WORDS OF HERITAGE
...writing black history
For generations, African American writers have captured the black experience in novels, poems, plays and short stories. And they continue to do so today.

To celebrate the achievement of black writing in America, Ford Motor Company Fund honored two of America’s leading writers, the late Langston Hughes and Sonia Sanchez.

Hughes was the 2001 winner of the Ford Freedom Award. The award recognizes distinguished people of the past who dedicated their lives to improving the African American community and the world at large through their fields: arts, humanities, religion, business, politics, science or entertainment.

Sanchez was honored as the Ford Freedom Award Scholar, an honor that is given to an individual who has excelled on a national or international level in the same field as the award recipient.

Lonely as a child, Langston Hughes found comfort in books. In turn, the poems, novels, essays, short stories and plays he wrote inspired others, including many who also became famous writers. In his long and productive career he wrote some 800 poems examining African American life. He also wrote articles for newspapers, magazines and literary journals.

Sanchez, a poet, professor and political activist from Philadelphia. Her poems celebrate the experience of African Americans and the empowerment of women of all races. Books of her poetry, ‘homegirls & handgrenades’ and “Does Your House Have Lions?”, won national honors and acclaim.

The first Ford Freedom Awards, given in 1999, went to former Detroit Mayor Coleman Young and to Andrew Young, former Atlanta mayor and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

The next year’s honors went to actor/singer/dancers Sammy Davis Jr. and Gregory Hines.

About This Section
To celebrate the Ford Freedom honorees and Black History Month, Ford Motor Company Fund is presenting the educational supplement “Words of Heritage...Writing Black History.”

This special section looks at the work of Hughes, Sanchez and black writers who have made their mark in the world.

It also gives students strategies for getting the most from literature, tips on researching black history or family history, and ways to use the daily newspaper for inspiration and themes in creative writing.

Most of all, it celebrates the wonder of writing as a way to honor the heritage of all people.

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2001 Ford Freedom Honorees Langston Hughes & Sonia Sanchez.

How Would You Honor a Leader?

Langston Hughes and Sonia Sanchez have been honored many times for their contributions to American literature. How would you honor someone you feel has contributed to the community?

Find an African American leader in newspaper today or pick another African American you admire. In the space below, create a Black History Month award to honor this person. Give the award a title that would show what kind of behavior or contribution you think should be honored in the community. Then write a short paragraph describing why you chose your honoree.

Title of Award:
______________________________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________________________

Person I Want to Honor:
______________________________________________________________________________________________

Why This Person Should Be Honored:
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________________________________________________________________________________________________
From earliest times through today, the experience of African Americans has been a story of drama, power, pain and perseverance. It is a story of emotion and strength, families and communities. And it has inspired some of the best writing in American literature.

From Langston Hughes to Sonia Sanchez to rappers and slam poets, African American writers have inspired black Americans—and enriched all Americans.

But being a writer has carried special challenges for African Americans.

The earliest black “writers” were slaves who carried on the storyteller traditions of Africa. These African Americans did not write down their stories—they were not even allowed to learn to write in most cases. But they built on the culture of their ancestors with spoken words and stories. And they told of their experiences in spiritual songs of hope.

The journals of slaves who had run away or been freed by their owners were the first African American writing of the kind we think of today. These journals were powerful accounts of the cruelty and hardship slaves endured, but they spoke also of strength and a faith that freedom would eventually come.

The Civil War made African Americans legally free, but did not stop prejudice and discrimination, especially in the South. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved north as a result, settling in cities and establishing strong artistic communities.

Writers and other artists were especially active in the period called the Harlem Renaissance from 1917 to 1929. Named for the famous black neighborhood of New York City, this5 period saw enormous creativity in poetry, novels, plays, painting and especially jazz and blues music.

It brought attention to black writers from readers of all backgrounds—but it also gave African Americans a challenge not faced by white writers. If they portrayed African Americans in ways that showed bad behavior or character, they ran the risk of reinforcing white prejudices about blacks. They also risked upsetting black readers who wanted African American writers to present blacks positively so that new rights could be won.

Eventually, each writer found ways to meet the challenge and present his or her vision of black life.

Langston Hughes used the rhythms of jazz in his writing to become one of the most important writers in America. Books like “Black Boy” and “Native Son” by Richard Wright and “Invisible Man” by Ralph Ellison used sharp realism to widen the impact of black writers.

Writers like Ntozake Shange and Walter Dean Myers deal with a wide range of issues affecting readers of all ages.

