

## Dorothy West: The Last Writer of the Harlem Renaissance



Dorothy West

from South to North led African-Americans to examine their lives: Who were they? What were their rights as Americans? The artistic expression of this collective examination became known as the Harlem Renaissance. Renaissance means rebirth. The Harlem Renaissance represented a rebirth of black people as an effective part of American life.

Dorothy West's first long book was published when she was more than forty years old. Her second book was published when she was in her late eighties. Yet African-American poet Langston Hughes called her "The Kid." This means a child. Dorothy West had been one of the youngest members of the group of writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance. This was a creative period for African-Americans during the 1920s and 1930s.

During and after World War I, thousands of southern blacks moved to northern cities in the United States. They were seeking jobs and better lives. Many settled in an area of New York City known as Harlem. Many were musicians, writers, artists and performers. Harlem became the largest African-American community in the United States. The mass movement

Dorothy West helped influence the direction and form of African-American writing during this time. Dorothy West was born in 1907 in the city of Boston, Massachusetts. Both her parents were born in the southern United States, and moved north. Her father was a former slave. He became the first African-American to own a food-selling company in Boston. The family became part of the black upper middle class social group of Boston. Dorothy West had private teachers, dancing classes, and holidays on Martha's Vineyard -- an island off the coast of Massachusetts. She studied at Boston University and the Columbia University School of Journalism in New York. Later, she would use her own experiences and observations to write about social class in the black community.

Dorothy West started writing stories at age seven. When she was fourteen, she published her first story in the *Boston Post*. After that, she wrote often for that newspaper. In 1926, she won second place in a short story contest by *Opportunity* magazine. Her story was called "The Typewriter." It describes an African-American man who hates his real life. He creates a better life for himself -- in his imagination -- in order to help his daughter improve her typing skills. Dorothy West won second place in the competition with Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston was another famous writer of the Harlem Renaissance. West moved to Harlem, too. She was considered a little sister by Hurston and other writers and poets such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Wallace Thurman.

Members of the Harlem Renaissance group were very serious about their art. West once told a reporter that they all thought they were going to be the greatest writers in the world. During this time, Dorothy West wrote a number of short stories. They were published in magazines in and around New York. One story was called "Funeral." Another was called "The Black Dress." She once said the writer whose work she liked most was the Russian Fyodor Dostoevsky. Experts say some of her work is similar to his. Like Dostoevsky, she wrote about the idea of being saved by suffering. She wrote about unsatisfied people who feel trapped by their environment, or by racism, or because they are female or male.

In 1932, Dorothy West went to Russia with a group of black intellectuals and artists. They went to make a film about racism in the United States. The film, *Black and White*, was never completed. West remained in Russia for about a year. It appears she did not stay for political reasons, however. She said she went to Russia with Langston Hughes and the others because she liked them. She returned to the United States when her father died.

By the middle of the 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance was dying out. Dorothy West wanted to recapture the creativity of the period. So she created a magazine called, *Challenge*. She edited and published the works of new, young African-American writers. The magazine lasted only three years. West did not have enough money to continue producing it. She also said she did not receive enough writing of a high quality. The magazine was criticized by a group of black writers. They included Richard Wright, author of the novel *Native Son*, and Margaret Walker. They said the magazine was too concerned with artistic values. They felt it should deal with political issues.

In 1937, Dorothy West created another magazine called *New Challenge*. She asked Richard Wright to help her, even though he had criticized her earlier magazine. The two writers disagreed on a number of issues, however. Also, West again had financial difficulties producing the magazine. So *New Challenge* was published only once. Yet that one publication was very important. It included a document by Wright called "Blueprint for Negro Writing." That was a statement about what he believed African-Americans should write about. *New Challenge* was the first publication to bring together black art and politics. Other magazines would follow its example.

In the late 1940s, Dorothy West left New York. She moved to her family's holiday house on Martha's Vineyard island. She lived there for the rest of her life. In 1948, she published her first novel, *The Living Is Easy*. It is partly based on her life and on her mother. It is about a light-skinned black woman named Cleo Johnson. She wishes that her dark-skinned daughter were more like her. She treats her husband badly because he is from a lower social class. The book describes black middle class values in Boston. Many critics liked the book and its message about racism against blacks and within the black community.

*The Living is Easy* was published again by the Feminist Press in 1982. Critics at that time described the book as important because it showed the position of women in the family and in life. The novel also is valued for its description of the complex relationship between a mother and a daughter. *The Living Is Easy* is now recognized as having an important influence on the writing tradition of African-American women. After her first novel, Dorothy West continued writing stories and short pieces containing her ideas on different subjects. Her second novel was published forty-seven years later, in 1995. It is called *The Wedding*.

The story takes place in the black community of Martha's Vineyard during the 1950s. It is about a rich young black woman who is to marry a white jazz musician. It deals with class and color issues between blacks, and racial issues between blacks and whites. West believed that different races should not be separated from each other. She also believed in love. She began the book in the 1960s. But she stopped writing it when the Black Power political movement grew strong. She thought members of the group would denounce it. She was not active in the civil rights movement to guarantee fair treatment for black Americans.

In 1992, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis began to visit Dorothy West to help her finish *The Wedding*. Mrs. Onassis was married to American President John Kennedy when he was killed in 1963. Later, she worked for a publishing company. She died just before *The Wedding* was published. Dorothy West noted that the two women looked very different but had worked together perfectly. The book was so popular that its publishers produced another one by Dorothy West. *The Richer, The Poorer* is a collection of stories and other writings she made throughout her life.

Dorothy West was the last living member of the Harlem Renaissance. She died in August, 1998. She was ninety-one years old. Not long before she died, she was honored at a special ceremony. Many different people praised her work. They described her influence on American culture over so many years. One said, simply, that Dorothy West was a "national gift."