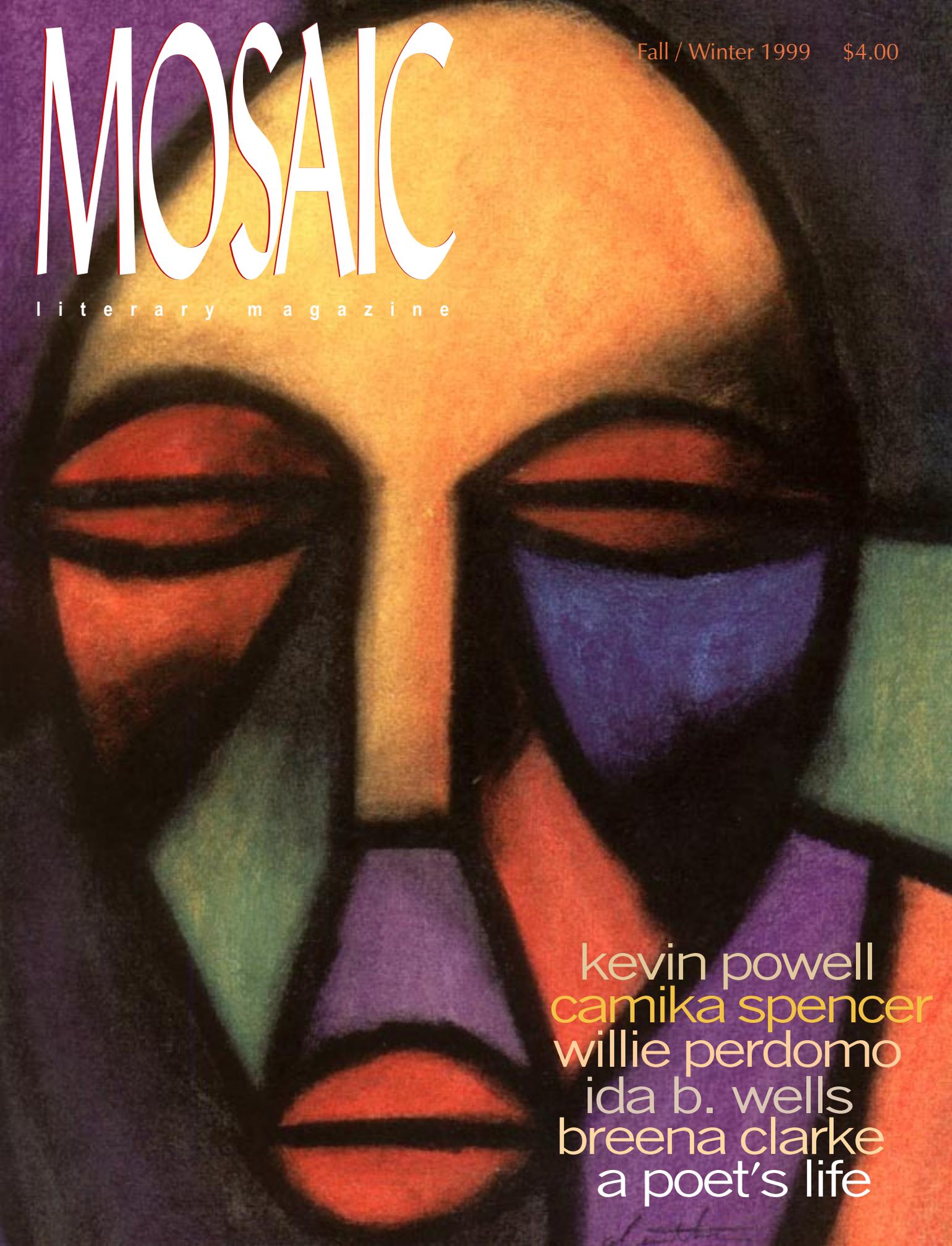


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Fall / Winter 1999 \$4.00



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willie perdomo
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breena clarke
a poet's life

mosaicliterarymagazine

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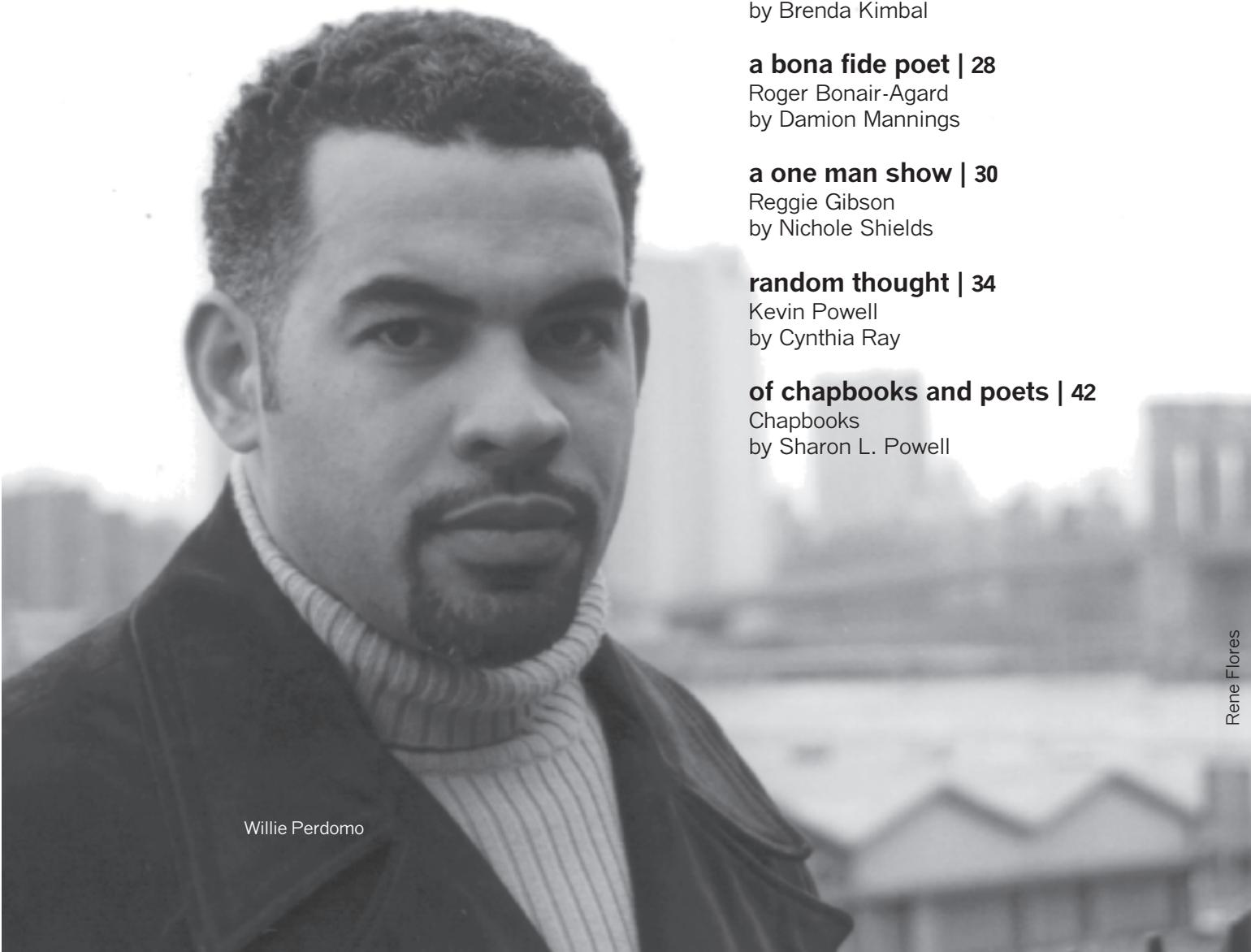
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SUBSCRIPTION INFORMATION

One-year subscription (four issues): \$12.00

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Printed in the USA.

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c o n t r i b u t o r s

Tara Betts represented Chicago in the 1999 National Poetry Slam. She is also completing her book of poems, *Can I Hang?*

Bro. Yao is a young writer who has been published in *Crab Orchard Review*, and will be published in *The African American Review*.

Pamela R. Brown is a freelance writer and editor for *Dialogue* magazine. She is currently compiling short stories for an anthology tentatively titled *City Stories*.

Trent Fitzgerald is a New Jersey-based freelance music writer and former music editor of *Beat Down* magazine. In his spare time, he pens liner notes for reissues and is writing a screenplay on the life of a famous jazz artist.

Robert Fleming is the author of several books including *The Wisdom of the Elders*. He lives in NYC.

Kim Fox received a B.S. in communications from Ohio University. She is currently a news, traffic and sports anchor for Metro Networks.

Linda Dominique Grosvenor is the author of the novel *Sometimes I Cry*. Her poems have been published in *The Love Blender*, *Garden of Grasses* and many other venues. She is working on her second novel, *Like Boogie on Tuesday*, and a collection of poetry, *Love Lingers*.

Deatra Haime is a freelance writer living in New York City. She is currently writing a book about kids of color.

Dorothy Harris is the Director of Pre-Admissions Instructional Support Program at UMass, Boston where she also teaches Critical Thinking and African American Women's literature.

Pat Houser is a writer from Brooklyn, New York

Tyehimbas Jess is a poet and writer living in Chicago.

Troy Johnson is the owner and webmaster of www.aalbc.com

Brenda Kimbal is a writer from Chicago.

Damion Mannings is the assistant to the director of hardcover sales at Penguin Putnam and a freelance writer living in Westchester County.

Renee Michel began writing professionally, editing and writing proposals for not-for-profit agencies. She is now feature writing while working in the fashion industry.

Leah Mullen is a freelance writer who resides in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Leah's articles have appeared in a number of publications including: *The Daily Challenge*, *Sisters in Motion*, and *The New York World*.

Sadeqa Y. Murray is currently at work on both a children's series and an adult novel. She has a degree in communications and handles publicity for children's books.

Sharon L. Powell is a Chicago poet, educator, and consultant. She has used her skills to work on issues related to women's health, sexuality, anti-racism/oppression, youth rights, political art, economic justice and political prisoners.

Cynthia Ray is a freelance writer living in Brooklyn who originally (and proudly) hails from the southside of Chicago.

C. Candice Ridgion is a poet and freelance writer from Dallas, TX. Her work has appeared in *The Arlington/Dallas Morning News*, *The Dallas Weekly*, and *Spirit Food*. She is a Griot Award Winner for Storytelling, and is currently working on her first novel.

Carla D. Robinson lives in NYC. and is grateful for the blessing of living life as a writer, in all of its incarnations.

Kalamu ya Salaam is the founding director of Nommo Literary Society, an African American writers workshop in New Orleans; and moderator of Cyberdrum, a listserv for black writers and diverse supporters of literature. Salaam can be reached at "kalamu@aol.com"

Nichole Shields is the author of *One Less Road to Travel* and is a member of Chicago Writers Collective: A Community of Writers and FLOW (For Love of Writing). Nichole's works have appeared in the *Iowa Review*, and *360°: A Revolution of Black Poets*.

Camika Spencer is the author of *When All Hell Breaks Loose* and is currently working on her second novel, *Cubicles*.

Nikki Terry is a native of Baltimore, MD. She is a recent liberal arts graduate from The New School University in Manhattan.

Angelo Williams is a writer living in California

Kelwyn Wright, a Milwaukee based writer, is the webmaster for www.theworlddebon.com.

glenda taylor ad

no time
to die

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the cover



HIDDEN MAN
by G.L. Smothers

A native Chicagoan, G.L. Smothers' artwork richly transforms vibrant layers of jewel-toned pastels into icons of mask-like faces, luminous skyscrapers and abstract designs. The artist studied Primitive Art and Industrial Design at Kent State. "Primitive Art and all disciplines of contemporary design fascinate me. It is this fascination with the antique and the avant-garde that helps to constantly develop and influence my style."

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CHRIS ROCKS WITH COMEDY JOURNAL

Comedian *Chris Rock* has entered into a partnership with Time Warner's HBO to launch *Hilltop Journal*, a humor magazine based at Howard University in Washington, D.C. The pilot issue of *Hilltop*, written by Rock and partner Bill Stephney, will debuted in September 1999. Howard University students will produce future issues of *Hilltop*.

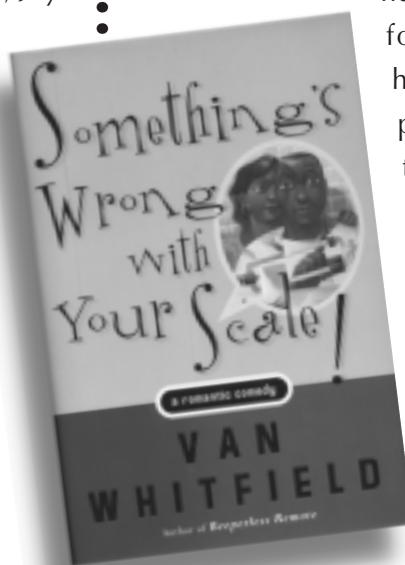
FROM SELF PUBLISHING TO THE MAINSTREAM

What do Victoria Christopher Murray, Timmothy McCann and Camika Spencer all have in common? Major publishers have picked up each of their self-published novels. Under a two-book deal with Urban Ministries, the largest African American Christian publisher in the country, Murray's self-published novel, *Temptation*, was reissued in September 1999 and her sophomore novel, *Joy Cometh In The Morning*, is expected to hit bookshelves in early 2000. Timmothy McCann secured a two-book deal with Avon Books and joins a trio of men writing fiction as he makes the literary rounds publicizing his recently redistributed novel, *Until*. And Camika Spencer's self-published *When All Hell Breaks Loose*, has been snapped up by editor Manie Barron and redistributed by Random House.