Women, too, became influential. Toni Morrison won both the Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes with books like “Beloved.” Alice Walker won a Pulitzer Prize for “The Color Purple.” Maya Angelou earned wide acclaim with her memoir “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.”

In children’s and teen literature, writers like Walter Dean Myers have written with power and realism about black life today in novels like “Scorpions” and the acclaimed “Monster,” which won the Coretta Scott King Award and was a finalist for a National Book Award.

In the performing arts, playwrights like Ntozake Shange brought women’s issues, black speech and culture to wide audiences with works like “for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf.” And August Wilson won two Pulitzer Prizes, for “Fences” and “The Piano Lesson.”

Even more significantly, rap and hip-hop artists have taken spoken/sung poetry to an ever expanding audience across America today.

Echoing across the nation, the voices of black writers have given all Americans diversity, richness, culture and distinction.
Langston Hughes was a very important African American writer of poems, novels, essays, short stories and plays. He once said that he wrote “to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America.” Though Hughes died in 1967, his work remains popular. And it still has artistic and social importance today.

Hughes was born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. His parents got divorced when he was very young, and at different times he lived with his mother, father, grandmother and friends of the family. His grandmother took Hughes to hear the great black leader Booker T. Washington speak. She also introduced him to a magazine, The Crisis, which was edited by another powerful African American man—W.E.B. DuBois.

Before attending Columbia University, Hughes went to live with his father in Mexico for a time. His father agreed to pay for college, but only if he studied engineering. Despite maintaining very high grades, Hughes left Columbia to pursue a career as a writer. Years later he continued his education—on his own terms—at Lincoln University.

He then took a position on a ship that traveled to Africa. While across the Atlantic, Hughes took various jobs that allowed him to go all over Europe. He lived in Paris, Venice and Genoa, Italy, before going back home to the United States.

When Hughes returned to New York, his poems about the things he had seen and the people he had known started getting published and read. He even wrote poetry for The Crisis, the magazine his grandmother had shown him when he was a boy.

Harlem Renaissance

At this time in New York City, a new circle of African American artists was forming. This group of people was part of an era called the Harlem Renaissance.

In the 1920s, the Harlem neighborhood had theaters, jazz clubs, and a talented community of writers and artists. Harlem became a center for African American people to express themselves creatively.

Langston Hughes was at the center of this cultural explosion. The stories and poems that Hughes wrote about African Americans were important and influential. His characters were not the negative stereotypes people were used to reading about or seeing on theater stages at that time. He tried to present his African American characters as complex individuals. This was important because African Americans suffered extreme prejudice because of people’s hate and ignorance.

Words of Change

Hughes knew that his words could help change how African Americans were treated by whites. He also knew he could change how they think about themselves.

In a 1926 article in The Nation, Hughes wrote “We build our temples for tomorrow, as strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves.”

Hughes knew that racial harmony would not happen overnight. However, he told everybody to work toward it in what is probably his most famous poem, “A Dream Deferred.”

A Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore — And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over — like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes’ books like this “Short Stories” collection used humor and realism to portray black life.
ON THE STREET WHERE YOU LIVE

Langston Hughes traveled to places outside the United States. He got to see how other people lived and what they felt about their lives. In some writings he compared Americans to other people in the world. Answer the questions below and then compare your answers with those of your classmates.

1. Do you have any brothers and sisters? How many? Are you the oldest or the youngest or somewhere in the middle?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

2. Do you have any pets? If so, what kind?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

3. How do you get to school? On a bus? In a car? Do you walk? Do you take a train or a bus?

______________________________________________________________________

4. What do you want to be when you grow up?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

5. Who lives with you? A parent? Maybe an aunt or a grandfather? How many people live in your home?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

6. What languages are spoken in your home?

______________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________

Langston Hughes wrote about the things he saw around him. Look through today’s newspaper and find a story that interests you. After you have read it, write a short poem about it. Remember, poems don’t have to rhyme. But fill them with strong adjectives, verbs and adverbs!

Poets study the world around them, try to connect what they see to the emotions people feel, or seek to look beneath the surface of things to find bigger meanings. Find a photo of a person or place in today’s newspaper. As quickly as you can, write down what you see in the photo. Then go back and write down what each thing makes you feel. Finish by looking for a bigger meaning or issue connected to one of the things you saw.
In the course of a lifetime, Sonia Sanchez has made a feast of her experiences in America. She has tasted fame and acclaim, and the bitterness of pain. She has had servings of success and portions of prejudice. And through it all, she has kept her senses sharp.

