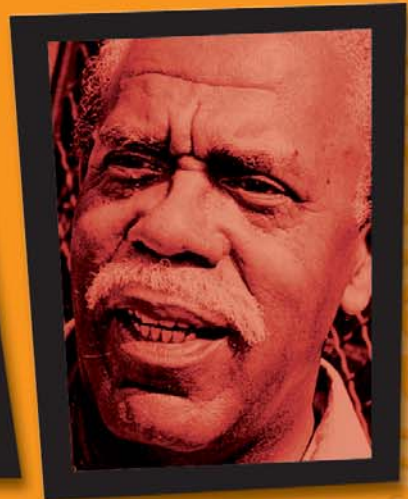


WORDS OF HERITAGE

...writing black history



FINDING FREEDOM IN WORDS OF HERITAGE

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

To celebrate the achievement of black writing in America, and to celebrate Black History Month, we have created the educational supplement "Words of Heritage... Writing Black History." This supplement focuses on two of America's leading writers, the late Langston Hughes and Sonia Sanchez. And it examines a wide range of other writers working today.

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

Sanchez, 66, is a poet, professor and political activist from Philadelphia. Her poems celebrate the experience of African Americans and the empowerment of women of all races. Books of her poetry, "homegirls & handgrenades" and "Does Your House Have Lions?", won national honors and acclaim.

About This Section

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

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

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



HOW WOULD YOU HONOR A LEADER?

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

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

Title of Award:

Person I Want to Honor:

Why This Person Should Be Honored:

WRITING BLACK HISTORY: challenges and rewards

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

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

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

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

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

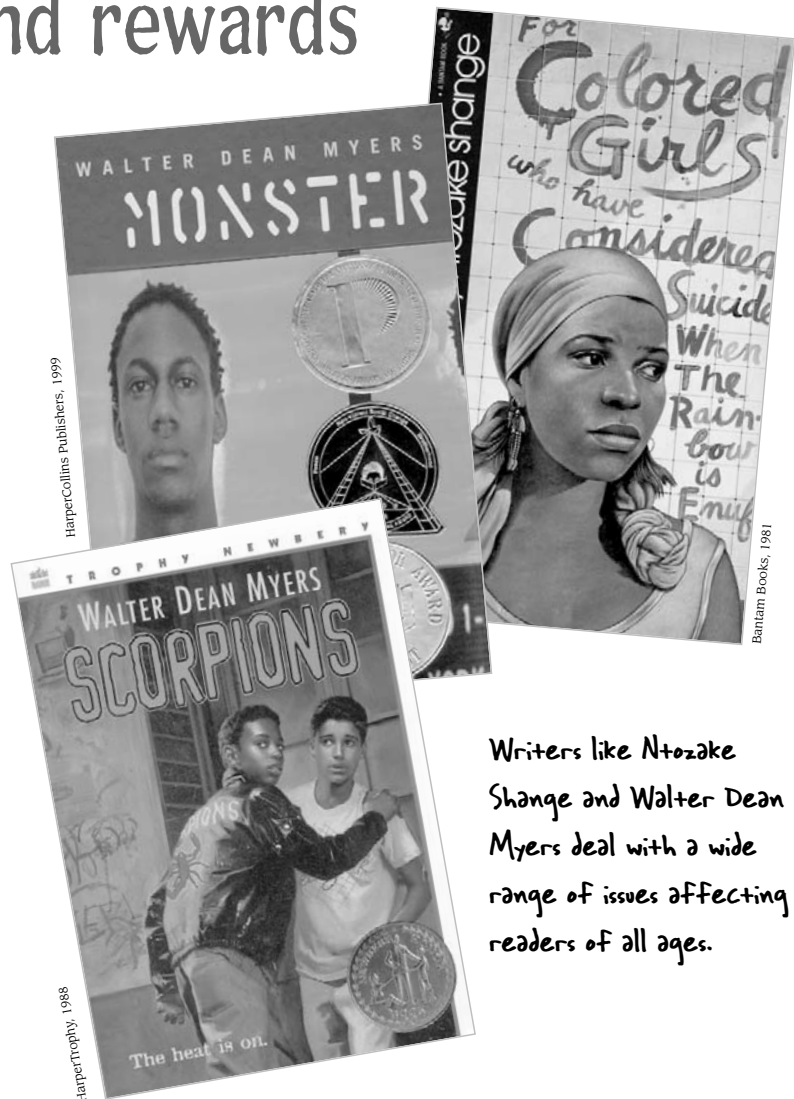
The Civil War made African Americans legally free, but did not stop prejudice and discrimination, especially in the South. Hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved north as a result, settling in cities and establishing strong artistic communities.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Echoing across the nation, the voices of black writers have given all Americans diversity, richness, culture and distinction.