PRIME TIME WIT

Van Whitfield's comedic wit has landed him a spot on prime time television. The author of *Beeperless Remote* and *Something's Wrong With Your Scale*, will lend his creative genius to *The Grownups*, a new television sitcom starring Jaleel White (formerly Urkel of *Family Matters*). Whitfield burst onto the literary scene with his debut novel, *Beeperless Remote*, followed by *Something's Wrong With Your Scale*, a tale of weight loss woes. *Beeperless Remote* and *Scales* have locked down the

number three and four positions in hardcover and paperback fiction on the Blackboard African-American Bestsellers list. *The Grownups* airs August 28th on the UPN network.



by Pat Houser
pathouser@aol.com

LITERARY SUCCESS

How do you spell success? Try E-L-Y-N-N-H-A-R-R-I-S. He's got five bestselling novels. Four of his five books are in audio format. Woodie King, artistic director of the Henry Street Settlement Theater in New York has optioned his debut novel, *Invisible Life*, as a play. And he's got a memoir slated for release in 2000. What's next for this bestselling author? The E. Lynn Harris Better Days Literary Foundation. This tax-exempt organization supports new writers by providing mentoring opportunities and workshops for aspiring authors. For more information write: The E. Lynn Harris Better Days Literary Foundation, P.O. Box 78832, Atlanta, Georgia 30357.

NATIONAL BOOK AWARDS

The National Book Foundation honored Oprah Winfrey for her dedication to the promotion of reading at the 50th anniversary of the National Book Awards. Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, both former National Book Awards recipients attended the November 1999 benefit. This year's panel judges include Charles Johnson, Terry McMillan and Veronica Chambers.

mother
love

in the beginning

POETRY IS MORE POPULAR THAN EVER. HEAR WHAT SOME OF OUR LEGENDS THINK ABOUT THE MAGIC OF BEING A POET.

by Robert Fleming

African American poetry, from its very beginnings, has spoken to our community much like our music, with its hot rhythms, perceptive images, marvelous speech effects, and provocative metaphors. It has moved us to protest, to persevere and to seek answers to the most complex riddles of our existence in this strange land. In so many ways, it mirrors our journey in America from our torment as slaves to “subhumans” in bondage under the iron thumb of Jim Crow to our current status as parolees with privileges in this chilly post-Affirmative Action environment. Our new wave of practitioners of this esteemed Dark Art such as Carl Hancock Rux, asha bandele, Saul Williams, Jessica Care Moore, Tish Benson, Tracy Morris, and Paul Beatty continue this tradition with the same grace, insight, and strong sense of resistance that can be found in the early poets - Jupiter Hammon, Lucy Terry, and Phillis Wheatley who confronted the bestial nature of slavery in colonial America. In these young modern word alchemists, there is a distinct link between their sardonic Hip-Hop beats and simmering rage to the fiery militancy of Claude McKay, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, and Jayne Cortez. Also, consider the motherwit of Audre Lorde, the no-nonsense analysis of June Jordan, the blues spark of Langston Hughes, the free jazz feel of Bob Kaufman, Michael S. Harper, and Melvin B. Tolson. Think of the raw power of Wanda Coleman, Sapphire, and Ai. Our poets may come from one ancestral lake, one pure source but they cannot be easily categorized.

As one of our finer poetic talents, Owen Dodson, once said:

“Our poets took our pain, suffering and neglect, mixed those ingredients with soul, imagination and skill and produced some of the greatest writing ever read.” Just what does it take to be a poet? The following excerpts on this question were gathered from some of our leading African American poets during my research for my upcoming book, *The African*

American Writers Handbook, coming next spring. There is much wisdom about the art and magic of writing poetry to be gained from listening from these voices:

Lucille Clifton, a two-time winner of the National Endowment for the Arts award and author of several poetry collections on the inspiration for her poetry:

“Poems come to me from sound, memory and dreams. I try to stay open and available to poetry. There is a music in the language of them and this is what brings forth the words. Poetry will always be here because it fills a basic human need.”

Ishmael Reed, author of ten notable novels including *Mumbo Jumbo* and *Flight To Canada* and four books of poetry including *Chattanooga* speaks on the allure of poetry, critics and audiences:

“Poetry is more accessible than fiction. It’s less time consuming to analyze and probably the most available to the every day person. In Japan, poetry is considered a part of daily life and in a part of Africa as well. For the most part, white critics don’t really read our work, poetry or fiction. They go on their assumptions and fear. You even get some black writers who publish in mainstream magazines



WHETHER YOU'RE A POET OR
WRITER, WHITE CRITICS MUST
BE KINGMAKERS AND CHOOSE
THE WRITERS THAT RISE. AND
IF YOU'RE A CHOSEN TOKEN,
YOU MUST PLAY THE GAME.
-ISHMAEL REED

who agree with them about the value of our work. Whether you’re a poet or writer, white critics must be kingmakers and choose the writers that rise. And if you’re a chosen token, you must play the game. As for black Americans as readers, I don’t accept the notion that we’re not sophisticated. We understand this culture in a way that the other white culture never could.”

Sonia Sanchez, one of the leading African American poets and author of several poetry books including the classics *I’ve Been A Woman* (1978) and *Homegirls and Handgrenades* (1984) speaks on the bold politics of a poet’s vision:

“I didn’t just write I’m black. I’m black. There have been people, some of the older writ-

spier & co



SOME OF THE OLDER WRITERS,
WHO HAVE TRIED TO CRITICIZE
SOME OF US BY SAYING ALL
WE WERE WRITING WAS BLACK
BLACK BLACK. BUT IF THEY
REALLY READ OUR WORK THEY
WOULD SEE THAT WAS NOT
TRUE. THEY WERE FRIGHTENED
BY WHAT WE SAID.
- SONIA SANCHEZ

ers, who have tried to criticize some of us by saying all we were writing was blackblackblack. But if they really read our work they would see that was not true. They were frightened by what we said. I've always understood this. They felt threatened by us. But I've always said that if I were just like them I would not be doing what I'm supposed to be doing. Each generation builds on a higher level... We came from them and when we came they were frightened by us... We are the thoughts they were afraid to utter, the things they said about white folks to each other in the barber shop, on street corners, at home..."

Cornelius Eady, an award-winning poet of such collections as *You Don't Kiss Your Water* (1995) and three others, on the art of the poem:

"Poetry has to be real. I have to be the speaker of the poem. I need to transport to the moment of the poem, the recreation and the retelling of that moment. I don't think about how the poem is put together. You are in it. It's a magic trick. The speaker has constructed the moment and it's so powerful. You want to be transfixed at the least and transformed at the very best."

Audre Lorde, a pioneering African American woman poet noted for her searing candor in her poetry and essay collections including *Coal* (1976), *The Black Unicorn* (1978), *The Cancer Journals* (1980) and *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) on the role of emotions in revising poems:

"For me, there are two very basic and different processes for revising my poetry. One is recognizing that a poem has not yet become itself. In other words, I mean that the feeling, the truth that the poem is anchored in is somehow not clearly clarified inside of me, and as a result the poem lacks something. Then the poem has to be refelt. Then there's the other process, which is easier the poem is itself, but it has rough edges that need to be defined. That kind of revision involves picking the image that is more potent or tailoring it so that it carries the feeling. That's an easier kind of rewriting than refeeling."

Haki Madhubuti, a leading poet in the Black cultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and founder of the influential Third World Press, on the power of poetry to transform:

"Probably the major reason the poets influenced me was that they seemed to have passion, commitment, and purpose. Poetry totally informed my life, for I quickly understood it is the basis of all language, the classical black language. I wanted to honor those traditions, wanted to dance in that language, wanted to enjoy its freedom. It opened me to a whole new world of ideas and I read a book
(continued on page 49)

a new day

BLACK BOOKS PLUS AND THE FUTURE OF BOOKSELLING

by Leah Mullen

After a successful 10 year run as a popular Manhattan based bookstore, Black Books Plus, under the leadership of Glenderlyn Johnson, is moving in a new, yet familiar direction—producing literary events for authors.

Johnson opened Black Books Plus in 1989 after working nearly 15 years as a reference librarian for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a division of the New York Public Library system. At the Schomburg Johnson came in contact with many people who were interested in black history and culture, yet at the time there was only one black-owned bookstore in Manhattan, Liberation Bookstore. Seeing the need, Johnson hung out her shingle on the corner of 94th St. and Amsterdam Avenue and folks beat a path to the store.

Her timing could not have been better. The nineties witnessed

what some in the industry are calling a new literary renaissance for black authors. Shahrazad Ali and other black writer's work sold like hotcakes alerting the mainstream publishing companies that black people do buy books. The publishers responded by producing more works by black authors for a black audience. The companies then relied heavily on community stores to sell their books and Black bookstores flourished.

Johnson fondly recalls one rainy evening about six years ago when Terry McMillan came to the store to read from one of her books. Despite the downpour, the crowd that greeted the author was so huge that the line trailed out the door and around the corner.

"The windows were steaming up," Johnson laughed. "And after she left, who should drive up in a limo, but Maya Angelou, Rosa Guy and Louise Meriwether."

That was during the heyday of the black bookstore before the
(continued on page 48)



Glenderlyn Johnson

august
press

big willie
style

by Renee Michel



Willie Perdomo

Rene Flores

WILLIE PERDOMO SPEAKS ON HIS PASSION FOR POETRY

Willie Perdomo engaged his audience last night – at the Nuyorican Poets Café – in a sensuous fiesta. Though I came inspired by his 1996 collection, *Where a Nickel Costs a Dime*, nothing could have prepared me for the exuberance with which the poet invoked verse. I watched, felt, listened and imagined as familiar pieces were given texture through eclectic rhythm. Perdomo artfully varied inflection and mood, insuring a mantrasque-free reading. The cherished hour was a celebration of the soul, an invitation to connect with his.

These days Perdomo prefers living in the present moment, expending his energies and talents there. “I lay it down for what comes next. I write the next poem for the book, do this interview for the magazine,” he explained. His plan for the future, is to do in the now. Although Perdomo’s Harlem inspired work has been compared to that of Langston Hughes’ and influenced by poets he admires such as John Cheever and Ntozake Shange, his voice remains distinctive. As early as middle school, Perdomo developed a love for literature and writing. During his college years, professors at Ithaca encouraged his talent. While majoring in English he wrote for a campus literary publication and read his poems at cultural and fraternal events. “I’ve always written about my own experiences. I don’t know any other way,” Perdomo told me.

Reflections On The Metro North (Part One), one of his best known poems, together with its sequel written seven years later, represent his having come full circle he told me. “The thing is change. You want to grow up,” Perdomo expressed about having overcome many personal struggles. His quest is to always progress. In his forthcoming book of poetry and prose he speaks from the same streets of El Barrio we have come to know through his eyes, however, from an entirely new perspective. When writing, Perdomo’s objective is to bring the reader to where he has been emotionally, through imagery. He believes there is power

in the spoken word. “I’ve always enjoyed hearing stories aloud, even as a child,” he told me. Of his work he said, “I read them all out.”

Though unassuming and grounded—with a great sense of humor I might add— Perdomo is no lightweight. His accomplishments include appearing in two PBS documentaries, writing copy for NIKE and a screenplay for HBO. During his twenties he traveled throughout the U.S. and parts of Europe with Nuyorican Poets Live, and has been featured in such publications as *The Washington Post* and *The Source Magazine*. His work is included in several anthologies including *Listen Up*, published this year. Perdomo said of his achievements, “If it’s a by-product of what you do and you take it in stride that’s alright.” He prefers to experience his work as a journey and not get caught up in an image of himself. “Sometimes you can’t deal with it though,” he continued about being a poet. At times he said, he feels like he’s always expected “to hit.”

Characterizing his sensitivity, in his poem *The Making of a Harlem Love Poem*, Perdomo writes “I turn my woman’s face into a star so she can watch me walk down 125th street.” She, “his princess,” is his North Star. On the streets of Perdomo’s Spanish Harlem, there was a fighter, a lover and a poet; he of course being the poet he explained. Perhaps though, he too was the lover; of imagination, simplicity, his Puerto Rican culture, his madre, his *panas*. After all, I found most distinctive about Perdomo his passion and appreciation for things often overlooked, like special moments, relationships and the power of choice. While on tour, following one of his readings he was approached by an old woman, he recounted. She took his hand, held it firmly and smiled warmly. Those moments are precious to him because, he said, “It reminds you of why it is you started in the first place.” As for where Willie Perdomo is headed next? Forward of course. As he might say, “siempre palante.” Always forward. ★



Breena Clarke

Miriam Berkley

still waters run deep

BREENA CLARKE IS THE AUTHOR OF *RIVER, CROSS MY HEART*

by Nikki Terry

Breena Clarke's journey through the world of literature is filled with impassioned lyricism and life. Her style of writing reflects a consistent commitment to the realism of images that speak for themselves. "I see my work as a cross between photography and painting. I like to think I can capture ordinary people in the midst of living whether in a past era or in the modern era."

Providing the truth and wonder of a community south of the Mason Dixon Line, Clarke's first novel, *River, Cross My Heart*, is filled with all the fabric and wonder of life for black folks living in Georgetown, circa 1920s.

Exploring the love for her hometown of Washington, D.C., her family and her desire to capture the day to day courage of ordinary black people, Clarke is a writer who is destined to offer value to the literary world. "I'm keen on the notion of writing ourselves, African Americans, back into history and literature so we will not be denied our propers."

Though Clarke is now concentrating on establishing herself as a new writer, her first love was the performing arts. Her involvement began in childhood with the "Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland"-style neighborhood theatricals and advanced to the Fine Arts Department at Howard University. In 1979, Clarke made it to New York City to begin her work on Broadway. Satisfying her desire to be an actress, Clarke worked as an assistant stage manager and chorus member for the Broadway show, "Reggae." Since then, she has written, directed and performed with the Narratives Performing Company, an African American women's theatre company, and has also performed with The Owen Dodson Lyric Theater. In addition, she has written stories for Time magazine. Most notably, a report on black theater for Time's *Black Renaissance in the Arts* issue.

Curious and enthusiastic, Clarke enjoys living and communicating in words that express what she loves and what life has taught her thus far. From the tragic death of her son in 1989, Clarke gained new strength and inspiration from her creative world. "After Najeeb's death, it became important to me to know and note how things had been in his life, my own and my family's. The serious application of my time and energy to writing occurs after."

As a writer, she would also like to explore themes of women's path to maturity, relationship to mothering, the rites of passage through grief and examining self worth issues. Clarke remains true to her own way of bringing maturity and insight to her writing, and as a result, they both have been bound together in her work.