As a woman and an African American, Sanchez has written powerfully about the areas in America that have changed the most. She has given expression to black life by making poems of the way people talk, walk, love and live. Full of the sounds and rhythm of street life, her poems connect the jazz of Langston Hughes to the hip-hop of Tupac Shakur, yesterday and today.

Shakur, in fact, often referred to Sanchez's poetry in his music before he died. And she appeared in the music videos of the rapper Rakim.

"Sonia is one of those poets who has kept to the course ... to use her work to transform the world, to struggle against injustice," said the great poet and playwright Amiri Baraka. "And she's continued to do this in ways that ... have made a serious impact on American poetry in general."

"Only a poet with an innocent heart can [overcome] so much pain with so much beauty," said the noted South American author Isabel Allende.

The poems of Sonia Sanchez use the language of real speech. Real speech can be found in the newspaper in direct quotations set off by quotation marks ("quote"). In pairs, collect direct quotations from today's newspaper stories. Assemble these quotations into a poem "Voices of Today." Read your poems aloud. What do today's voices tell you about life in your community?

Sonia Sanchez writes often about issues from politics. Find a story about politics in the newspaper today. Write down every emotion you feel about the issue in the story. Use these emotions to write the lines of a poem about the political issue that caught your attention. Come up with a creative title for your political poem.

Sonia Sanchez was born Wilsonia Driver in 1934 in Birmingham, Alabama. Her mother died when she was just 1 and her father later moved with her to New York City. After attending Hunter College, she was caught up in the social activism of the 1960s. She admired Malcolm X, wrote books with powerful titles like "We a BaddDDD People" and became a leader in the Black Arts Movement.

With Baraka and others she taught the first black studies class in the country at San Francisco State College. Her poems, plays and other writings celebrate the beauties of black speech, while exposing wider audiences to black issues and culture.
Spring, 1973. I was part of a cultural group from the United States visiting the People’s Republic of China. It was Monday, we were singing songs on a bus, on our way to visit the Great Wall of China. One of the Chinese guides turned toward me and said, ‘Now, Professor Sanchez. We will sing one of the songs of your people — Old Black Joe.’

On that morning bus hurrying us toward steps jutting out from the land like enameled footprints, I took her hand in mine and stated: ‘Old Black Joe’ was not a song by and for black people. In fact, it was a song that mocked the dignity of black people. Even as I talked, though, I heard the responses of some white cultural workers disagreeing with me, with my sense of reality. My sense of history. Their words embraced ‘Old Black Joe’ as authentic black culture and life.

My explanation prevailed, however, in that faraway place. My explanation about songs that depicted blacks in ceremonial Sambohood. And on that morning resonating a global spring, I talked to the guide about spirituals and blues and work songs and blues and gospels and blues. And we smiled a smile of recognition, for her people had experienced in Shanghai parks signs that read: ‘No Chinese or dogs allowed.’ On that Monday morning, we deported ‘Old Black Joe’ from the shores of China to an uncharted shore.

My explanation prevailed because I explained how in unraveling the years of slavery and exploitation, I had to peel away others’ misconceptions about blacks, and at the same time gain strength from the life experiences and beauty within the culture.

And as I sang a blues song on that bus, I heard Lady Day’s voice redeem our flesh contracting in pain.

And as I hummed a spiritual on that bus, I heard Paul Robeson’s song get caught in my voice, drawing me up from deep rivers.

... And I remembered young Phyllis Wheatley’s poem:

Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,

Taught my benighted soul to understand,

That there’s a God, that there’s a savior, too,

Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.

... Remember Christians, Negroes black as Cain,

May be refined and join the angelic train.

... Trees newly planted announced

The Great Wall. And the hills stretched themselves out underneath the Wall like great sea shells under a great wave. The Wall, sitting empress style, smiled her ancient welcome. And I returned the smile.

On that Monday, as I started to climb that long winding trail of history and survival, my feet moved in tune to other feet. And they came toward me, the Lynchers and the lynched. And I stepped inside of Nat Turner’s steps, and we heard together the patterollers riding, drawing nearer. And we ran. And I caught up with poet Robert Hayden’s words and saw Harriet Tubman ‘way-up a-head,’ her body cocked like her pistol toward freedom, her voice saying, “Hush now. I mean to be free... you keep on going now or die... Come ride-a my train... mean mean mean to be free...”


