

Walker, Alice, 1944-

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Alice Walker (1944- ) is one of the most significant and outspoken black women writers in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. She is best known for her novels, particularly *The Color Purple* (1982) which won the Pulitzer Prize, but she also writes poetry, short stories, essays and autobiographical pieces. Walker's fiction concentrates on the perspective and experiences of African-American women, particularly in the rural South. She has often met with controversy, for she has been revolutionary in offering a critique of both white racism and black patriarchy and misogyny. Indeed, much of her writing explores life within African-American communities rather than directly addressing their experiences with white society. Walker's fiction is predominantly realist, but this is sometimes interwoven with spiritual and supernatural elements. She tends to avoid linear narratives and other conventions that she feels are part of white Western literary traditions. Instead, her work shows the influence of nineteenth-century slave narratives as well as that of black folklore and the culture of oral storytelling. She has also been acclaimed for her authentic rendering of African-American dialect.

Alice Malsenior Walker was born on 9 February 1944 in Eatonton, Georgia, the eighth and youngest child of Minnie Grant Walker and Willie Lee Walker. Both parents were sharecroppers (sometimes referred to as the 'new slavery') and life was tough. In her early years Alice was a spirited and confident child until the age of eight, when one of her brothers shot her with a BB gun, leaving her blind in one eye and disfigured by scar tissue. Teased by other children, she became

shy and withdrawn, but this led her to books and she began to write her own stories and poems. At the age of 14 a doctor removed Alice's scar tissue and transformed her appearance but, though she went on to become high school prom queen, she continued to carry the emotional scars of this experience. In 1961, Walker won a full state scholarship to Spelman College, Atlanta, where she studied for two years before transferring to Sarah Lawrence College, New York. During this time she became actively involved in the Civil Rights Movement. While passionate about these political activities, along with developments in black literature, Walker realised that the emphasis was on the rights and experiences of the black male, and this inspired her wish to articulate a black female voice. In 1967, she married a white Jewish lawyer, Mel Leventhal, with whom she had a daughter, Rebecca, in 1969. They lived in Mississippi until divorcing in 1977, when Walker moved to California, which remains her home.

Walker's first publication was a collection of poetry, *Once* (1968). It was inspired partly by the Civil Rights Movement and partly by a summer that Walker spent in Africa, but this was also a traumatic period during which she became pregnant and had an abortion. The experience left her suicidal, and writing these poems formed a part of her healing process. Subsequent poetry collections include *Revolutionary Petunias* (1973); *Good Night Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning* (1979); *Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful* (1984); *Her Blue Body Everything We Know* (1990); and *Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth* (2003).

Walker's first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, was published in 1970. It follows several generations of the Copelands, a sharecropper family

living in rural Georgia. Degraded by racism and poverty, Grange Copeland and his son are both violent towards their respective wives and children, but Grange undergoes an emotional journey in which he gains self-respect and respect for others, passing on what he has learnt to his granddaughter who embodies hope for the future.

As Walker's literary reputation began to grow, she published her first collection of short stories, *In Love and Trouble: Stories of Black Women* (1973), which depicts what was to become one of her major themes, that of black women endeavouring to transcend oppression (both racist and sexist) and to develop self-respect. Laura Niesen de Abruna comments on Walker's philosophy: '[. . .] one must not only survive, but survive without being splintered and degraded' (Walker entry in *Continuum Encyclopedia of American Literature*, ed. Serafin, 1999). Later collections of short stories include *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981) and *The Way Forward is With a Broken Heart* (2000).

Walker's second novel, *Meridian*, was published in 1976. It is one of her most overtly political novels, along with *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992).

Meridian Hill is a young black woman from the South, and her personal story is set against the social and political struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the Civil Rights Movement and the struggles of both the black community and women to attain self-respect and legal and social equality. Meridian works selflessly for the Civil Rights Movement while undergoing her own emotional and spiritual journey, particularly in healing her relationship with her mother. Like all of Walker's protagonists, Meridian's challenge is maintaining self-respect in the face of abuse and oppression, and also in developing a sense of herself both as a strong, independent individual and as a member of a cultural

group. Whereas *Grange Copeland* is written in a linear narrative, *Meridian* is the first of Walker's novels to experiment with different forms and structures, moving back and forth in time. Like the novels that followed, *Meridian* draws on black folklore and oral storytelling traditions in its rich use of metaphor, monologues and interspersed stories. As such, Walker helped to pave the way for a distinctive African-American literary tradition.

*The Color Purple* (1982), winner of the 1983 Pulitzer Prize and later adapted into a film directed by Stephen Spielberg, is Walker's most acclaimed and well-known novel. Written in epistolary form, and employing idiomatic language, its main focus is the relationship between Celie, growing up in rural Georgia, and her sister Nettie, who is working as a missionary in Africa. Unlike *Meridian*, who undergoes her emotional journey primarily on her own, Celie's story celebrates the transformative healing power of female friendships and relationships, and suggests the possibility of non-patriarchal communities. Celie's early life is horrific -- she is repeatedly raped by her stepfather, gives birth to his children who are then taken away from her, and is forced to marry a man who continues this pattern of physical and emotional abuse. Celie's life is transformed, however, when she forms a relationship with Shug Avery, who is initially her husband's mistress. Shug helps Celie to develop a sense of her own inner beauty, and gradually Celie overcomes the effects of years of degradation, until eventually she is able to acknowledge herself as a person of worth. The two women set up a home and business together; as Niesen de Abruna comments, 'Walker offers a vision of a non-sexist, nonexploitative society in which her home is the center of an extended family.'