Breena Clarke's writing has appeared in the anthologies *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color* and *Street Lights: Illuminating Tales of the Urban Black Experience*. She is a graduate of Howard University and native of Washington, D.C. Clarke, who taught acting, stage managed and preformed in Washington D.C. before relocating to New York City, co-author the play *Remembering Aunt Jemina, A Menstrual Show* with Glenda Dickerson. Her journalistic work has been published in Time Magazine, Black Masks, Hersies, Conditions, Quarto and Women and Performance. She is an administrator of the Editorial Diversity Program for Time Inc. Ms. Clarke lives in Jersey City, New Jersey with her husband, Helmar Augustus Cooper, and their two Labrador Retrievers, Hannah and Laura.

If you're lucky enough or if you would like to get in on the best kept secrets of the black community in Georgetown, read her first novel, *River, Cross My Heart*. ★

[Except from *River, Cross My Heart* on page 18]

River, Cross My Heart

by Breena Clarke

Little Brown & Co.

Young Johnnie Mae Bynum and her friends have gone swimming in a seemingly haunted part of the Potomac River named "The Three Sisters" leaving her younger sister, Clara, sitting on a log watching the fun. Johnnie Mae quickly realizes she is having too much fun.

Clara sat quietly watching Johnnie Mae and the other girls. Her quiet allowed them to ignore her. She was a constant appendage to her sister and seemed content to be so. None of the other girls noticed Clara moving along the log to the high end that jutted out over the water. Hannah and Tiny slid off the log into the water, causing it to shift.

Clara maneuvered herself along the log to get a better view of the other girls. They swam together in groups, weaving in and out of each other's arms. They dunked each other's heads and cannonaded each other by slapping the water's surface. Mabel, the oldest, pulled her wet swimming suit away from her chest to show the others her nipples, tight and wrinkled with excitement and cold. The girls giggled, they laughed uproariously, they didn't notice Clara.

Johnnie Mae was obliged to remember Clara. It had been her responsibility to watch Clara ever since Clara was a baby. But Johnnie Mae's mind

was elsewhere. She was, right then, considering swimming straight across the river to Roslyn on the opposite bank. It didn't look too far. It looked like something she might be able to do.

Johnnie Mae

did not hear Clara splash into the river when the rotted log collapsed. Johnnie Mae ducked her head under the surface of the river, her shoulders following, then her back and hips. Her flapping ankles churned the water's surface. She arched her back and pulled up to the surface with long, graceful arms. The splashing sound, she thought, was her own body slicing the water.

But it was Clara's body that slid beneath the water. The fingers of the undertow swooped her. The others did not see her go down. They looked at the place on the bank where Clara and the log had been, and now Clara and the log were gone. It was as though the log were a hobbyhorse and Clara was riding it. The canopy of leaves draping the bank seemed unmoved by Clara's sudden absence. The effect was of viewing a scene through a stereopticon: The first image contained Clara and the log, and the second did not.

Johnnie Mae dove twenty times before the others realized what had happened. Johnnie Mae rose to the surface, tread water, and screamed wildly. She filled her lungs with air and she dove again. The other girls grabbed her after it became clear that she would continue to plunge. The girls grasped arms around the struggling, screaming, exhausted Johnnie Mae and drew in close around her, like petals on a daisy. Johnnie Mae thrashed against them at first, then collapsed. They swam in tandem to the bank. A white ribbon off Clara's plait floated on the surface of the river.

Excerpt from *River, Cross My Heart*

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Naked
by Linda Dominique Grosvenor

Laying peeled down nude
wrapped in the loveliness of words
that join us delicately like commas
describe us like adjectives
and move us like verbs.
Lips greeting, thighs meeting
the scent of you creeps in me.
Lips assuming the rest of you
would give in too,
is what you proposed too soon?
In your head, where I constantly cleave,
spill your fancied thoughts
in the valley of my fears.
I'm defenseless now, as I vow
I'll never leave this comfort of bliss
my love will remain the same
only the seasons will change...
I promise you,
in the nude.

movin' on up

FROM SELF-PUBLISHED TO MAJOR PUBLISHER. HOW IT HAPPENED.

by Camika Spencer

I self-published my first title on April 17, 1997 and officially signed with Random House in May of 1998. In total, it was a two and a half year process of going from fantasy to reality. The fantasy was that I believed I was going to write a novel, get an agent, publish a book, do a tour, get rich. I know it sounds silly now, but back then, that was all I knew and in many instances, this is the dream of the average American writer. Well, the reality side of my story is for those of you losing sleep over rejections, lack of money and lack of useful resources. Perhaps after reading this article, you can rejuvenate your wills and get closer to your own publishing goals.

I decided to write a book after working at Black Images Bookstore. Terry McMillan was riding the waves of success with *Waiting to Exhale* and E. Lynn Harris was the new jack on the block with *Invisible Life*. I was reading like crazy and had decided, "Hey, I can do this. I can write and I can tell a story!" I was excited and ready to be well known and rich just like McMillan and Harris. I secured a job, used graduation gift money to purchase a computer and began my journey. Needless to say it was the best of times and the worst of times.

The first manuscript I completed, in fall '96, was titled, *Keep It On the Down Low*. This was the Fall of 1996. Written for a teen aged audience and inspired by my experiences as a youth coordina-

tor at my church, *Down Low* was a local success among my test audience of hormone engrossed fans. It gave me hope.

I mailed it out to several agents and received two rejections, one non-response. One highly excited agent in Atlanta was ready to take me to the next level on the condition that I write from only one characters point of view. Like many of us, fear made me drift. I was talking all the talk, but never walking the walk. I was on the road to becoming one of those people who spend the rest of their lives talking about what they could of and should of done. I had become complacent until the Spring of 1997 when the tragedy of bad decision making struck. I had started on my third manuscript, *When All Hell Breaks Loose*, but I was knee deep in the poetry scene, which kept me comfortably side-tracked.

The group I performed with, *Ordained In Lyrics* (O.I.L.) was performing in the South X Southwest Festival in Austin three hours out of Dallas and I was expected there in less than five. It was a rainy Friday morning and I packed my car up and headed out. On the way down, after filling up at a gas station two hours out of Dallas, I hydroplaned and basically totaled my car. One minor detail, my insurance had expired that Thursday and I had decided not to renew until Monday. I was up the creek. So there I was, in my



Camika Spencer

own place, with no car and no more motivation to do anything but pity my own ignorance. My parents didn't offer any financial salvation and I didn't see a decent way out. But I realized that maybe this was my wake up call to start taking my writing seriously. Every time my books called me to take the big step, I was finding some lame reason not to. I had to stop running from my fear of failure and wrecking my car definitely put an end to my running. Now, I felt like I had absolutely nothing to lose.

Winter of 1998, I moved back home with a six month rent free grace period from my parents and had my car pieced back together. I wrote up a financial strategy and begin extracting the necessary money from my paychecks to get the process started. I spent four to five extra hours per work day, off the clock, typesetting and completing *When All Hell Breaks Loose*, as well as compiling lists of independent booksellers nationwide and sending them promotional letters. Through community connections, I found a small design firm who agreed to do my cover at a discounted fee. They contracted out a college student to illustrate my cover by paying for his books that semester and my printer, though on average a bit expensive, was within driving distance and they did everything in-house. The only thing I didn't plan for with the original edition of *When All Hell Breaks Loose* was my editorial situation. My mistake was having one editor and he suffered a near death stroke during the second edit of the book, which was approximately three weeks before the manuscript was to be turned in and the book was to be released. So me and my friends did the best we could with technical editing. I was fortunate in this area because my ability to tell this story well overpowered the editing oversights. I drove and flew to places that I could afford for book signings. I mailed tons of books out by night and still worked a full time gig during the day.

It's now 1999 and I am financially invested, working on publishing the poetry book of a friend, about to release a second novel (*Cubicles*), still living at home and working on presenting writing and self-publishing courses in my community. I

am still working full time as well, but having a computer at work with full email capabilities allows me to communicate to people in the book world as needed. It also allows me to grow in other ways as a writer. Since the acquisition, I've started writing book reviews, articles and commentaries to strengthen my skills. A few recommendations for those who desire to self-publish:

- Take your time.
- Make sure your printer does everything in-house.
- Have a minimum of 3 editors.
- Don't be afraid to get a second or third opinion.
- Get any and all agreements in writing.
- Pay people on time and if you can't, call and let them know.
- You can't remember everything. Get help. If you have children, it's a valuable opportunity to teach them how to be part of a business early.
- Set aside 20% of each full order of books you have printed to give away free or as promotional items.
- Get a lawyer or agent (or both) to negotiate any contract offers.
- Attend at least one Book Expo America (annual book convention hosted by the American Booksellers Association) during your independent tour.
- Be honest and responsible for what you are about to release to the world.

This is not all the advice I have to offer, but it's what's important in the beginning stages of independent publishing. Distribution is another article in and of itself. Mistakes will be made and sometimes relationships will become strained, but it's up to you to make it happen without losing or abusing the people who support and stand by you during this grassroots process. Everybody who began as a self-published author and is now writing for a mainstream house has a different story to tell, so don't think that there is an absolute right or wrong way to get acquired by a larger house. We all arrived here on different paths and no one path is greater than the other. It's not easy nor is it a pretty business, but if you enjoy writing and enjoy people, this gig can be fulfilling, it can pay the bills, it can be fun and if nothing else, it can teach you about you. ★

Careful What You Wish For by Myrlin A. Hermes

Simon & Schuster

Reviewed by Pamela R. Brown

In the debut novel of Myrlin A. Hermes, *Careful What You Wish For* set in 1949, the main character, Eleanor Blackmar Cline, wishes to escape the scandal and shame of her family's past by marrying a respectable and much sought after bachelor, John Cline. The fulfillment of her desire results in a form of respectability but also a loveless marriage. When her husband's eventual affair becomes public knowledge and fodder for the gossipy women of the Liberty Ladies Sewing Circle, that semblance of respectability is lost. Eleanor then takes the implausible step of inviting her husband's mistress to come and live with the family. Through Natalie, Eleanor comes to find a freedom and independence she had never dreamed of before but this too comes at a cost.

Though the story gives some attention to peripheral characters such as Natalie, John and Eleanor's son, Adam, it is truly the story of Eleanor's odyssey into self-discovery and subsequent return to her roots. Unfortunately, this leaves many questions unanswered for the reader. Who is Natalie? Where did she get her zest for life and her free spiritedness? What is at the heart of John's coldness and cruelty toward Eleanor?

Hermes descriptions of settings and characters are rich and filled with a bright and colorful imagery. She speaks of John "occasionally casting off sparks of affection like candies at Christmas time" and her grandmother's "razor sharp posture cutting through whispers ... like a boat parting the reflection of clouds on the surface of the lake." Such careful attention paid to language reflects an uncommon artistry in today's popular fiction.

Folk sayings carry their own particular brand of wisdom and honesty. "Be careful what you wish for because you just might get it" is a tireless reminder. Sometimes the things we long for don't necessarily bring about the desired outcomes.

To Make a New Race
by Jon Woodson
University Press of Mississippi
Reviewed by Dorothy Harris

Jon Woodson in *To Make a New Race*, adds new understanding to the many influences on Harlem Renaissance writers. The author explores ways in which the works of many writers of this era whom he calls "the Harlem group", were influenced by the Greek born mystic, George Ivanovitch Gurdjieff (1866 - 1914). Gurdjieff's arrival to America seems to have been messianic. Woodson writes:

... for those artists, writers, intellectuals, and spiritual seekers who gravitated to Gurdjieff, his arrival to Europe and America had the aura of the coming of a modern messiah. (p. 2).

In the way of a coming messiah, then, Gurdjieff's way was prepared by P.D. Ouspensky, the highly acclaimed author of *Tertium Organum*, who, according to Woodson, had already influenced many European and American thinkers before introducing his teacher, Gurdjieff (p. 2). Gurdjieff attracted quite a following among those who found interest in the idea of working toward transcendence from this life of what Gurdjieff considered "walking sleep." The writer Jean Toomer was one of his followers. In 1924, Toomer spent several months in France at Gurdjieff's Institute for Harmonious Development of Man at Fontainebleau, France. He returned to the States in the fall of 1924 to study under A.R. Orage, who was the editor of the *New Age*. Toomer began his own study groups in Harlem in 1925 to which several of his artist friends were invited.

Woodson's thesis in *To Make a New Race* is that the writers' lives and their works were greatly impacted by their experiences with the Gurdjieff study groups. Woodson discusses the existence of Gurdjieffian codes and references to Gurdjieff, Orage and Ouspensky in works by Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman, Rudolph Fisher, Nella Larsen, George Schuyler and Zora Neale Hurston. Woodson gives in-depth analysis through close readings and analytical discussions of their works

that show Gurdjieffian influence. Woodson demands his readers to analyze the subtexts, to make word associations, to create anagrams from names and terms used by the writers, and to explore the use of codes in the works discussed in order to make the association he makes to Gurdjieff. In order to do so, he takes a literary critic's license to create anagrams, make free associations with words that the readers may not readily see, and creates his own subtexts to support his thesis. When making connections between Gurdjieffian philosophies and Nella Larsen's novels, for instance, Woodson writes "By the time we discover "race Hell" in *Helga Crane*, we realize that certain letters should be ignored and that we have license to arrange the letters according to need." (p. 106).

The strength of *To Make a New Race* is that it offers insight into the understand of influences of Gurdjieff on these African American writers, something that is not done by any one literary critic in a single text. Scholars of Harlem Renaissance writers as well as Gurdjieffian scholars would benefit from Woodson's contribution.

Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends:
Letters from Rebecca Primus of Royal
Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown of
Hartford, Connecticut, 1854-1868.
Edited by Farah Jasmine Griffin

Alfred A. Knopf

Reviewed by C. Candice Rigdon

At times, it may read like a steamy romantic novella. Two friends, each in search of loyalty, identity, and something more than a warm body beside them at sundown, are trying to survive in an era that does not understand or accept them. Both want to love and be loved. Both pray for their friendship to stand the test of time.

Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends is a far cry from a dime-store romance that incites guilty pleasure rather than literary significance. It's the true, post-Civil War story of two women, Rebecca Primus and Addie Brown, as corresponded through letters to each other and to their families. ►

Edited by Farah Jasmine Griffin, the story traces the relationship between Rebecca Primus, a middle class teacher from Royal Oak, Maryland, and Addie Brown, a domestic who befriends the Primus family and whom Rebecca adopts as a “sister.” Presented in a straight-forward, no holds barred manner, Griffin weaves the letters into a readable form that is as comfortable as a quilt in the dead of winter. The majority of the letters are penned by the uneducated Addie, whose grammatical missteps tend to be confusing.