And the Wall, strutting her seams across the land, stood still as I arrived at the top. Stood still with the voices of the oppressed and the innocent. And I called out to Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Sojourner Truth—to Martin Delany and Martin Luther King Jr.—to Rosa Parks and David Walker. I called out to plantations and factories—to the Bermudas and Selmas—to police chiefs and dogs chasing black children at the moment of birth.

And I called out to Martin’s dream to penetrate our bodies, to make us lean with legends and love. I called out to the dreamers to dedicate themselves to a new day, to discipline their lives so that the next generation could truly BE.

So I always smile when February comes, when Black History Month comes like thunder, blackening our skins. In spite of the cold, the agony of a gnawed earth, the horror of thundering countries raining hungry faces, I smile. For I know as Martin knew: “The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Ga.; Jackson, Miss.; or Memphis, Tenn., the cry is always the same—We want to be free.’ ”

For I know as the poet Margaret Walker knows that my people “are trying to fashion a better way from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding, trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people, all the faces, all the Adams and Eves and their countless generations...

“Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth. Let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men and women now rise and take control.”

—— By Sonia Sanchez
Karen Batchelor's grandmother had only an eighth-grade education, but she was one of the smartest, wisest people Batchelor has known. And Batchelor wants to make sure that that wisdom lives on. "I want my grandchildren to know about her," Batchelor said.

To make sure that happens, this bank first vice president's goal is now to write down stories about her grandmother and other family members.

"I believe that knowing where you come from helps you know where you're going," explained Batchelor, an attorney who comes from a long line of "very strong people, especially the women."

Coming up with stories to write about won't be hard for Batchelor, who has been researching her family for more than 25 years. There are 126 different family lines she could research, and she already has uncovered many fascinating stories.

Her third great-grandmother, Charity Ann, was kidnapped and sold into slavery as a teenager. The girl's mother ran after the black carriage that took her to a plantation. Charity Ann had 17 children by the slave owner's son. The youngest of the 17 was Batchelor's great-grandfather.

William Hood, an Irish native who served in the American Revolution, was also a forefather. Finding him earned Batchelor a place as the first African American woman in the group known as the Daughters of the American Revolution.

Batchelor's journey into her past began with a New Year's resolution in 1976, the American bicentennial year. Her son was a baby, and she wanted to find out more about their family history.

"I wanted to pass on to my son more than I knew," said Batchelor, who was also intrigued by Alex Haley's book "Roots," about tracing his African heritage. She later met the author, who encouraged her to write her own stories down.

"Until 'Roots,' older blacks didn't talk about slavery because it was a negative," Batchelor said.

With her son in tow, she traveled to many of the places around the country where relatives had lived. She's done gravestone rubbings in cemeteries where ancestors are buried, visited courthouses where they transacted business and tracked down houses where they lived.

"I want to know what they were like as people," she said. "They're not just names and dates to me."

Some searching hasn't been easy, since much African American history is not found in documents. It was passed down by word of mouth.

A big help has been the local genealogical society, which she helped start. The organization, which meets in the public library, helps African Americans uncover their family histories.

"So much of our history is oral tradition and as older people pass away we lose it," said Batchelor, who would like to see every African American sit down and talk with their oldest relative about family history. "If we don't preserve it, it's lost."

While she's uncovered much of her family history, there are still ancestors she hasn't found yet.

"Genealogy is something you're never done with," she said. "It's like a jigsaw puzzle that has many pieces still to put in place."

If you want to research and write a history of your family, a great place to start is the "My History Is America's History" website—www.myhistory.org. Developed jointly by the National Endowment for the Humanities and Genealogy.com, this site offers a research guidebook, classroom projects and other resources. Some other Internet sites you might choose include:

- AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY
  www.americanantiquarian.org
- BALCH INSTITUTE FOR ETHNIC STUDIES
  www.balchinstitute.org
- GENEALOGY.COM at www.genealogy.com
- "THE GENEALOGY PAGE" OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION
  www.nara.gov/genealogy/genindex.html
- LIBRARY OF CONGRESS LOCAL HISTORY AND GENEALOGY READING ROOM
  http://lcweb.loc.gov/rr/genealogy
- MYFAMILY.COM at www.myfamily.com
- THE NATIONAL GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY
  www.ngsgenealogy.org
- SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN HISTORY
  www.si.edu/nmah/
- STATUE OF LIBERTY AND ELLIS ISLAND FOUNDATION, INC. at www.ellisisland.org
WRITE A FAMILY HISTORY

On his home computer, high school student Blake Rowley traced his family history back to the 1600s. Then he shared the information at a family reunion. His relatives were enthusiastic at what he’d found out, so he started thinking of ways to share with even more people.

