

Literature changes with times

Grassroot News, N.W.—Black History Month, 1983, is technically over, but the desire to place people of African descent in their rightful place historically remains a full-time job. One procedure to keep track of black achievements is through black literature.

Black literature of the 1980s differs in content and volume from what was published years ago. Joyce Harris, manager of the Talking Drum Bookstore, talks about the current titles in the Black Books category. "In 1981 and 1982 one title

birth of black publishing houses and companies. Third World Press, IPE and Broadside Press all developed out of a need to publish and support our talents."

According to Ms. Harris the literary trend of 1982-83 is historical books. We can relate this literary trend to what is happening in Portland. We had an explosion of information brought in by consultants to the Portland School District. People like Asa Hilliard, John H. Clarke and Hunter Adams all have had an impact on what the Afro-American

just unique to Random House but to all major publishers."

Another trend in black books is the easy route to publication of books written by black women who negatively cast the black man. "The publisher of *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, as well as its author, Michell Wallace, went through an unusually small amount of effort to publicize the book. The message in her book is that black men were to root of our problem. But in reading her book a lot of information was not totally accurate, historically. So if you know the historical information was wrong then it is reasonable to assume the analysis drawn from it is distorted."

Among the other variables creating a crisis in black literature is the "Out of Print" label which puts many Afro-American classics out of reach of this generation. "One book that fell into the out-of-print category was *The Choice*, by Samuel Yett. It dealt with concentration camps for blacks in case of an emergency. This is a valuable perspective to have. Another way to bury black classics is to keep them available only in hardbound copies.

"You have to be realistic about publishing trends and recognize the possibility of some books not being available. It is worth your while to start those collections. Used bookstores are a source and we at the Talking Drum Bookstore have started a Used Books section. Other excellent sources are yard and rummage sales to locate masterpieces in black literature."

Could we compare these trends in the publishing companies to George Orwell's 1984? This is where historical information was either altered or

deleted. "If you look at the process of taking black books out of circulation, there is no reason to take out black literature a chapter at a time when they are removing the whole book. Tell me when was the last time you saw George Redmore's *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* It is another classic removed for years under 'Out Of Print.' A brother in D.C. was telling me of a new additional tax levied on bookstores for their inventories. So they are taxed on books that aren't moving. And

they are not moving because the bookstore is not promoting it." Ms. Harris sees this development as an insidious political move. "It's very planned. They are keeping information away from the masses."

Another factor adding to this conspiracy is the conspicuous absence of African women from our history books. "The role of African women is not recorded and I know there were some sisters doing many things. Black historians such as J.A. Rogers or Carter G. Woodson pro-

vide some information but there is still not as much information as I know there must be. You constantly see the same names over and over again."

For aspiring young authors Joyce Harris advises learning English inside out. "You must be very realistic about the market. If you write anything having to deal with black people you might as well prepare to promote it yourself. From all that is said and done that is the only way your information will get out."



A few of the many offerings of the Talking Drum Bookstore.

that came out was, *I Sought My Brother*. This is a photo-essay recording about two brothers who spent some time in an African rain forest with people who had retained their traditional culture. Another is *Bad Blood*, a documentation of the Tuskegee Study where black men were given syphilis to see how the disease worked on their bodies."

What evolutionary path has black literature gone through? "Maya Angelou's first title, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, differs vastly from her last novel, *Heart of a Woman*," Harris answers. "This is just a reflection of the changes we've witnessed in the world. Black writers started to expand their consciousness beyond the United States of America. They realized the Third World's actions and reactions affect the total African community. An example is, *I Sought My Brother*. They didn't go to Harlem or Alaska, but Africa. So, black literature of today tends to reflect a world consciousness."

Is this renewed Pan-Africanist perspective a reincarnation of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance? "No, not quite. In the '20s we saw a great deal of a Pan-Africanist theme in our literature. I like to compare the period of the Harlem Renaissance to the 1960s—our second renaissance. During these two periods we had a proliferation of writers and poets. The main difference between the '20s and the '60s is that in the '20s you had a lot more whites supporting and sponsoring black artists and writers. But in the 1960s something more significant happened—the

community wants to read. At the Talking Drum we sell more non-fiction historical books than we do fiction. For the most part it boils down to black people in Portland wanting to know more about themselves as a people."

Currently, black publishers find themselves in a bind. "Well, even the major white publishing companies are struggling. With high interest rates, unemployment and a depressed economic situation there is no choice between a loaf of bread and a book."

This creates a lopsided dependency on white publishing companies. If these few giant companies decline to print black books, then no black books get published. Also created by this situation is an extraordinarily powerful influence by publishing companies over the writer. An example Ms. Harris gives is Ivan Van Sertima's *They Came Before Columbus*. "For years Dr. Van Sertima approached many publishers about his book. But it wasn't until he gained the attention of Toni Morrison that his book was brought to publication. It took Random House over a year to consider publishing it and it wasn't until Dr. Van Sertima rewrote it. When he first presented his book it was written as straight history. Random House felt it would sell better if written as historical fiction. The book is written in narrative form and reads like a story. To the public, a question is raised regarding the authenticity of the facts presented. When Random House published *They Came Before Columbus*, they didn't promote it. Now this is not

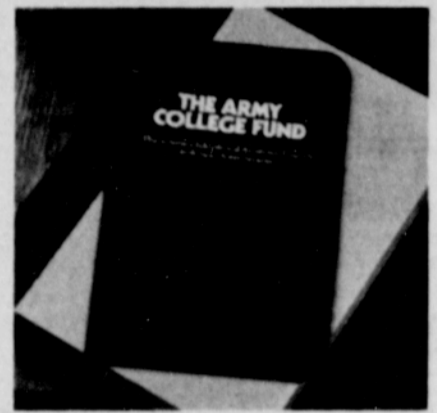
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Obituaries

JACK FRYSON

Mr. Jack Fryson of 923 N.E. Failing St., brother Mrs. Lalle Williams, passed on March 30, 1983. Mr. Fryson was also retired from the railroad. His funeral was held April 4th, 1983, at Vann & Vann Funeral Directors and interment was at Riverview Cemetery.

SAMUEL G. WHITNEY, SR.

Mr. Samuel G. Whitney, Sr., died March 29, 1983 at the age of 77. His

funeral was held at Vancouver Ave. First Baptist Church April 2, 1983, and was officiated by Rev. John H. Jackson. Mr. Whitney had been an electrician and most recently self-employed at the Whitney Real Estate Com. He is survived by his wife, Louise Whitney; sons, Samuel, George, James, Harry T., and Kenneth; daughters Fannie Mae Fair, Louise Perrin, Alice Whitney, and Mary Lee Evans. There is one sister, Mrs. Alice Hines; 24 grandchildren and 5 great-grandchildren. Mr. Whitney was buried at Rose City Cemetery.

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