Initially, the sisterly bond of the women seems platonic; but as told through the voice of Addie, more romantic notions plainly come to sight. It is unfortunate that Rebecca’s letters to Addie did not survive; however, Addie explains situations and answers questions for Rebecca that defy the notion that this was a single infatuation. Although she was biologically an adult, Addie clearly experiences a coming-of-age, that is when she is not attempting to impress Rebecca with her readings or her community activities.

Most fascinating about the letters are the issues and circumstances that parallel 1990s culture—there is the pending impeachment of a president, the social character lynching of an unwed mother, unfair working conditions, political outrage, and even town gossip. Addie marries for convenience but does not repress her lustful admiration (what she calls love) for her friend; presumably Rebecca marries for love, and moves on with her life. The only surviving letters scripted by Rebecca Primus are to her family, so the reader may tend to wonder how she feels about the relationship that could have been birthed from the imagination of Addie Brown. One never knows how Rebecca responded to her friend’s early demise; the only note of it was her name and the date of her death scribbled on the back of an envelope.

The world of these two women is enchanting but the reader may not be able to obtain the completeness of their rich existence.

Still, Farah Jasmine Griffin has superbly directed a story that tells it-

self. This work of nonfiction breathes life into imagination, and takes the readers back to a time which just may look something like the present.

Time Will Tell

by Trevy A. McDonald

Reyomi Publishing Company

Reviewed by Kim Fox

Thomasina, Rachel and Hope are childhood friends who grow up in Chicago and whose lives are revealed through the telling of their relationship as high school classmates and college coeds, along with their wedding woes, are spread out over a decade.

Thomasina is the primary narrator, Rachel is warm-hearted and Hope is critical of everyone and everything. Their common denominator is growing up in the Front Street African Christian Church where Thomasina’s father is the pastor—and where the girls learn to put Christ first in their lives.

The story has potential, but too frequently the reader is left to guess or assume the results of a variety of situations. For example, why do people steal free trash cans in the Windy City? And why are professor’s degrees stolen when displayed in their offices on college campuses? There are numerous unexplained instances like these throughout the book.

It’s easy, though, to get wound up in the crux of the novel—the trio’s allegiance to one another, and sharing in each others’ lives despite their post high school transitions, as each lives in a different city. Moving through *Time Will Tell* is like looking at a high school yearbook ten years later at a reunion and discovering that some things just don’t go as planned.

Thomasina’s many failed relationships eventually slow her down in her quest for companionship and she focuses on her career instead. Rachel ditches her predictable fiancé, Patrick, and ends up with a sweet talker who goes by the name of ‘Brothaman’. Hope pushes herself on her high school



sweetheart, Jason, and their relationship becomes thinner than her wedding veil.

The story of these three women is at times corny and predictable but there is something reassuring about reminders of true friendship—and we get to revere and appreciate our own bonds with people who help create our histories.

The True History Of Paradise
by Margaret Cezair-Thompson
Dutton Books
Reviewed by *Kalamu ya Salaam*

Craftwise, this is a beautifully rendered debut novel. In 330 pages Cezair-Thompson unfolds a multi-ethnic tapestry detailing the social history of Jamaica. She is an entrancing storyteller who has obviously done her historical homework in presenting the story of Jean Landing, a middle class Jamaican woman, whose half sister, Lana Ramcharan, has committed suicide by immolation, a death that mirrors the internal violence tearing apart Jamaica in the late seventies and early eighties.

Jean, an apolitical translator in the security section of the Michael Manley government, is fleeing Kingston, Jamaica to join her English lover in New York. As Paul, a lifelong family friend, drives Jean to a small airport on the northern coast where she will depart with an illegal passport, memories and voices flood Jean's consciousness. The memories reveal Jean's personal life story and the voices are those of her family's diverse ancestors: Spanish, Scottish, English, East Indian, Chinese and African.

The memories are vividly told and give us a brilliant insight into the class structure of Jamaica. Although the "voices" are effective as historical highlights, they are not successfully integrated into the novel's structure. As Jean remembers we can visualize the memories, but the novel fails to make believable the idea that Jean is actually hearing these voices as each tells a con-

cise and coherent genealogical story.

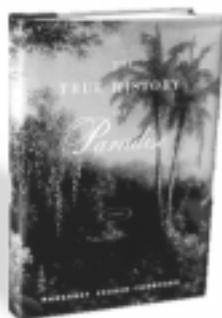
Had the novel been longer and more tightly edited, Cezair-Thompson may have been able to integrate her wealth of material into a seamless whole. Not only are the transitions abrupt, but too often we are given expository summaries rather than scenes of action and dialogue. Fortunately, these stylistic deficiencies are merely blemishes on what is otherwise a stunningly told tale of love, intrigue and, ultimately, tragedy.

Even with the above noted stylistic reservations, this novel would have been a triumph were it not for the troubling absence of poor and dark-skinned Jamaican characters. Reading *The True History of Paradise*, one would never know that the black poor are the overwhelming majority of Jamaicans.

Moreover, Jean Landing, who obviously loves her homeland, never expresses any deep interest in discovering the sources of Jamaica's social deterioration. Gun violence didn't just happen on an island without a single gun manufacturer. Dirty tricks by the American government are hinted at but never pursued by the protagonist who, as a security official, was in a position to discover the truths.

The "true" history of Xaymaca, the Arawak "land of many rivers," cannot be told without highlighting Jamaica's black and poor people, those whose sweat and blood drenched the fertile land and whose exploited labor grew and harvested the crops that generated the wealth to create and support a multi-ethnic middle and upper class. Additionally, the political turmoil that Jean Landing is fleeing cannot be understood without an appreciation of international destabilization. Because this is presented as a historical novel, these omissions cannot be dismissed as minor technicalities.

The True History of Paradise is an accurate and expertly drawn portrait of apolitical, middle-class Jamaica. Hopefully, in future novels, Margaret Cezair-Thompson will reveal the rest of the truth about how paradises de-evolve into living hells. ►



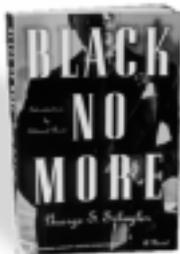
Black No More
by George S. Schuyler
Random House

Reviewed by Trent Fitzgerald

One of the saddest things about books is how quickly they are forgotten as soon as they hit the bookshelves. Once they hit the shelves, it's over, on to the next hype-filled campaign of a new book. Libraries offer hope for out-of-print titles and rare books. They can attract audiences for these books and resurrect comebacks of great literary achievements. The Modern Library has republished one such achievement for today's race conscious society in its authenticity written in period ebonics and dramatic conversational dialogue.

George Schuyler's compelling novel, *Black No More*, originally published in 1931, deserves a comeback more than most books. With an in-depth introduction by acclaimed author Ishmael Reed and a preface from Mr. Schuyler himself, this is, unequivocally, an African American masterpiece.

The story has a period, the Harlem Renaissance era, when black people produced the greatest art forms and white people wore their racism proudly on their sleeves. Max Disher, a black man, is searching for a new social identity. Tired of racism and being alone, he, along with thousands of black people, participates in a corporate American scientist's sanitarium that can change black people into a white people. Disher volunteers his body and transforms himself into Matthew Fisher, a white man. Then, in order to hide his true identity, he boards a train to Atlanta, Georgia; befriends the local racist redneck, marries his daughter and joins a Ku Klux Klan faction called The Knights Of Nordica.



As a writer, Schuyler is all sensitive and political. In chapter 5, he satirizes the Renaissance's noted Negro leaders that are upset over black America's race to turn white. Marcus Garvey is portrayed as Santop Lico-

rice, a philanderer married to several white women. (Ouch!) And W.E.B. DuBois is portrayed as Dr. Shakespeare Agamemnon Beard, a cultural hustler, who writes "limpid prose" of black people's suffering in a magazine called *The Dilemma*. (Ouch! Ouch!) Throughout the book, Schuyler's writing of science fiction and nonfiction becomes equally interesting but also separate and visible.

The story has revelations, lessons, challenges and the sincere application of the latest quackery. When Fisher, now a rich man after playing the "race card" with Atlanta's white folks decides to skip town with his wife; Schuyler leaves the novel at its most disturbing -- racism, influenced by an American notion of racial superiority and economics, will never end.

Song for Anninho
by Gayl Jones
Beacon Press
Reviewed by Tara Betts

Gayl Jones took a hiatus of at least 20 years before returning with new releases destined for the black literary canon. The dense internal dialogues of *The Healing* and *Mosquito* are part of the quick succession of new books Jones has published. *Song for Anninho*, a book-length narrative poem, is her latest addition.

Song for Anninho wanders through the thoughts of Almeyda, who joins a quilombo (similar to the Maroon communities of former slaves) called Palmares which was established in Brazil in early 1595. Some of the Africans enslaved by the Portuguese fled into the jungle between Pernambuco and Alagoas, where the Palmares community flourished. Since this community was highly organized, the people of Palmares successfully resisted conquest until 1694. Zumbi, the still-celebrated leader of Palmares, joined many of his citizens in death. Jones based this poem on the novel *Palmares*, which she is currently completing.

Almeyda shares her story while recuperating from the aftermath of a defeated Palmares. After a Portuguese soldier cuts off her breasts and she is
(continued on page 44)

Dressed in a long, white chiffon dress, black gloves and a cowboy hat, a tall, thin, young man, stands on the stage of the Subterranean, a Wicker Park club, reading a poem about death.

The club is one of three venues for the preliminary and semi-final rounds of the 1999 10th Annual National Poetry Slam competition. People are sitting along the stairway and leaning over the rails of the balcony. Hanging over the stage, is a statute of two figures joined at the hands, pulling in opposite directions. The crowd listens intently and applauds wildly. The poem may be about death, but poetry is far from dead these days. These are die-hard fans that follow the poets from city to city each year.

The poets seem to have created a city of their own, a "City of Poetry." The climate is Bohemian and Beatnik. The poets express truths about racism, feminism, romanticism, eroticism, or any other subject of their choice. As one emcee warned the audience gathered in the Chicago Theatre at the Saturday night finale: "There will be no Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson," and so there was only hip poetry, frenzied poetry, poetry on the edge of a burning millenium.

The Slams began in Chicago as Marc Smith's desire to have poetry on stage in bars. In 1985, he asked the owner of the Green Mill, Dave Jemil, if he could stage poetry readings in his bar and the rest is history. It is, however, in debate as to who actually started the competitions. However,

without controversy, Marc Smith is credited with creating the term "Slam."

The traveling "City of Poetry" was a result of the Slam competitions. Today, the competition has a following of at least a thousand. This year Morley Safer covered the event for 60 Minutes. The atmosphere is tinged with a mixture of silliness and seriousness. Scorekeepers promenade around a handmade cardboard scoreboard and judges are handpicked from the audience rather than academia.

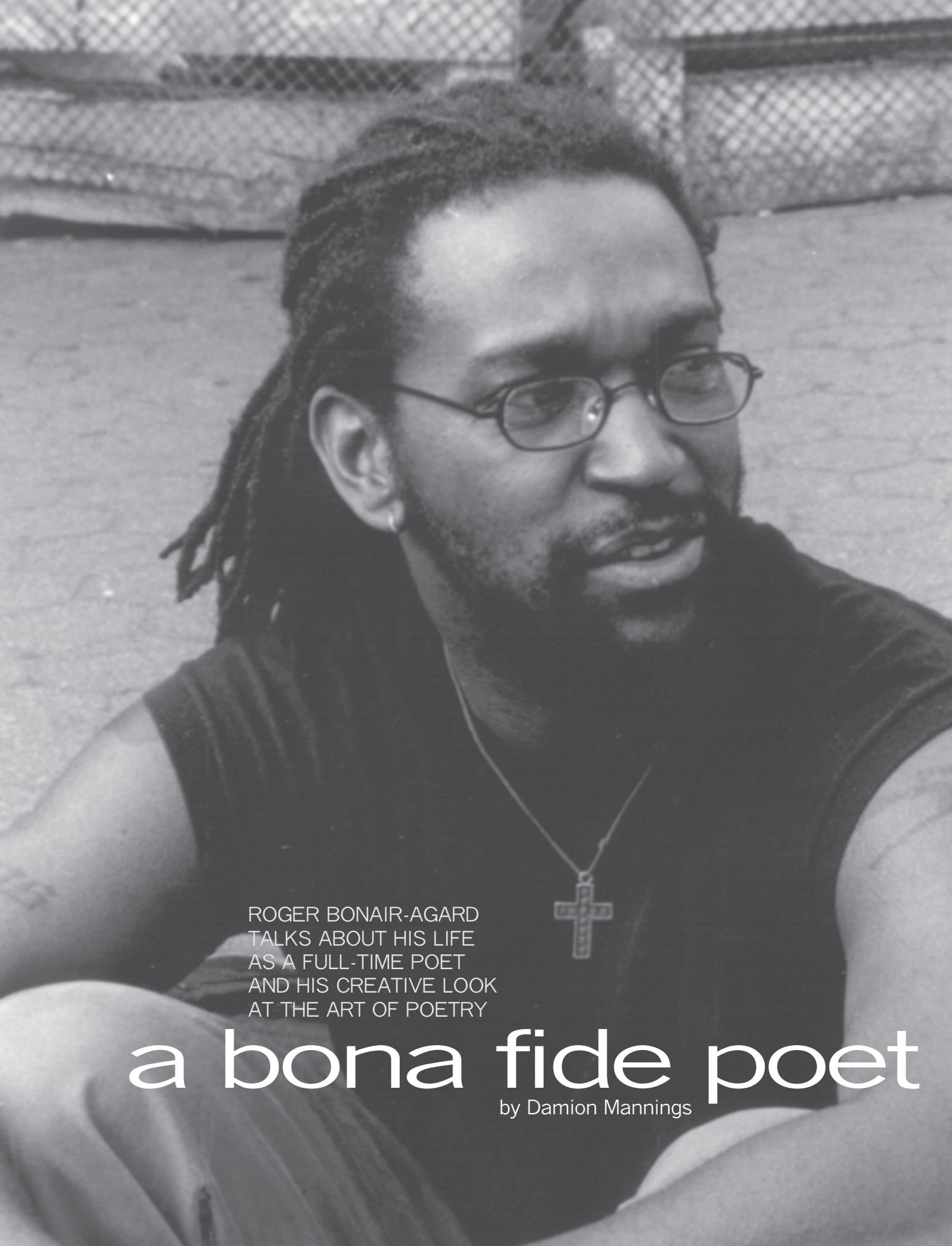
The Individuals category came down to a very close finish between the 1998 National Poetry Slam champion, Chicagoan, Reggie Gibson and this year's winner, New Yorker, Roger Bonair-Agard. Mr. Gibson performed a Eulogy to Jimi Hendrix, where his voice at times sounded like the instrument Hendrix played. Roger Bonair-Agard examined his upbringing by his grandmother, who questions, "What kind of man are you intending to be?" Seeing him on an "Urban Cross," he imagines her saying, "Get down off that thing, boy, and fight."