Soon after that he entered the information he had collected about his family on a special National Endowment for the Humanities website called “My History Is America’s History.” His family’s story will now be part of a permanent collection of American family stories. And Rowley is one of an important new group of history collectors—students and teens.

“There are so many family history websites, and kids are so computer literate,” enthused Lynn Smith, program manager for youth and family reunions in Detroit when that city celebrated its 300th anniversary. “They’re able to do a lot without even leaving home.”

When it comes to writing and recording family histories, the young are now as important as the old in the community. Through sites like “My History Is America’s History,” they’re being urged to gather and write down family milestones and events to pass on to future generations.

The benefits to students can be great, and not just in learning about their own backgrounds. They also can learn how powerful a tool writing can be when it comes to heritage. They can learn the craft of writers and historians. And they can even get credit in some schools for family history projects.

Some are taking on these projects to mark family anniversaries, others for community celebrations. And some are just doing it for fun. They are finding satisfaction interviewing older family members and working on their family trees. And they are getting exposure by contributing what they find to websites such as “My History Is America’s History” (www.myhistory.org).

The result is often a new appreciation of the contributions ancestors made to the growth of their families and communities. Even more important is the understanding that history is not an old textbook thing, but a living, breathing experience.

HOw CAN YOU TRACE YOUR HERITAGE?

• Journals
• Diaries
• Letters
• Baby Books
• Scrapbooks
• Family Books
• Bibles
• Announcements
• School Records
• Medical Records
• Photo Albums
• Certificates
• Church Records
• Memorial Cards
• Family Traditions
• Autograph Books
• Newspaper Clippings

Ways You Can Become Involved

Look at an original settler.
Are you the descendent of an original settler or first family? This can be someone who settled during your community’s early years or was among the first of your ethnic group to settle in the area.

Look at a centenarian.
Do you know someone who is 100 years or older?

Look at people who made a difference.
Gather biographical information about people in the city who saw an opportunity, faced a challenge and left a legacy for the future—particularly members of ethnic groups and women.

Efforts to research family history sometimes can be inspired by the news of today. A feature story, for example, might include an interesting fact about a person’s family and inspire a writer to want to know more. In teams, scan the stories in today’s newspaper for a story about an African American or other newsmaker. Read the story and list three details that might be a starting point for researching the person’s family. Next to each, write how you think the details could connect to history and what history might tell us to increase our understanding of the person.
Alice Walker is a famous and well-respected writer and a woman who has spoken out about politics and issues important to her. She writes stories, poems, essays and novels about many different topics, including African American families and women. She also has written a biography of Langston Hughes that is coming out in March.

Her most famous novel “The Color Purple,” is a good example of this, earning both praise and criticism for the way it portrayed family life among African Americans. The story of “The Color Purple” is told through letters to and from an African American woman named Celie. Celie has suffered terrible abuse in her life, but finds happiness and independence with the help of her friends. The book was so popular it was made into a movie that starred Whoopi Goldberg, Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glover.

Watching & Learning
Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia. An accident as a child damaged one of her eyes and changed her life forever. Before the accident, she was a very outgoing and popular girl. After her eye was hurt, however, she became very quiet and shy. She spent her days watching everything that went on around her and writing poems and thoughts in her journal.

Active in Politics
She participated in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and she even was part of Martin Luther King’s March on Washington. In her last year of college, Walker spent time in Uganda, a country in Africa. After college, she went door to door registering African American voters.

“I could never live happily in Africa—or anywhere else—until I could live freely in Mississippi,” she explained

In politics and books, Walker’s words continue to move people on important subjects like racism and treating women and girls badly.

She uses her writing to reach and teach other people.

When Terry McMillan was a teenager, she helped out her struggling family by shelving books at the public library in Michigan. She made just $1.25 an hour, but the job gave her a huge reward later. It opened up a whole new world of literature to the teen.

Today McMillan is a best-selling author, whose own books are on the shelves of libraries everywhere.

Her novels “Waiting to Exhale” and “How Stella Got Her Groove Back” became popular films, while “Disappearing Acts” was made into an HBO movie in 2000.

