reading was forbidden to slaves.

Fastforward almost half a century. I know from rearing my children, who are now all adults, that having had Black books in the home was, and remains, a good influence on their self-esteem and confidence. When a person sees himself reflected in the literature he or she reads, it indirectly helps build a better self-image. For in literature, we find our role models, our archetypes from which we can learn life lessons. More specifically, in African American

literature, the stories are relevant to the Black experience in this country. These experiences range from people coming from different socio-economic classes, from varying urban to country regions, to different professions. We often get the Alger Horatio rags-to-riches story to its reversal, the riches-to-rags story. Most of these stories make social commentaries on how we all play a part in the symphony of the American Dream.

"Black Writers on The Rise," the headlines screamed. I believed them. After all, seeing the different genres of African American books in the local, predominantly Black bookstores, who wouldn't think that? Hadn't things improved for us as Black writers, since the late 1980's? However, after attending the Book Expo of America (formerly the American Book Association) held in Los Angeles, California in late April 1999, I had a rude awakening. Because of seeing all the books in the predominantly Black book stores scattered throughout LA, I had been lulled into a false sense of complacency that we, as African American writers, were being published at the same rate as mainstream books. To say the least, I was disillusioned.

Yes, The Book Expo of 1999 was a big eye-opener. The bad news is this: Our problems (as African American writers) are far from over. When I compared the books represented by the major publishers, I saw that the percentage of Black books is infinitesimally small compared to that of other races. Not one to be a soothsayer, but I feel the number of African American books can disappear like they did after the Harlem Renaissance, after the late 40's, and after the Revolutionary 60's, if we don't take control of our own written words.

However, the good news is this. The increase that is witnessed in the number of African American books can be attributed, by and large, not only to more Black publishing companies, Black editors, but to self-published books. Given the advent of desktop publishing, the Internet, and Black book clubs, many writers are taking control of our destinies and empowering ourselves by publishing our own stories.

So consider these questions. What are other ways having more Black books have helped? Is it easier to get published by mainstream as a Black writer, in a tight publishing market? Why is self-publishing so important, particularly for Black writers, if you can't get your books published by mainstream? To encourage other writers to pen their stories, here are some of the good things Black literature has brought to this country.

1. Salvation. To paraphrase Toni Cade Bambara, fiction snatches you back from the edge as a Black person in America.

2. Continuity with your ancestors. To paraphrase Toni Morrison, "If you are not

writing about the Village which you come from then you are not writing about anything."

3. A reading audience who is eager to see stories that reflect their reality.

4. A way of restoring history which was not allowed to be written down in the past.

5. A way of lifting up the next generation through the printed word, in addition to our oral tradition, which is reflected in rap, Hip Hop, and Poetry.

6. A way of promoting racial understanding for other ethnic groups. I learn a lot about other parts of the Diaspora when I read books by Haitian Americans, or when I read Chinese American literature, or any other culture's literature.

Recently, a teacher told me at a book signing, that a study was done at her school. It was found that all the little Black girls said that their image of beauty was still a blond, blue-eyed child. Imagine! This was December, 1999! It reminds me of the tragic tale in Toni Morrison's book, *The Bluest Eyes*, where the scourged Black child, Pecola, went insane, all because she wanted blue eyes. This book's setting was circa 1940.

My point is this. If we keep writing our stories down, we, as African American writers, may not ever have parity in the world of books. But at the same time, we won't have another generation of little Black girls playing white, like my friends and I did, with scarves and towels draped over our hair, which we felt wasn't beautiful enough. Or perhaps, we won't have little girls going crazy like the fictional Pecola did.