The four-person, four-team competitors from San Francisco, San Jose, Oakland and New York, ended in a first-place tie between San Jose and San Francisco, who then decided to share the title and \$5,000 prize money. These two opposing teams, like the two statutes at the Subterranean, were pulling in opposite directions, in this "poetry as a contact sport" competition, but were indeed joined at the hands. ★

city of poets

1999 10TH ANNUAL NATIONAL POETRY SLAM

by Brenda Kimbal

A black and white photograph of Roger Bonair-Agard. He is a Black man with long dreadlocks, wearing glasses and a dark tank top. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a thoughtful expression. He is wearing a necklace with a cross pendant. The background is a chain-link fence.

ROGER BONAIR-AGARD
TALKS ABOUT HIS LIFE
AS A FULL-TIME POET
AND HIS CREATIVE LOOK
AT THE ART OF POETRY

a bona fide poet

by Damion Mannings



The poet must first discover himself before he finds the root of all things. Once he claims a path, the expedition doesn't end; it takes turns, uncovering many layers of soul. Roger Bonair-Agard is sure of this. His forthcoming collection *And Chaos Congealed*, is a courageous testimonial on the voyage of self-discovery, spanning oceans and interstates, coming to you live from the pulpit of open-mike stages, making you feel that old phenomenon: the spoken word.

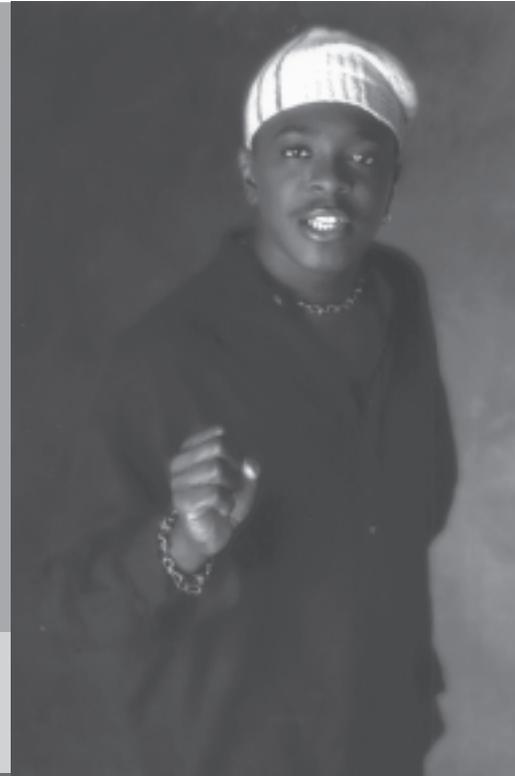
The ties that bind art and artistry are intrinsic within the artist, weaving a tapestry where the remnants of his experiences arc glorious to behold. "I am feeling without a doubt that I am doing what I was meant to do," Bonair-Agard asserts, confident with his decision to be a poet instead of pursuing law school. "What I do so requires that I constantly examine who I am, and take the stances I take to question my own politics. One needs to question one's life at all times and what I do gives me the best chance to do that." His poetic vision allows him tremendous insight into the human condition, making his work poignant and captivating. Dreadlocked and handsome, the energy he radiates makes one yield closer, bearing witness to his testimonies of soul-survival on a journey to "figure out what exactly is going on in [his] life."

A graduate of Hunter College, Bonair-Agard has been featured at various venues throughout the country including New York's Nuyorican Poet's Café where he was the 1998 Nuyorican Poets' Café Fresh Poet of the Year. He acknowledges the Café for putting him on the map, allowing him to spar in the poetic arena. "It gives me the opportunity to share a piece of me that I wouldn't be able to give otherwise," explains Bonair-Agard of his performances that often leaves audiences wanting more. The marriage of artistic forms is equally important in his work because it allows one to make associations with not only words but also movement and sounds. "If a painter or dancer can evoke the message [of the spoken word] that's a beautiful thing."

"Creation gives me an adrenaline rush," he smiles, radiating mahogany-like the candle light of an East Village bar. "The most exciting part is when [an idea] grabs you spontaneously and it writes itself." This catharsis allows Bonair-Agard to share a more intimate part of himself with others. His autobiographical/confessional tone pulls one into a universe where matriarchs are synonymous with strength, where heritage is the root of self-preservation, and mangoes are equivalent to bliss.
(continued on page 49)

by Nichole Shields

a one man show



REGGIE GIBSON

HAD MAJOR SUCCESS

WITH THE MOVIE

love jones...

NOW WHAT?

One man. One Stage. One Word. Powerful! That is what Reggie Gibson is when he performs his poetic words; especially during his recent one-man show, Church of the Phunky Word, a word-vocation of the mystic origins and manifestations of “musexpression through word-ritual and sound-prayer.”

The aura of the Godfather of Soul and Jimi Hendrix is resurrected upon Gibson’s stage entrance to perform Church and the Phunky Word, which has been incubating in his mind and soul for more than seven years. With a whirlwind of syncopated hand claps, chants and an improvisational foot dance, a five-member band edges him on with ancestral instruments and chants. And then, the Griot speaks, stunning the audience with his rhythm, dance, and song. It is definitely poetic.

Although Gibson’s poetic expressions began at the tender age of eleven, it has been less than ten years ago that he entered a little jazz club called Spices (a.k.a. “the Sanctuary”) in the Near North section of downtown Chicago and “let loose.”

Luther and Diane, the proprietors of the now defunct Spices would open the doors to their small jazz club every Monday evening for a night of poetry where Gibson and countless others would belt out metaphors from the back of the room to the stage. “Spices was our ►

hangout, our sanctuary. This is where we went to hide from white folks on Monday nights” states Gibson. Often known as “the Sanctuary” to the faithful poets that added flavor to the joint, it later became known to a larger audience when the venue was featured in the movie *love jones*.

Not many people know that *love jones* was based on events of Gibson’s life, and that in fact, Gibson was first choice by poet/director Theodore Witcher to play the lead roll of Darius Lovehall. However, the faceless decision-makers of Hollywood intervened and the rest is history.

Gibson’s upbringing in a household of a direly religious mother and police officer father has been the backdrop for a few of his poems. As a child, Gibson would “make-up stories about things we didn’t have.”

A few years later, he wrote a science fiction/religious piece that dealt with death and destruction that “scared the shit out of my mother.” Needless to say, Gibson did not stop writing, but began to incorporate a variety of subject matters into his writings. His use of high language and talisman words is part of the beauty of his art. Gibson states that his writings are replete “surrealistic/dream imagery.”

An illustration of the dynamics and versatility of Gibson’s work is to view the diverse audience for any of his performances. “There’s a fair mix of academicians and layman [to poetry], people who write, teach, and sometimes, people who have never [or think they have never] heard poetry before. The imagery is subjective and people will walk away with anything”



says Gibson.

Among Gibson’s numerous accolades is the first place award in the individual competition of 1998 National Poetry Slam Championship in Austin, TX. According to Gibson, his placing was a surprise. “A lot of people think I’m humble... had it been a different day, a different group of judges, or a different poem, I may not have been standing there as a winner.”

Despite all of the fanfare and attention that Gibson receives, he proudly gives praise by pouring libation and allowing the ancestors to use him as a vessel. His transformation from poet to Griot is administered, and wisdom and strength allows him to speak truth to the people. Never are the accomplishments of others forgotten, since Gibson thanks all that have helped with his transformation from various elements and stages of his life. Among Gibson’s many artist predecessors are Sonia Sanchez, Pablo

Neruda, Jimi Hendrix, Salvador Dali, Yusef Komunyakaa, Guatama Buddha, and Mozart.

For any patron of poetry, Reggie Gibson can be found performing his poetic words, including the electrifying *Church and the Phunky Word* on many stages throughout Chicago, in addition to hosting several venues three nights a week in the city. When he is not traveling, Gibson teaches poetry and is occasionally a student at various poetry and writing workshops conducted by guest poets across the U.S.

This fall, look for Gibson’s forthcoming collection of poetry, *Storms Beneath the Skin* by published nappyhead press in Chicago. ★

Speak your mind

SPEECH RECOGNITION SOFTWARE

by Deatra Haimé

If somehow you managed to get through school without learning how to type and now deal with the tedium of hunting and pecking your way through most of your computer-related tasks or if you simply like to talk more than you like to type, there's good news. Speech recognition technology offers a futuristic alternative to translating thoughts into written words—it's now possible to sit in front of your computer, speak your mind and watch words appear on your monitor.

Speech recognition isn't a new concept—it's been wildly popular among professionals like lawyers and doctors who do large amounts of technical writing—but until recently, hardware and software technology wasn't advanced enough to make it a feasible option for the average writer. To run effectively, programs like Dragon System Naturally Speaking and IBM Via Voice, need lots of RAM (minimum 32 megabytes) and fast processors (at least 133 megahertz) to trudge through the complicated machinations of taking dictation. On a well-configured machine, upper-end products can "type" up to 100 words per minute. Even on the lower end (in some cases under \$50), speeds reach 75 words per minute — not bad



compared to average hunting and pecking speeds.

To get started, you'll need to train the program to recognize the quirks of how you speak (do you say "wahter" or "wawter"?). In the past, this training was the bane of speech recognition—it took hours of repetition for programs to gain even a semblance of users speech patterns. New advances have considerably diminished how long this process takes—in most cases, a hour or so is plenty. Putting in the

time is worth the effort since accuracy improves significantly when the program is thoroughly familiar with how you speak.

If you naturally enunciate fairly clearly, you would probably do well with one of the lower-end programs that just take dictation. If, however, you tend to slur words, talk quickly or think faster than you speak, you may need a more advanced program which allows you to instruct corrections to be made as you speak.

Some aspects take getting used to—dictating punctuation, for example—but once you're comfortable, speech recognition software opens up a new world of getting words down. Speech recognition software may help you finally finish those letters, memos and novels you've been putting off. ★



KEVIN POWELL

ON THE STATE

OF BLACK LITERATURE

random thought

by Cynthia Ray

Kevin Powell's fervor was not easily disguised, even as the blues of Billie Holiday blared in the background of a quiet Brooklyn cafe. The topic of conversation that had captured his interest was the current—and future—state of black literature.

Powell, one of the young, vibrant and more outspoken voices on the literary scene first gained attention on MTV's *The Real World*. This media debut was followed by the publication of three books, *In the Tradition: An Anthology of Young Black Writers* which he co-edited with Ras Baraka, *Recognize*, a book of poetry, and his memoir, *Keepin' It Real: Post-Mtv Reflections on Race, Sex, and Politics*.

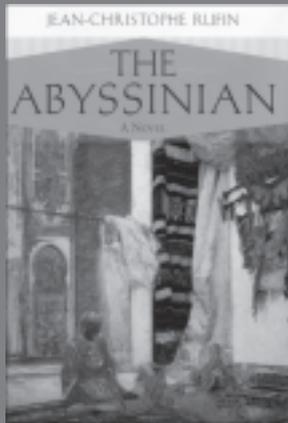
It might surprise the reader to learn that Powell's earliest influences were not black writers. As a child his first loves were Ernest Hemingway, Edgar Allen Poe and William Shakespeare. Always a voracious reader, black literature did not enter into his experience until he attended college. "When I got to Rutgers, I discovered [The] Autobiography of Malcolm X, I discovered Richard Wright, I discovered Zora Neale Hurston."

Apparently, Powell's well-rounded literary aesthetic has helped shape his views on black literature today. In defining black literature, his main criterion is that people have a sense of the tradition and history of the genre. He is committed to the continuation of the integrity and quality of black literature and poetry. "I've seen the overcommercialization of the black cultural and literary scene. Can we really say we're creating the next Sonia Sanchez, Richard Wright or Amiri Baraka for this generation? I don't think so. The ones who are really talented aren't really known. There are people like Paul Beatty, Willie Perdomo, Ruth Forman, Sharon Strang, Nikky Finney and Valerie Boyd, they're just not famous."

He continues, "Once you become conscious, on a certain level, of what's going on in this world, inequities, oppression, our tradition as black people, I think it's incumbent upon you
(continued on page 47)

four heavy weights for the fall season

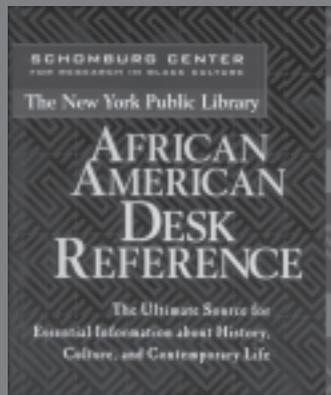
HERE ARE FOUR BOOKS OF DIFFERING INTEREST THAT WILL INFORM, ENTERTAIN AND KEEP YOU READING FOR SOME TIME.



The Abyssinian: A Novel
by Jean-Christophe Rufin
W.W. Norton

422 pages

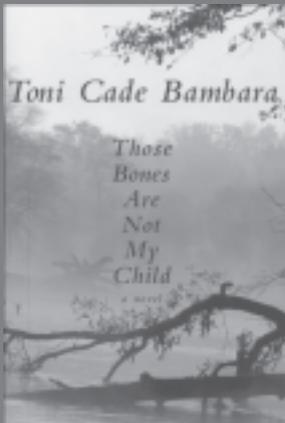
A novel of adventure, *The Abyssinian*, chronicles the tale of King Louis XIV attempt to bring Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia) under the influence of France.