Her newest novel, “Day Late and a Dollar Short,” caused new excitement when it hit the bookstores recently.

McMillan’s stories are about African Americans—mainly women—who are striving to live the “American dream.”

She writes with humor, occasionally getting criticized by other writers who think her literature isn’t “serious” enough. But she takes her writing very seriously.

McMillan told an interviewer that she believes writers all have different voices, different styles.

“You know, I think the role of good literature should be to give you hope,” she said. “It should let you know that there is another way to look at things.”

Early Struggles
To support five children, her mother worked in an auto plant and a pickle factory and spent some time on welfare. Her father was an alcoholic who beat her mother up.

At just 17, McMillan left home for a new life in Los Angeles. She worked as a secretary and took a course in black literary classics at Los Angeles City College. While studying journalism at the University of California-Berkeley, she wrote poetry and had a short story published.

She moved to New York City, got a word-processing job, and became a member of the Harlem Writers Guild. The group encouraged her to write her first novel, “Mama,” whose title character was modeled after her own mother.

Teaching at the University of Wyoming and University of Arizona, she produced “Disappearing Acts,” and “Waiting to Exhale.”

Both Terry McMillan and Alice Walker write about issues that are important to them. Scan the stories in newspaper today for one about an issue important to you. Write a paragraph stating why you think the issue is important. Write a second suggesting ways to teach people about the issue, or correct a problem.

Both Terry McMillan and Alice Walker write about things that are important to them. Scan the stories in newspaper today for one about an issue important to you. Write a paragraph stating why you think the issue is important. Write a second suggesting ways to teach people about the issue, or correct a problem.
Kids often ask Christopher Paul Curtis why his books are set in blue-collar Flint, Michigan. Why don’t they take place in a more exciting place?

“I tell them I grew up in Flint,” the award-winning author recently told a newspaper reporter. “There are some wonderful stories to be told about Flint.”

Telling stories about his home town has made Curtis famous around the world. His “Bud, Not Buddy” was the first book to win both of the American Library Association’s two big prizes for children’s book writing — the Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Award.

“Bud, Not Buddy” takes place in mid-Michigan during the hard times of the Great Depression of the 1930s. It is the story of a 10-year-old orphan from Flint who travels to Grand Rapids to see if a jazz musician could be his father.

“The Watsons Go to Birmingham — 1963” is a book about a close family much like the one Curtis grew up in. It tells what happened when the “Weird Watsons” get caught up in the civil rights struggle on a trip to Alabama to visit their grandmother.

Curtis’ newest book, “Bucking the Sarge,” again is set in Flint. It is the story of the son of a Flint con artist. But unlike the first two novels, it takes place today.

Growing Up

Curtis didn’t read books growing up. He preferred wacky Mad magazine and news magazines such as Life, Newsweek and Time.

One reason was the lack of books for and about African American children. “There weren’t books by, for or about me,” Curtis has said.

When he started writing himself, he set out to solve the problem for kids coming up today. His characters come from people he knows, especially family members.

Kenny Watson, for example, is a combination of Curtis and his brother David. Buddy was inspired by Curtis’ grandfathers, big teasers who passed their sense of humor on to him.

Some incidents, such as a scene in which Momma Watson tries to cure brother Byron of setting fires by threatening to burn his fingertips, actually happened to Curtis or his siblings.

Black History

Curtis weaves real-life experiences together with important events in American history. The Great Depression was one. And he chose Birmingham, Alabama, for the Watsons book because of a church bombing there that killed four little black girls in 1963.

Now living in Windsor, Canada, Curtis spends every morning writing in a library when he’s not lecturing somewhere on the art of writing for children.

It’s the best job the former autoworker has ever had, he says.

Asked in a magazine interview how to encourage kids to consider careers in writing, he said:

“If young people knew the almost criminal enjoyment I get out of writing, they would be so jealous.”

Of Writing
Dudley Randall won fame because of his poetry—especially the heart-breaking “Ballad of Birmingham” about a church bombing during the civil rights movement that killed four little girls in Alabama.

But the award-winning author, whom former Detroit Mayor Coleman Young named Detroit’s poet laureate in 1981, was proudest of his work on behalf of other writers.

Randall’s Detroit-based Broadside Press published the work of young black poets when it was very hard for them to get recognized or published elsewhere. And his efforts contributed to the achievements of the national Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Broadside encouraged and supported writers like Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, LeRoi Jones, Alice Walker and Haki Madhubuti, among others.

