On Novels by Black American Women: A Bibliographical Essay

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A slightly better bibliography, published the same year, is Darwin T. Turner's *Afro-American Writers* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970). With emphasis on the major works published by Afro-American writers in the twentieth century, Turner lists eighteen Black American female novelists and their works. Special features of the Turner bibliography include such annotations as an asterisk following an entry to indicate novels of special importance and a dagger sign to indicate the availability of the work in paperback. The most extensive listing of novels written by Black American women is that of Ora Williams in *American Black Women: In the Arts and Social Sciences* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973, pp. 33-36). Williams lists 51 novels written by 35 Black American women.

**Supplement to Bibliographies**


**II. LITERARY AND PERSONAL BACKGROUND**

Sources of information about the literary backgrounds and personal lives of Black women novelists are scarce and generally unpublished. Information relating to the unpublished sources of novels by Black American women still living can be obtained either by writing to the authors listed in Ann Allen Shockley's and Sue P. Chandler's biographical directory entitled *Living Black American Authors* (New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1973) or by writing to the authors not listed in the directory in care of their publishers.

**Autobiographies**


**Letters and Personal Papers**

To my knowledge, no letters of a single Black American female novelist have been published. Zora Neale Hurston's letters and papers, however, can be found in the University of Florida library at Gainesville, and in the James Weldon Johnson Collect-
tion of Yale University. Ann Petry's letters and papers can be found at the University of Connecticut.


**Articles**


**Interviews**


In the December 1976 *Essence*, pp. 54 ff., Jessica Harris interviews Toni Morrison.


Alice Walker’s second novel, *Meridian*, a study of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, is the focus of Jessica Harris’s interview with her in *Essence* 7 (July 1976): 33.

**III. CRITICISM**

**General Criticism**

Although no full-length study of the novel by Black American women has appeared, novels written by Black American women have received token respect in other book-length studies. The first full-length study of Black fiction in America, Nick Aaron Ford’s *Contemporary Negro Novel* (Boston: Meador Co., 1936), examines novels from 1914 to 1936 and illuminates the views of Black writers on issues of race. Ford concentrates on such themes in the novel as segregation, passing, prejudice, imitation, and social intermingling. He includes in his study nine men and two women (Fauset and Larsen); he does not refer to any Black female novelists before Fauset, and he does not examine all the novels of the two Black women he has chosen to write on.

Published 12 years after Ford’s study was Hugh Gloster’s *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1948). Gloster, like Ford, gives more attention to the novels of Fauset and Larsen than to novels by any other women. Though he does devote one or two pages each to such novels as Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* (1892), Pauline Hopkins’s *Contending Forces* (1900), Sarah Fleming’s *Hope’s Highway* (1918), and Zora Neale Hurston’s *Jonab’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), mainly Gloster summarizes plots.

A popular and often quoted study is Robert Bone’s *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958). Bone views the Negro novel as following the historical development of the American novel but having a "life of its own which springs from the soil of a distinctive minority culture." Examining Negro novels from
William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* (1853) to James Baldwin’s *Another Country* (1962), he divides his study of the novel into four parts. In Part I, “The Novel of the Rising Middle Class: 1890-1920,” Bone mentions the first Black American female novelist, Frances Harper, but devotes only one insignificant paragraph to her novel, *Iola Leroy* (1892). In Part II, “The Discovery of the Folk: 1920-1930,” Bone barely reserves the last five pages to the two most popular Black American female novelists of the time, Fauset and Larsen. Though Bone admits that Fauset wrote more novels than any other Black American from 1924 to 1933, he dismisses her four novels as being “sophomoric, trivial, and dull” and devotes one sentence to each of them. In the case of Nella Larsen, Bone cagily admits that the novel *Passing* (1929) is “probably the best treatment of the subject in Negro fiction” but devotes only half a paragraph to a discussion of the novel. His discussion of Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) is lengthier. In Part III, “The Search for a Tradition: 1930-1940,” Bone comments at length on Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), mentions in passing *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), and omits entirely *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939). In Part IV, “The Revolt against Protest: 1940-1952,” Bone devotes two sentences to Ann Petry’s *The Street* (1946), which was a best seller, and two sentences to *Country Place* (1947), but does not mention *The Narrows* (1953). His comments about Dorothy West’s *The Living Is Easy* (1948) focus on the bitchery of the Black female protagonist, Cleo Judson.


In the 1970s several studies have included information about the novels of Black women: Nathan Huggins’s *The Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Noel Schraufnagel’s *The Black American Novel* (Deland, Florida: Everette/Edwards, Inc., 1973); Amritjit Singh’s *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976); and James O. Young’s *Black Writers of the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973). Of the four, the Schraufnagel and Singh works are the most important. From Schraufnagel, one learns, for the first time in a full-length study, the contents and critical assessments of such novels as *Rosa Guy’s Bird at My Window* (1966), *Carlene Polite’s The Flagellants* (1966), and *Odella Wood’s High Ground* (1945). Amritjit Singh’s *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* examines 21 novels published by Black writers between 1923 and 1933, six of which are by Fauset and Larsen.

From the *Dark Tower* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974), by Arthur P. Davis, is a valuable reference guide to the study of Black literature. Surveying Black literature from 1900 to 1965, Davis includes the novels of Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Ann Petry. An important feature of this reference guide is the extensive biographical information on the writers’ lives which leads to a better understanding and appreciation of the writers’ novels.

Darwin Turner’s *In a Minor Chord* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1971) examines the writings of Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston, three writers who comprise a “melancholy minor chord” because of their inability to find satisfaction in their search for their heritage. Turner views Hurston unsympathetically as “an imaginative, somewhat shallow, quick-tempered woman, desperate for recognition and reassurance.” Robert Hemenway’s meticulously researched *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), with a foreword by Alice Walker, will undoubtedly become the standard reference work for information about Hurston’s life and works.

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