African American Desk Reference:
The Ultimate Source for Essential
Information about History, Culture,
and Contemporary Life
Schomburg Center for Research
Into Black Culture

606 pages

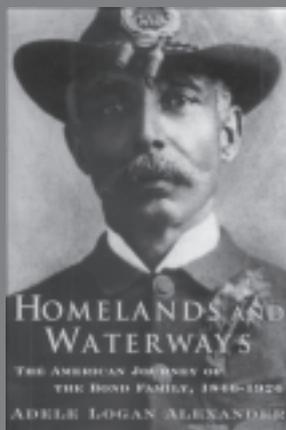
With over 5000 information capsules this reference captures the most vital people, places, organizations and movements of the African American diaspora.



Those Bones Are Not My Child: A Novel
by Toni Cade Bambara
Pantheon Books

671 pages

This book was twelve years in the making. Toni Cade Bambara worked on it until her death in 1995. Edited by Toni Morrison, Bambara retells the story of the Atlanta murders that gripped the nation in the late 70s early 80s.



Homelands and Waterways
The American Journey of The Bond Family,
1846-1926

by Adele Logan Alexander
Pantheon Books

694 pages

Historical look at an African American family from slavery to freedom

The Fly God Sings

by Bro. Yao

I am, I am flying, I am fly god
the hip bait for holy singing
taste me and your mouth
will fill with sugar

though hipness is science
and death to hipness
was the first decree
kill the beat break it down

cut the hands of the drummer
so the beat bulges in his throat
bring in bugles make mad music
slip heroin into the song

kill the heroines

sing baptism for the song
gone out of control
the whodunit, I want it
hot and heavy, I want it
to be funky

like a hot summer street
where people riot with their
tongues flapping out their mouths

tear the city down

beneath you the hip
songs they sang
chain gangs chain
rattle the links, fill it
to the brink

scratch the record, slam
the microphone, bring it home

make mistakes into music
got to use it, fly god want
the world to be holy

retarded music, Jah steppin
let the beat come down
like spaceships, to be hip
is to be born somewhere else

sun ra sun ra sun ra

lost geometry of a
Harlem, juke joint
shacks full of twisted bodies
in the dazzling strobes
you see the globe of the city

suffer in the light
of a thousand insufficient watts
a thousand deaths
your feet trembling
on the runway, runaway

you wanna fly,
take flight
you wanna get with me
the fly god singing baptism
you wanna be

an old school weapon
power to the people
throw your hands in the air
you wanna big pep rally
blame it on the funk

take trash can lids and old
paint buckets, sing it
on the street, flap your jaws
put the people in the zone

my home is your home
this land is my land
this land is your land
and you can't leave

let your flesh sweat in the degrees

you believe in machines
but have never had any
except blenders and
refrigerators, hot combs

hair dryers, an ax
to cut things down
a big car full of engine
to drive around town

lean to the side
just ride, you gotta be
smooth, cool
to ride with the fly god
buy the fly cd, sport
the fly gear, hear clear
the age of the blunt
descend upon the city like
the thud of a cannon

abandon the mission

get your self some tinted
windows some indigo
drive like this, with your
head just above the dash

sing a song
of sorrow get played, sing
a song of guns and rage
get paid

they pump the music
out of the radio like smoke
screens, got 10-year-olds
dreams, filled with money
and guns, big thighs

they wanna be fly, the
wanna be down, they wanna
get with the fly god, phat
and free and wild

they make the paper, they
make your image, into
shadows, on the screen
they make your mama cry

make your mama wanna fly
fly fly fly away
be on the fly god's ship
to do the dip and the sway

box of wheaties with the stars
phatest rhyme you ever heard on
a beer commercial
heroes with the heroics doom

curse their father, hold a bible
and sing the blues, make a beat
sound so sweet it drips onto
the children playing in the street

with lyrics of doom, gotta be
that way, gotta have boom
gun shot, gotta give me what
cha got, what we need
the fly god says the coolest
of the cool look like fools
with their bank account on wheels

they broker and deal
hustle and kill
for the spotlight

and all that is fly
flies away
and we get left

I wanna be's
buzzing around our head
like flies.

With a sincere desire to produce quality, conscious literature; a \$400 cash award won in a poetry contest; and a used mimeograph machine, Don L. Lee, now known as Haki R. Madhubuti, along with poets Jewel Latimore (now Johari Amini Hudson) and Carolyn Rodgers started Third World Press in 1967.

As the independent politics and the creative fervor of the sixties continued to stir in the veins of many artist during that era, Haki Madhubuti, armed with determination and a proactive entrepreneurial stance began producing books underground—literally. In his basement apartment on Chicago’s South Side, Third World Press’ production of *Images in Black* and *Songs of a Black Bird* marked the successful beginning of what many, Madhubuti included, could not fathom Third World Press would become.

Thirty-two years later, Third World Press has a list of extraordinary authors, over 100 titles, and a dedicated staff that possess “an entrepreneurial understanding and focus” states Madhubuti, helping Third World Press to become a beacon for the plethora of independent black publishers in America. When Madhubuti started the press, his primary focus was publishing poetry, but just as today, even with the popularity that poetry has, the sales alone is not be able to help guide independent publishers, or others, to the levels of financial stability that fiction, popular fiction in particular, has made on the industry. When Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gwendolyn Brooks made a conscious decision to leave her primary publisher to sign with Third World Press, the successful sales of her works helped the infant press boost its sales and develop growth.

The uniqueness of Third World Press is primarily because it is one of the few long-term independent presses that will produce more than 5 poetry titles, in addition to other titles, per year. Some publishers will not publish poetry at all. “Nobody reads it, but everyone writes it” states Naomi Long Madgett, of Lotus Press in Detroit. An example of Third World Press’ commitment to poetry is the 18-24 month production schedule for new poetry releases.



Since its inception, Third World Press has seen much growth and has moved its operation to three different locations. Currently located in the middle of a residential area on Chicago’s South Side, the offices for Third World Press was formerly a rectory for a now defunct Catholic Church. The four levels of the building serve as the primary daily operation for the press, and surprisingly, many residents are not aware of the jewel that lie within the heart of their block.

Although Third World Press has experienced growth, there are issues such as advances, attractive royalties and
(continued on page 48)

first rate books

THIRD WORLD PRESS

by Nichole Shields

lights... cameras... words...

WRITING THAT SCREENPLAY MAY SOUND LIKE FUN
BUT IT CAN BE ANYTHING BUT

by Carla D. Robinson

Once I came to screenwriting, I found it stretched me beyond what I felt were my limits as a writer. It is no easy row to hoe. There are a number of obstacles in going from the germ of an idea to a completed screenplay, many of which stopped me my first few times out.

Recently, though, I, along with my writing partner, completed my first feature length script. It was a year and a half in the making, and what I learned during that time continues to prove of great value to me as I work on new film projects.

My partner—who also happens to be one of my closest friends—and I decided to work together when we were equally green film school students. I realized, from reading the short scripts she had written, that she was a structuralist. All of the necessary elements in her pieces were tightly constructed and properly dispersed. She was also good with action. My strength was character. I had a penchant for creating believable, yet flawed, people. What we had in common was our warped sense of humor, and the desire to work on something that was light and fun. Hence, we decided to write a romantic comedy about a Jewish guy who falls for a black girl who thinks he's black, too.

One of the earliest lessons we learned was that friendship can be an obstacle to getting work done. Writers are notorious for being easily distractible, even when working solo. In our partnership, before we learned better, we used each other as distractions (and had a good time do-

ing so). In order to overcome this, we decided to spend as little time as possible working in the same room. We would outline our story together, one act at a time, then divvy up the scenes and separate. Since each of us had a sense of where the other person's scenes were going (via the detailed outline), we were able to complete relatively seamless early drafts. It proved quite an efficient system, until it was time to restructure and polish the piece. At that point, we found we had to work together and brainstorm because it's what I call the "thinking period." While the first few drafts of a screenplay shouldn't involve thought but, rather, writing from the heart (without censorship or perfectionism), latter drafts present the point when the characters, story, and plot are pretty much in place, but the whole thing needs to somehow be taken to a higher level. In our case, we discovered we needed to work on subtext, humor, and believability. The latter issue came into play when we had to figure out how to make our main characters' love affair work, in spite of the fact that it began as a result of deception. The reason our partnership was so helpful at this point is because we were able to bounce questions off each other. It's as simple as that.

Asking questions about every aspect of a script is the only way to improve it. If you're working sans partner, be prepared to ask yourself questions about your piece and to come up with creative and unexpected solutions. One key ques-

tion that came up after five or six drafts of our script was “Is there too much backstory in the opening?” This simple question led us to take the most critical scene in the script, which we had placed near the end, and make it the opening. It became our proudest moment. Once we reached a point where we felt we could take the piece no further, but were well aware that it still wasn’t finished, we held a staged reading, which I can’t recommend highly enough. A problem that I had run into in my previous scripts was that I would grow frustrated over scene length and the level of dialogue. Hearing actors perform our screenplay helped my partner and I make necessary cuts (before the reading, our script was 148 pages, afterward, 113) and fine-tune the dialogue.

Since we were writing a comedy, we decided to invite some of our friends and associates to the reading in order to gauge audience reaction. This made it possible for us to punch up jokes and eliminate scenes that failed to work. The response was favorable; thus it also inspired us to push on to the finish.

I have come to discover that completing our screenplay was only the beginning. We are now faced with the task of selling it and trying to get representation, which has presented an entirely new challenge. From this experience, I am becoming a master marketer, firing off snappy query letters and promoting us as a hot property to any producer or agent who’ll listen (there is no room for modesty when trying to make a sale). I have had to build an unbelievable amount of resilience but even more than that, I’ve had to keep writing. My partner and I have two more screenplays in the works in addition to those that we are working on individually.

I’ve had to force myself not to merely sit and wait for our screenplay to sell. Many writers complete five to ten scripts, before making a sale or even garnering an assignment. I have kept this in the forefront of my mind and it may well be the most important lesson I’ve learned, because as one noted screenwriting authority says, the only way to become successful is by putting “seat of the pants to the seat of the chair.” ★

BOOKS TO LOOK FOR



Hellified
by Tracy Grant
Visao Press

**The Day Kadi Lost
Part of Her Life**
Photos by Kim Manresa
Spinifex Press

A Thirst For Rain
by Roslyn Carrington
Kensington Press

Black Wings & Blind Angels
by Sapphire
Alfred A. Knopf

**A Miracle In Paradise
A Lupe Solano Mystery**
by Carolina Garcia-Aguilera
Avon Books



**Shadowboxing
Representations of Black Feminist Politics**
by Joy James
St. Martins Press

B. Smith’s Rituals & Celebrations
by B. Smith
Random House

The MultiCultiBoho Sideshow
by Alexs D. Pate
Bard Press



Dona Ines Vs. Oblivion
by Ana Teresa Torres
Translated by Gregory Rabassa
Louisiana State Univ. Press

of chapbooks and poets

WITH A LITTLE CREATIVITY YOU CAN
PUBLISH YOUR OWN BOOK OF POETRY

by Sharon L. Powell

My first chapbook was Gwendolyn Brooks' *Primer for Blacks*. It is autographed and contains a favorite self-esteem booster poem, *To Those of My Sisters Who Kept Their Naturals*. I won it in an essay contest *Our Mizz Brooks* sponsored at my grandmother's church. I believe I was the only entrant, but they assured me otherwise. I was sixteen. I also remember Third World Press' little poetry books by Angela Jackson, Sterling Plumpp, Carolyn Rodgers and Don L. Lee in the 1970s.

The history of chapbooks is not limited to poetry. For those who need appropriate citation, a chapbook is "a small book or pamphlet of popular tales, ballads, and the like formerly hawked about by a chapman." The chapman is "a hawker, peddler or merchant." From those early days in Europe, the transformed world of chapbooks apparently has an etiquette of which I was unaware. Staples versus thread. Acid free paper. Colophon. A poet with a chapbook – in the marketplace of poetry – is a peddler. Chapbooks are usually sold at poetry readings to generate some extra cash for the exploited poet or to appease audience members who "really loved your stuff" and keep asking about a book or "a copy of that piece."

To a heifer poet like myself, chapbooks are poets' little self-published books. They can do it themselves, enlist the help of a typesetter or printer, or compete in a poetry competition and win the chapbook publication prize. Poets have equal artistic license, control

over the content and blame for typographical errors. Put simply, a chapbook is a cheap book for many struggling, shy, enterprising, righteous or otherwise unpublished poets. The chapbook offers them a faster route to publication and a way to have their words last longer than a poetry reading.

Chapbook publication, however; is not limited to novices or the previously unpublished poet. According to *The Life of Langston Hughes* by Arnold Rampersad, a result of attempts "to make his persona one and the same with the masses as he heard them in the bars and the streets," was publication of Hughes' *Jim Crow's Last Stand*. This pamphlet of twenty-three poems published by the Negro Publication Society of America in 1943, and a ten cent copy of his poem, *Freedom's Plow*, were the wares Langston Hughes hawked at his readings in the 1940s. Earlier, during the Depression, Hughes toured the south reading his poetry and selling booklets, pamphlets and broadsides knowing that two dollar books were out of the financial reach of his audiences.