He became a librarian, and taught English at the University of Michigan.

Powerful Ballad

With $12 he took out of his paycheck as a librarian, he published the “Ballad of Birmingham” on a single sheet of paper called a “broadside.”

He distributed it himself, and it won wide attention and praise. The well-loved poem is a conversation between an African American mother and her child, who was later killed in the Birmingham church bombing.

In the poem, the girl asks her mother if she can go downtown to attend a civil rights freedom march.

“No baby, no, you may not go, for I fear those guns will fire,” the mother answers.

“But you may go to church instead, and sing in the children’s choir.”

The church, sadly, proved to be a place of unexpected danger.

Spotlighting that danger, in a place that should have been safe for African Americans, touched the emotions of readers, especially anyone who was the parent of a child.

Using poetry to touch emotion that way was a source of joy for Randall, who died in 2000.

And he wanted to pass that feeling along in his words—“to give people joy because poetry gives joy.”

Dudley Randall started Broadside Press with his own money “because poetry gives joy.”

Emotion has been called “the soul” of poetry. It is what gives it life and energy. It is also what connects the words to the feelings of readers. Photographs in the newspaper can provide a way to practice expressing emotions. Find a photo of an African American or other newsmaker in the newspaper. Closely study the face and attitude of the newsmaker. On a sheet of paper, write out as many “emotion” words as you can that you feel describe the person in the photo. Arrange these words into a poem called “The Emotion of a Newsmaker.” Compare and discuss as a class.

Poetry can come together in many ways. You may have seen magnetic poetry kits that let you form lines of poetry from individual words on magnets. Divide into teams and come up with a way to use the newspaper to create a poem from words and phrases in the newspaper. Then create a poem that illustrates your approach. Choices could include headlines found in the paper, for example, words emphasized in ads, or sports descriptions. Illustrate and display your poems as a class.
Rap Takes Stage as Musical Poetry

While rap is a relatively new art form, it has strong roots in the classic traditions of poetry and storytelling. Langston Hughes believed art could bring about change in society. So did Gil Scott-Heron, whose 1975 poem/spoken word piece “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” expressed anger about people’s indifference to the African American struggle for equality. He used the piece to call for people to pay attention.

In the 1980s and ’90s rap grew into the music that we recognize today. Drum rhythms, music provided by live musicians and electronic “sample” recordings of songs, speeches or noises combine to create works full of energy and excitement.

But the poetry of rap comes with the words. Rappers use rhymes and rhythms in their rapping to build a message and increase the enjoyment of songs. Many rap artists like Will Smith and TLC focus on themes like love and friendship, but others tell stories that they hope will change people’s minds about things.

Public Enemy, Lauryn Hill, Wyclef Jean and Queen Latifah are just some of the rap artists who have tried to reach people and change the world with their words.

What rappers that you know are offering strong messages about life around us in America?

Slam poetry has won attention as a creative public kind of writing. Slam poets write poems about their lives and read them aloud at Slam competitions. The audience listens and reacts, picking winners who are the most exciting, or expressive, or outrageous. The competition is what makes Slam different from other poetry.

Use the space below to write a Slam Poem about what it is like to be a teen today. Pack your poem with emotions and images that will hold your listeners’ attention. Think how you will perform your Slam so that it will take listeners inside your life or the life of another teen. Organize a Poetry Slam for your class or school. Challenge other classes to a Slam competition.
If we want to remember something, we usually write it down. But that wasn’t always true.

People used to tell each other stories, which were then passed on by spoken word to family and friends. Each generation then handed down the history to its children and grandchildren. For centuries, that’s how important events were remembered.

In Africa, storytellers called “griots” carefully memorized what happened and told others about it. They often used songs, dances, poetry, proverbs, folk tales and myths to get their messages across.

Even today, some African parents teach children morals with stories handed down through generations. In school, children learn the art of storytelling and often compete with each other creating or solving oral riddles.

Brought to America, African blacks continued telling old and new stories. Even before they were allowed to go to school to learn to read and write, African Americans added to the rich literary tradition they brought from their homelands. Many of these stories were about survival and overcoming oppression—painful issues for slaves suffering hardships and loss of freedom on American plantations.

Today’s ‘Griots’

Keeping the oral tradition of African Americans alive are modern-day storytellers such as those who tell tales in schools, libraries, churches and at business meetings.

The storytellers enjoy telling tales, especially those about black culture here and in Africa. Sometimes they dress up like someone in a story while sharing adventures from history. They also like to relate memories from their own lives or travels.