*The Color Purple* triggered strong reactions amongst black communities, some of whom felt that Walker's candid depiction of abusive behaviour and misogyny in black men betrayed their fight for racial equality and self-respect. Yet Walker has always been determined to explore the 'triple bind' in which many black American women find themselves -- that of racism, sexism and poverty -- and to expose the shortcomings of movements for racial equality that overlook the female experience.

In 1983, Walker published her most well-known collection of essays, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* . In the groundbreaking title essay, she coined the term 'womanist', as opposed to 'feminist', to refer to a black feminist, making the point that white Western feminism has its limitations and often fails to understand the viewpoint and experiences of women from different cultures. Walker comments: 'Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.' It is therefore a slightly different 'shade', related to feminism but with a clear identity of its own. 'Womanism' originates from an African-American expression, used by mothers when their little girls are trying to be grown-up, confident and sassy, as for example: 'You acting womanish.' Gerri Bates comments:

Therefore it has a take-charge appeal, which is the message that Walker wants to get across to contemporary African-American womanists, who in being womanist seek out African-American ancestors, make spiritual connections, preserve the artistic spirit, and take charge of their own existences and those in their charge.

In 1988 Walker published *Living By the Word: Selected Writings, 1973-1987* . She has also written various autobiographical works (usually collections of

miscellaneous pieces), including *The Same River Twice: Honoring the Difficult* (1996) and *We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For* (2006).

Some of Walker's later novels are loosely linked to *The Color Purple*, though they cannot be termed sequels. *The Temple of My Familiar* (1989), which features Fanny, granddaughter of Celie, is Walker's most spiritual work. Based around the story of three couples, this novel moves back and forth in time, spanning a period of 500,000 years. Lissie is a character who has reincarnated many times, and remembers her former lives, in which she has been both male and female, black and white. Her memories offer a vast picture of human history, and particularly of race relations and gender relations, and the novel encourages African Americans to boost their sense of self-worth by connecting with their past -- cultural, spiritual and mythical. Trudier Harris comments on the response to this novel: 'Critics complained that the novel was too talky and too New Age, but it has found a faithful following among those who believe that harmony with the earth and all its creatures is of paramount concern' (Walker entry in *The Oxford Companion to Women's Writing in the United States*, 1995, eds. Davidson and Wagner-Martin).

*Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), set in Africa, tells the story of Tashi, who was the best friend of Celie's daughter Olivia in *The Color Purple*. *Possessing the Secret of Joy* is a candid portrayal of the horrors of female circumcision, against which Walker has actively campaigned for many years. The story is told through Tashi's memories -- now living in America and married to Celie's son Adam, she begins to experience flashbacks and undergoes therapy to recall her traumatic experience of female circumcision. Walker was praised for her courage in tackling this taboo subject, though critics have also pointed out the difficulties involved in attacking a tribal practice from the perspective of one

who was born and brought up in the West. One of the significant criticisms of Walker's work in general is her tendency to take a sentimental and sometimes preachy tone.

Walker's more recent novels include *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) and *Now is the Time to Open Your Heart* (2005). The first of these, like much of Walker's fiction, explores female sexuality and family relationships, as a family of African-American anthropologists travel to Mexico to study a tribe descended from black slaves and Native Americans. The protagonist is coming to terms with, and learning to celebrate and enjoy, the process of aging -- Walker, who was in her sixties by the time this novel was published, had noticed that there is a shortage of fictional explorations of growing older, and certainly very few that celebrate the process.

Walker has also edited various collections, and she is particularly noted for her recovery of the works of Zora Neale Hurston, who has been one of her greatest influences and inspirations. Walker edited the highly acclaimed collection, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader* (1979). Walker's other influences include Flannery O'Connor and Virginia Woolf. Walker is acclaimed for her significant role in the development of African-American literature, and particularly for her revolutionary stance in articulating the experiences and the particular oppressions of the black female -- and in so doing, attacking black patriarchy as well as white dominance. The forms and structures of her fiction, along with its thematic concerns, have helped to create a distinctive style through which to express African-American experience. Jan Pilditch comments:

The era of the so-called Harlem Renaissance drew together a number of gifted black American writers who gave voice to the black experience. Some used traditional poetic forms and metaphors to describe the black condition, but others like Jean Toomer and Zora Neale Hurston worked to establish a black voice in American literature. They drew on the rich Afro-American oral culture with its store of stories, songs, narrative incidents, phrase and metaphor, and developed the necessary literary expertise to translate the lived experience, with its idiomatic language, onto the printed page. Alice Walker, as a contemporary black writer from the American south, stands well within this tradition. (Walker entry in *Contemporary Novelists* , 1991, ed. Henderson)

Further critical resources include: *Alice Walker* (1992), by Donna Haisty Winchell; *Alice Walker: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* (1993), eds Henry Louis Gates and K.A. Appiah ; *Critical Essays on Alice Walker* (1999), ed. Ikenna Dieke; *Alice Walker* (2000, Modern Novelists Series), by Maria Lauret; *Alice Walker: A Life* (2004), by Evelyn C. White; and *Alice Walker: A Critical Companion* (2005), by Gerri Bates.