My chapbooks and other poetry inspired products help me disseminate poetry to the people. It is a grassroots approach and action. Chapbooks are also part of a legacy of "street literature," that, as a resident troublemaker, speaks volumes to me. Lastly, the existence of these types of texts is in keeping with the piece of sage advice Gwendolyn Brooks gave me years ago: "Publish it yourself." ★



Chapbooks by Clymenza Hawkins

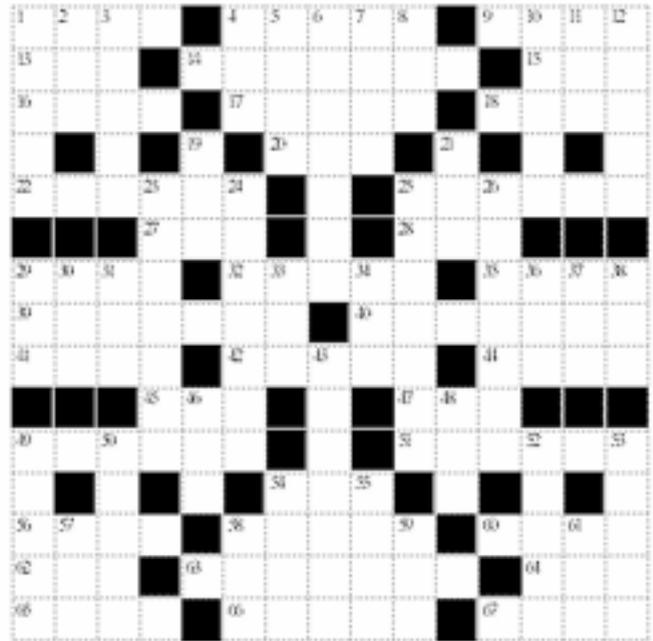
crossword puzzle

ACROSS

- 1 A short Korean poetic form consisting of three lines, each line having a total of 14-16 syllables in groups ranging from 2 to 7 (but usually 3 or 4), with a natural pause at the end of the second group and a major pause after the fourth group
 4 Kaufman's Poem: "_____ Shop Jazz" won 1965 Guinness Poetry Award
 9 Seaward
 13 Hawaiian acacia
 14 The full "8 Down"
 15 Summit
 16 Deavere Smith (1950-)
 17 Farm birds
 18 Swahili Nine
 20 Very small
 22 Michael Johnson is a good one
 25 Official seal
 27 Tribe, West African Coast during period of Slave Trade
 28 17th letter of the Greek alphabet
 29 The Rastafari term for a saltless and vegetarian diet.
 32 "____ Allen" Brooks Pulitzer (1950)
 35 World's longest river
 39 "_____" Ice – Floridian Rapper
 40 Leroy Robert Paige
 41 An extended narrative poem, exalted in style, but usually simple in construction and heroic in theme, often giving expression to the ideals of a nation or race
 42 Units
 44 Having eyes
 45 Roman goddess of plenty
 47 Biblical high priest
 49 substitutes for a particular attribute the name of a famous person recognized for that attribute.
 51 A literary work which exposes and ridicules human vices or folly
 54 Striver's one
 56 Either of two collections of mythological, heroic and aphoristic Icelandic poetry from the 12th and 13th centuries
 58 Parliaments' "Flash _____"
 60 Portico
 62 No TV Heron
 63 Inane
 64 Vase
 65 Swahili He
 66 A hymn of praise, joy, triumph, etc
 67 Employes

DOWN

- 1 An ancient Scandinavian poet or bard
 2 Electrically charged atom
 3 Roman god with two faces
 4 Wet spongy ground
 5 Once more
 6 An old English minstrel
 7 Otherwise
 8 Madhubuti was he
 10 A line or verse of poetry
 11 Greek goddess of the dawn
 12 Achebe's "Things Fall _____"
 19 Alain Locke (1886-1954) wrote about this kind of Negro
 21 In Rasta speech, this term is used as a synonym for Emperor Haile Selassie as the manifestation of the Godhead.
 23 A part of the Parnassus, a mountain range in Greece, which was the



- home of the Muses
 24 The endeavor to portray an accurate representation of nature and real life without idealization
 25 Folds
 26 An elaborate metaphor, often strained or far-fetched, in which the subject is compared with a simpler analogue usually chosen from nature or a familiar context
 29 I have
 30 Faucet
 31 Black bird
 33 Thomas R. Gray wrote the narrative for this revolter in 1831
 34 Doctrine
 36 The God of the necropolis (City of the Dead) portrayed in dog form.
 37 Who said: "You've really got to start hitting the books because it's no joke out here."
 38 Antiquity
 43 A pastoral poem, usually containing dialogue between shepherds
 46 Monetary unit of Burma
 48 A medieval narrative or lyric poem which flourished in 12th century France, consisting of couplets of five-syllabled lines separated by single lines of two syllables
 49 A poem of lament, usually formal and sustained, over the death of a particular person; also, a meditative poem in plaintive or sorrowful mood, such as, Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard, by Thomas Gray
 50 Strangely
 52 The recurring stress or accent in a rhythmic or metrical series of sounds; also, the mark indicating the syllable on which such stress or accent occurs
 53 Author of "Vive Noir!"
 54 First name for a "Bird" or U.S. Poet Laureate
 55 Command to stop a horse
 57 Decease
 58 One circuit
 59 Large cask
 61 Metal-bearing mineral

Crossword puzzle provided by Troy Johnson/www.aalbc.com

Answers on page 49

(continued from page 26)

separated from Anninho, her lover, Almeyda heals under the care of a medicine woman named Zibatra. Almeyda recalls her relationship with Anninho through flashbacks and passages where she speaks to him directly.

As Almeyda tells more about their story, an array of questions emerge about why she and Anninho cannot communicate with each other as a people under attack. One woman mutilates herself so the Portuguese men will never rape her. Almeyda cannot understand why the woman chose to harm her body. The chorus of "This is not the right time" echoes throughout the book.

One of the topics Jones considers is the loss of language. "Think about language. We will/make words out of words/We will use the same words, but they will be different." Such moments parallel with the black slavery experience in America, and Jones sketches the circle that draws these two atrocities into the center of the African Diaspora. *Song for Anninho* is a thoughtful, challenging work on a segment of slavery's history that America often overlooks.

Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction

by Philip Rose
University Press of Mississippi
Reviewed by Kelwyn Wright

In *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction*, author Philip Page chooses novels written between 1978 and 1996 by five authors, Toni Cade Bambara, Ernest Gaines, Charles Johnson, Gloria Naylor and John Edgar Wideman, to explore the topics of rootlessness and the longing for communal connection.

In reviewing Wideman's thirteen published volumes, Page posits the theorem that Wideman's own personal demons contribute to his characters and narrators being caught in both

physical and psychic isolation, possessing almost a pathological inability to connect with the community at large.

In dissecting *The Salt Eaters* by Toni Cade Bambara, which takes place during one afternoon in the fictional city of Claybourne, Page suggests that Bambara moves from Wideman's introspection and explores the interlocking interaction of individuals, their families and the community at large. Published in 1980, Bambara's is a prescient novel, presaging environmental and economic disaster. Page tackles those two themes as well as the sense of restored unity and community invoked by the book's title. To eat salt together is to get to know someone on one level and to bring harmonic equilibrium to the body on another.

Page notes the debt Johnson's fiction owes to phenomenologists Edmund Hesserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In *Middle Passage* and *The Oxherding Tale*, novels exploring the slave trade and the northward escape from slavery respectively, Page explains how Johnson keys on his characters' development of consciousness and self-awareness.

Page addresses the existence of a well metaphor in Naylor's fiction. The well is metaphysical in Naylor's first two novels, *The Women of Brewster Place* and *Linden Hills*, and an actual physical presence in *Mama Day*. Naylor's characters, Page suggests, exist on the rim of the well, with the well representing both life threatening and life sustaining characteristics.

Gaines seems to be the odd man in this collection of essays. Unlike the dense prose of Wideman and Johnson or the non-linear form of Bambara's fiction, Gaines fiction is a deceptively simple "communal construction of meaning." Gaines fictional world is a multicultural milieu where characters share knowledge of one another yet remain stressed by societal imbalances.

Gaines is loathe to use two words when one



will do, and there are times when one wishes Philip Page had adhered to the same principal. Page's prose is heavy, with long, Faulkneresque sentences that must be a prerequisite to getting published by the University Press of Mississippi. That said, *Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction* gives thoughtful commentary to the five novelists it reviews.

Kinship:

A Family's Journey in Africa and America
by Philippe Wamba

Dutton Books

Reviewed by Tyehimbas Jess

Philippe Wamba's politically inspired *Kinship* serves as a guide to the complex and dynamic history of African and African American relationships. Wamba, the product of a marriage between a father from the Congo and a mother with roots in Georgia and Mississippi, positions himself to provide readers with a multifaceted view of the territory that exists between the two realities. He navigates this ground using the compasses of history and personal experience to explore how a people can split in two and yet remain one.

Starting from his beginnings, Wamba narrates us through his parents' courtship and engagement; a budding relationship between an African student and a stateside sister in the mid-60s. As the pulpy, bittersweet essence of their two worlds combine, a young woman is exposed to the real Africa; not the one glamorized in fiery political diatribes and propaganda. While living in the Congo, she finds the true face of neocolonial oppression.

The Congo of the 1960s, Wamba writes, was one where "Rival political parties were illegal, as were antigovernment demonstrations, and my mother often heard hushed descriptions of the government's more odious repression techniques, which included torture and detention without trial." Nevertheless, Wamba's mother is still able to appreciate her newfound family and the roots

of her culture. The young couple also avoid many of the pitfalls of cultural misunderstanding that crippled and failed many other transatlantic marriages.

The young family learns how his father discovered he would best serve his people in the Congo by getting an education in the United States; how the oppressor's face shows allegiance to no particular color; how an African family can prosper and survive cultural difference. He also takes us through history's pages to show the Diaspora's never ending search for its African roots in music, culture and political ventures, from the Garvey movement to the first African American settlements in Africa to Afrocentric rap of the late 80s and early 90s. He also examines how Africans embrace African American and Diaspora culture through reggae and rap music.

Recounting his student years at Harvard, Wamba voices disappointment with the failure of African American students to fully grasp and engage the political struggle of neocolonial Africa. He bemoans the typical American ignorance of world events that African Americans have adapted. When Zairean strongman Mobutu Sese Soko visited Harvard in 1990, protest against the dictator was hindered by apathy of African American students who neither knew nor cared to know about political realities that would destroy a tidy Afrocentric worldview of "Ethiopia stretching forth her wings."

Kinship researches literature, music and historical events that celebrate the blend of bloods across the waters. This book proves useful for that purpose alone. Towards the end, we see Wamba resolving to continue on his father's path by using his considerable talent, intelligence, and international perspective to call attention to and correct the political wrongs of his native Congo. This is an inspiring, hopeful end to *Kinship's* journey through the Diaspora's shared bloodline. ➤



Jazz Poetry Kafe
Volume One
Blackwords Inc.
Reviewed by Angelo Williams

Jazz Poetry Kafe Volume One, is a full course mind meal of twelve spoken word and jazz cuts concerned with the African American postmodernist search for memory, identity, salvation, love, spirituality, humanity and belonging. Kafe teams the best of the Black Arts old school (Madhubuti, Sanchez and Daa'ood) with the cream of spoken words common era (Kysha Brown, E. Ethelbert Miller, Ras Baraka and Tony Medina) to create a master mix of word and sound that should make this CD black America's morning prayer. With four inspiring jazz hybrid tracks in tow, Kafe is a solid benchmark in our culture's current quest for reciprocity, atonement and healing.

Kwame Alexander, Kafe's executive producer, inaugurates the session, pouring metaphorical libations his mothers way as she asks him the quintessential black boy question: What do you want to be when you grow up. Kwame replies "poet", and proceeds to pop through Blackwords, his four-year-old publishing company's accomplishments. Sounding more the role of Puffy than poet, Alexander props the work but forgets to drop some lines. His omission is a forgivable mistake amply made up for though his own books of poetry and Kafe's intelligently weaved arrangement.

Laced over piano, drum beat and bass, Wadud's hardcore bludgeons, baptizing the new school in an adept treaties against hard core culture: "This is for all those supposed hardcore hip hoppers ...being spoon fed the notion that black on black crime is somehow sexy..." Wadud beats on the hungry few who, for a promised payoff, divorce reality and construct a hardcore image for cash, a transaction in commerce that inevitably kills someone, physically or culturally. Wadud bellows, "Buffoonery has a price all its own." Of particular brilliance is Wadud's jazz riffing near the outro as he says the words: "No other group of people on earth allows their children to be portrayed as insignificant," and then sing-scats:

"Death row, is the label that pays me." He ends with a warning: "If you don't control your art, you don't control your life." Wadud's adept meditation on nihilism is just part of the sage wisdom that is Kafe's standard. Haki Madhubuti reminds us of the dire necessity for memory. Kysha Brown delves into an existential search of and for the self. E. Ethelbert Miller breaks new ground on brother-sister love. Ras Baraka convincingly queries the core of African-American identity with *An American Poem*. Tony Medina steals the show lambasting the absurdities of race with his pseudo haiku, *Poem For Lt. Uhuru's Brother*. Each poet tackles different sections in the 400 year African-American struggle for identity and belonging as well as man and woman's thousand years' grapple to heal and be human. This healing project is best embodied in two poems by Black Arts veterans Sonia Sanchez and Kamau Daa'ood.

Sanchez remembers her brother who died of AIDS by starting her poem sermon style. "It's about black folks not being homophobic... its about making every place we go into, making it holy." Her mission set, *Mother-Sistah* takes four words: "I will be human," repeats them as mantra, undulating her voice, inflecting, drawing out each word to produce different meanings: question, declaration, plea. Her's is the essence of word/song: a new school poetry seminar entitled: *Quality and Sense over Quantity and Length*. Where Sanchez stops Kamau Daa'ood continues, performing a new rendition of a track previously released on his own CD *Leimert Park*.

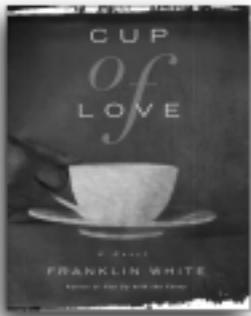
Daa'ood's poem *Tears* is an homage to trial by fire; of learning through surviving suffering; of having "been to the place of torment and returned with a badge of scars and praise on the lips." Daa'ood describes the human condition with apt tactility: "Watermelon seeds swelling in asphalt.... hope floats in an empty pack of Kools down a gutter river, 5 million 40 ounce bottles of malt liquor filtered through a bladder of a ghost that's about to loose his pants." He questions the heart: "why does beauty wade through shit callused and unnoticed...why do sons die before their father ...why is the sweat of the heart invisible." He answers and ends with hope and direction: "When

the ears are turned inward and the work is placed on the desk of the heart ...You will extract wisdom from a tear, when the horses of desire have been tamed and rode to new horizons, then you will move through the body of God as a healing agent rather than a disease, tears."

In it's totality, *Kafe* serves as one ingredient to build those healing agents, that 'army of healers.' The CD's words succeed in that mission but I was found wanting more when it came to sound. To be sure, the three jazz tracks reflect the healing mission. The smooth instrumental serenades and upbeat acid jazz is inspiring but the missing link in this *Jazz Poetry Kafe* is the raw horn, the bombastic improvisation of freestyle; swing beats and bops. Food for thought hopefully to be eaten, digested and served up in volume two.