‘By telling our stories, we let people know they can rise above whatever struggles they have,’ explained Amy Jackson, a former teacher who has lots of stories from her own family, in which she was the youngest of 14 children.

‘We remind them they are standing on the shoulders of other people who came before them.’

Storytellers also urge their listeners to learn the ancient art of storytelling and keep it going. People who do this not only add to the rich tradition of storytelling. They also build self-confidence and public-speaking skills.

African storytellers were — and are — very important, Jackson said. ‘They kept historic data in their heads and went from village to village telling stories. They spoke for the nation.’

What makes storytelling different from reading is that the stories are told out loud. Telling a story out loud gives an audience things that reading alone cannot. Storytellers can emphasize different parts of stories by the tone of voice they use. They can use different voices for different people. Or they can control the emotion of stories by raising or lowering their voices. You can practice the art of oral storytelling with the newspaper. In teams or pairs, pick a story from today’s newspaper. Read it through together. Then decide how to read and present the story out loud in a way that will bring the story to life. Read the words with expression—and emotion!
Many journalists dream about becoming a columnist for a large daily newspaper. Betty DeRamus, who wrote three columns a week for The Detroit News, never planned it that way. She was perfectly happy writing breaking news stories.

"To me, the pinnacle of life was being a reporter," said the award-winning columnist, who loved "the daring stories, where you were up all night and had to keep watch."

In 30 years covering Detroit, DeRamus tried her hand at many different kinds of writing.

She wrote short stories, magazine articles and poetry and even worked on a book based on stories of the Underground Railroad.

An avid reader, DeRamus started writing her own 'little stories' when she was in grade school. "I made up my own world, where things happened the way I wanted them to," recalled DeRamus, who was an only child.

A former teacher tells her she won a Detroit Times writing award as a young child. As a student at St. Elizabeth High School, she won a rosary and some money in an Archdiocese of Detroit essay contest. After earning a journalism degree at Wayne State University, she became a newspaper reporter. She began writing columns at the request of a Detroit Free Press editor on a trial basis.

The job interested her for more than 20 years.

Her columns ranged from serious topics such as a 6-year-old who shot his classmate to light-hearted, sentimental ones about family, friends and herself.

While she wrote for all readers, DeRamus had a 'deep and abiding interest in African American history, especially unexplored areas.' Journalism, she said, is hard work but all writing has its rewards. "It's kind of a high, very exhilarating to be able to use words to say what you mean," she believes.

CREDITS

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Plays are a great form of literature. In plays, performers act out stories as they do in movies and on TV. But there's a big difference.

When you watch a movie or TV, you're just sitting in a movie theater or your living room and staring at a screen. When you go to see a play, you're in the same room as the play, and the audience and actors are part of an experience together.

Because you're so close to the action, many people find going to a play in a theater much more special than watching a movie.

In the theater, the people who perform are called actors, the people who turn on the lights and move things on stage are called the running crew and the person who writes the stories and the words is called the playwright.

There are many accomplished African American playwrights. Langston Hughes himself wrote more than 30 plays including "Black Nativity," "Tambourines to Glory" and "Don't You Want to Be Free?" Other playwrights include:

LORRAINE HANSBERRY
Hansberry wrote "A Raisin in the Sun," which is probably the most famous African American play ever written. The title comes from Langston Hughes' poem "A Dream Deferred." The play is about a family living in racially prejudiced Chicago.

AUGUST WILSON
Wilson is writing a series of 10 plays, each of which focuses on the African American experience in a different decade of the 20th century. Some of his most notable works include, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "Fences" and "The Piano Lesson."

SUSAN LORI PARKS
Parks is a strong force in the world of theater. Each of her plays shows off her talent as a witty and powerful critic of society. "The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World," "Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom," "In the Blood" and "Venus" are just some of her plays.

NOTOZAKE SHANGE
Shange changed her name from Paulette Williams to a name in Zulu that means "she who comes with her own things" and "she who walks like a lion." Her plays, "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf" and "spell #7," challenge audiences to stretch their minds as they listen to her beautiful and meaningful words.

A SCENE FROM A PLAY

Find and read an article in today's newspaper that interests you. Then, in the space below, try to write a short scene between two "characters" in the article as if it were a play. A scene is like a conversation. What would these two people say to each other? Be sure to tell where the scene happens—in a school, The White House or someplace else. Pair off and read scenes to the class.