Cup of Love
by Franklin White
Simon & Schuster
Reviewed by Sadeqa Murray

Cup of Love explores an interesting recipe of love, deceit and understanding. The novel delves into the lives of four struggling friends searching for balance, spirituality and happiness in the midst of a chaotic world.



Vance Butler has cheated on Artise, his live-in girlfriend of ten years, for the third time. In addition to Vance's infidelity, Artise has to deal with the ups and downs of her unstable relationship with her overbearing mother. Her best friend and business partner, Tasha, happens to be dating a candi-

date in the mayoral election — a man twice her age. When Ethan, Vance's best friend and Tasha's ex-fiancé returns from Atlanta, the cup of love begins bubbling over. By the time the author stirs in a snippet of a surprise inheritance, a dash of a shady business deal, and a whole heap of drama, this book is armed with the proper ingredients for

an excellent cutting-edge, urban novel.

While the writing in *Cup of Love* is deserving and the dialogue admirable, the climax is dissatisfying. The author takes the reader on a wonderful and spiritual journey, propelling the action of the story with well researched current events and significant information but delivers the climatic scene half-heartedly. The experience was akin to waiting for a delicious meal to be prepared; the presentation was terrific but the flavor lacks substance.

Sometimes, having all the ingredients for a great dish doesn't guarantee that the food is going to come out right. ★

(Kevin Powell cont. from page 35)

to talk about it. I write for the people. I'm trying to find out some truths in this world and I'm writing for people who are trying to find out some truths in this world."

Powell feels that contributing to the existing body of black literature and looking critically at re-defining it will require a measure of both self-examination and artistic responsibility from the writer. "As long as racism exists, Richard Wright will always be significant. As long as there's sexism, Toni Morrison will always be significant, asha bandele will always be significant. As long as there is classism, Tony Medina, Sonia Sanchez and Amiri Baraka will always be significant. To me—and this is me—I can't separate the art from the political and social climate we live in. It goes hand in hand. As long as certain conditions exist, the work is always going to be necessary. I don't believe in art for art's sake or literature for literature's sake. All art is relevant to our lives."

Kevin Powell recently edited an anthology of almost 100 young and emerging Black writers of poetry and prose to be published Fall 2000 by Wiley and Sons. The as yet untitled anthology will feature powerful voices from the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa. He is also at work on a second volume of poetry. ★

(Black Books Plus cont. from page 13)

superstores like Barnes and Noble began popping up all over the country. These mammoth stores complete with cozy arm chairs, escalators and a wide selection of books, have in some cases usurped the market enjoyed by niche bookstores like Black Books Plus. Many independent bookstores were forced to close.

Though Johnson admits that the chains are affecting everyone in the book selling business, she says that her decision to close the store was not financially based, but personal.

Running the retail end of Black Books Plus was exciting and rewarding yet exhausting work. In addition to coordinating readings for the public, there was still the nitty, gritty day to day details of operating a retail establishment, and for the most part, Johnson says she worked alone. Now free from the confinement of set store hours Johnson is able to focus on author related events exclusively like luncheons, book signings and panel discussions.

Although she's clear in terms of where she wants to go with her company, Johnson says that since she announced the closing of the retail end of Black Books Plus, this past Spring, people have been asking "what is Black Books Plus?"

"I guess the closest thing I can say about what I do now is that I produce literary events." Making the transition from being a bookstore proprietor to special events coordinator is not a big change since author events were a large part of what made Black Books Plus popular. After the first signing with Quincy Troupe, literally hundreds of authors visited the store.

"We had Berry Gordy at the store for his book," Johnson said. "And we had a lot of music lovers come out. It's not everyday that you get a chance to see and talk to the great icon of Motown."

Johnson says that she's still adjusting to her new role, but is moving steadily, using her knack for matching authors with venues, a skill she developed out of necessity. When Black Books Plus could no longer hold the crowds that were turning out for readings, Johnson was forced to find locales outside of the store to host authors. She

coordinated a very popular event for Walter Mosley at The Spy Club in SoHo, a perfect place for the master of sleuthing tales. This summer Johnson produced an event for relationship novelist Eric Jerome Dickey at the Turning Heads Beauty shop in Harlem. Over the last few months she coordinated events for famed poet Nikki Giovanni at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and with the Writers' Voice at the 63rd St. YMCA in New York City.

"I've moved to another level as I see it," Johnson said. It's been a progression from librarian to bookstore owner to coordinating events for authors to meet their audience. Each role exemplifies Johnson's continuing dedication to Black literature. You can visit the site at www.blackbooksplus.com. ★

(Third World Books cont. from page 39)

distribution that remain uncultured. According to Derrick Bell, author of *Afrolantica Legacies*, a Third World Press title, "I usually get \$50,000 to \$100,000 for my books...but I believe in what Haki is doing...without him, an awful lot of important materials wouldn't get published." Among poetry titles by literary giants such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Third World Press has produced the scholarly works of Derrick Bell, Dr. Chancellor Williams, John Henrik Clarke and Frances Cress Welsing, authors that intellectually and culturally stimulate the consciousness of its readers. "The reason for Third World Press' existence, is that it has become more of a cultural institution than a commercial venture" states Kassahun Checole, president of Africa World Press/Red Sea Press.

With the onset and continuing tradition of promoting literature to feed its readers truth and knowledge, Madhubuti states that it is his goal to "define, entertain, and move us closer to becoming a self-empowered people." Third World Press has become a measuring stick, a beacon, for independent black Presses in this country and abroad. In the words of poet Mari Evans, Third World Press was formed to "Speak the truth to the people." ★

(In *The Beginning* cont. from page 12)

a day, preparing myself to write. Being thirsty for knowledge opened doors for me, I realized if you're ignorant, you don't know how the world works. You don't know how power works. To be a poet, you must study the world. Poetry is the foundation for so many things. Study is essential. Possessing a solid knowledge base is extremely critical to becoming a poet who truly has something to say."

Naomi Long Madgett, a superb poetic stylist and founder of Lotus Press, which has published many great talents including Gayl Jones and Toi Derracotte, on the need for dedication and reading for poets:

"I always tell young poets to keep writing, keep persisting. They must prepare themselves. Read the good poets, people you can learn from. Just because you write from deep emotion does not mean the poetry is necessarily good. Join a group and study your craft."

Lorenzo Thomas, a member of the innovative Umbra poets in the 1960s and author of the acclaimed collection, *Chances Are Few* and several other books of poetry, on the true nature of poetry:

"Poetry aspires to be music but isn't music. Someone who babbles in rhyme is not necessar-

ily a poet. In poetry, the message is delivered before you understand it intellectually. A good poet can be taken apart later to completely comprehend its effects and artistry. Poetry is a craft one learns as one would dance or music. The young poet imitates the art as an apprentice before finding his own way. But imitate the best. Unfortunately, a lot of poets don't want to learn the craft. They only want to be published. The fact is that it's always a matter of time before quality work finds its way into print. Quality will never be denied." ★

(Roger Bonair-Agard cont. from page 29)

Women are a primary influence in Bonair-Agard's oeuvre. "I love women, women excite me, and as such, their image makes their way into my work either as an erotic theme or an other kind of inspiration. They are not only erotic, but revolutionary." The immense strength of the women in his family, mostly his mother and grandmother, has infinitely challenged and inspired his work and ideals.

A native of Trinidad, Bonair-Agard combines the tropical with aspects of Americana that fuel his vision on love, social issues and returning to one's legacy. His pursuit of self-discovery and lust for life is framed within the metaphor of his poems, alluding: "I have come full circle/in search of a world I can be proud to leave to my sons/ touting discipline over license/education over ignorance." His poetic vision works like a sieve, allowing the essential to remain in his perspective. The recording of his life in poetry results in an awareness that makes Bonair-Agard realize the importance of the things one did not understand as a child but knows well as an adult.

Completing his forthcoming collection and currently at work on a new project, Bonair-Agard recently won the National Poetry Slam in Chicago. "I like being on the road and having the ability to experience new places and to take my work somewhere else. In some remote corners of the United States, what I have to say has never been said by someone like me. That's exciting." ★

CROSSWORD PUZZLE ANSWERS



ida b. wells

by Tara Betts

More than 60 years before Rosa Parks refused a seat at the back of the bus, Ida B. Wells bit a Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad conductor after he and the baggage man tried to force her into a smoking car. Wells felt her ousting failed to comply with the separate but equal doctrine — especially since she had paid for a first class ticket. Consequently, she sued the railroad and won a short-lived victory that was appealed and reversed in 1887.

After her loss, Wells began writing about her experience for a church paper under the pseudonym “Iola.” Her writings appeared in black weekly papers throughout the country when she accepted an editorial position at the Free Speech and Headlight in Memphis, Tennessee. Steadfast in her convictions, she was removed from her teaching position when she criticized the “separate yet unequal” colored schools in 1891.

By the time three black men were lynched and their grocery store destroyed in Memphis in March 1892, Ida B. Wells was writing full time. Wells wrote her first lynching story. Her editorial addressing the murders stated, “There is only one thing we can do; save our money and leave a town that will neither protect our lives or our property.” Wells followed by visiting and investigating the scene of the lynchings of purported black rapists. She even stated that white women were the victims of their own lust, rather than the black men killed for sullyng their reputations. This series of writings led to a smashed press at the Free Speech and a home she could never revisit.

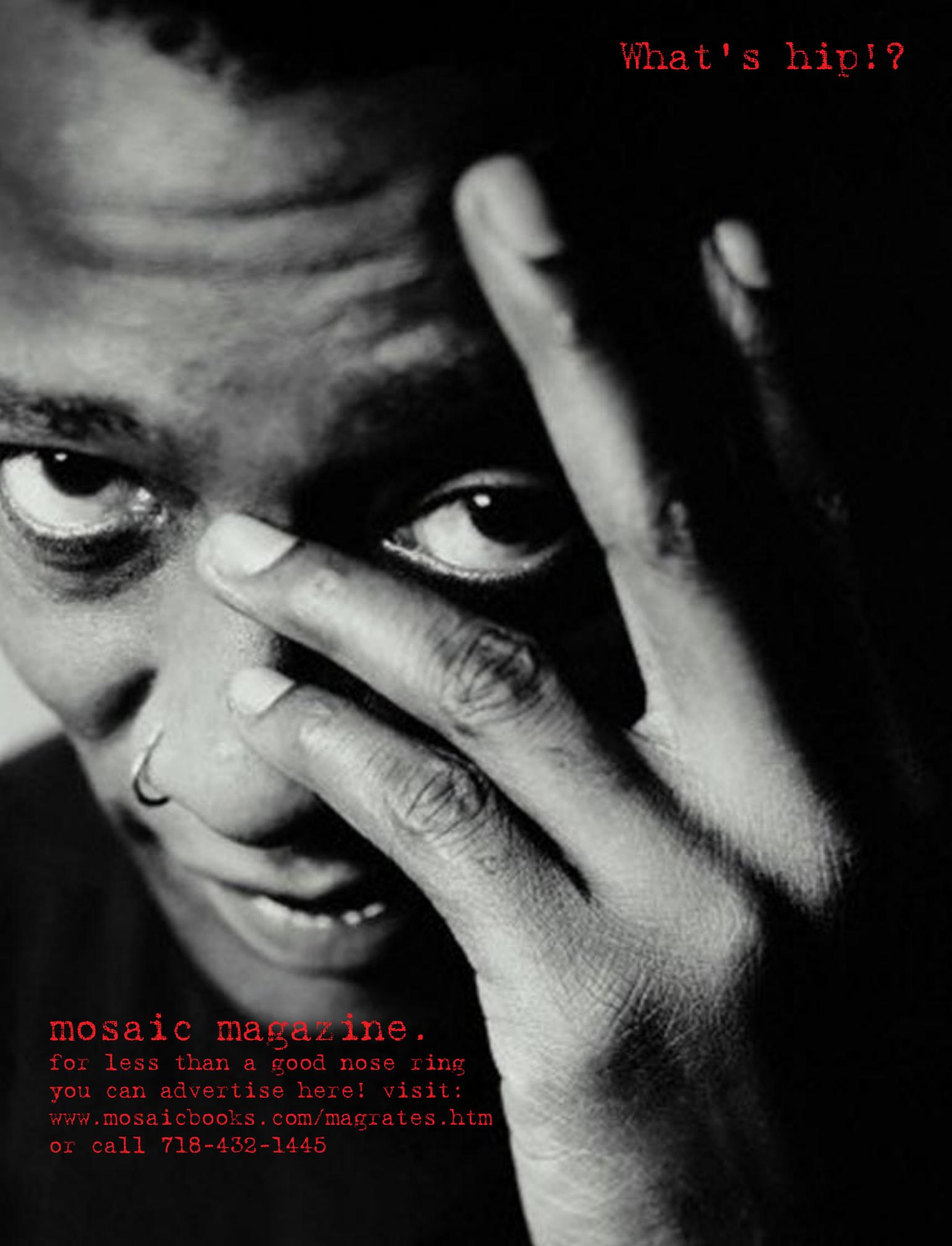
Despite threats, she continued to write in the north when she learned that death watched her house like a promise in the south. She spoke to sympathetic groups in England, Scotland and Wales about lynchings in America. Her column “Ida B. Wells Abroad” documented her travels in the Chicago Inter-Ocean Paper in 1894.

She returned and settled in Chicago to be closer to love interest Ferdinand Barnett, the first black state’s attorney. They married and raised 6 children. The youngest child, Alfreda Duster, edited Ida B. Wells’ autobiography *Crusade for Justice*.



Wells served an instrumental role in fighting for black people in organizations such as the Negro Fellowship League, the NAACP, and the National Association for Colored Women. Her speeches urged black women to organize into what became the Club Movement, where black women provided social services for themselves. She also organized the first black women’s suffrage club, the Alpha Suffrage Club, in Chicago in 1913.

She began writing *Crusade for Justice* in 1928, shortly before her campaign for state senator in 1930. Her writing had been published throughout the country in the *Defender*, *World*, *Broad Ax* and *Whip*. Today, readers page through the *Memphis Diary* or *Southern Horrors*, collected writings doubling as testaments to one observation—do not put your hands on the wrong black woman unless you want her vengeance, heavier and rougher than any rope. ★



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