



Margaret Abigail Walker Alexander

Biography

Margaret Abigail Walker was born of July 7, 1915, in Birmingham, Alabama. She was the eldest of five children born to Sigismund C. Walker, a Methodist minister, professor, and linguist who loved literature, and Marion Dozier Walker, a musicologist and professor. Young Margaret grew up in a close-knit family where religion, education, racial pride, music and literature were greatly emphasized by her parents. She grew to delight in the stories of slave life in rural Georgia told to her by her maternal grandmother and acquired a zest for literature and aesthetic knowledge that paralleled her father's. Her mother instilled within her daughter a love of all forms of music from classical works to those traditional melodies that permeate African-American culture. By the time Margaret Walker reached adolescence she was immersed in writing daily. Her parents encouraged and supported her interest in poetry and writing and her father purchased for her first journal. This journal served as the first permanent recording of her poems and her grandmother's stories. With the impetus to write and her parents encouragement, Walker began at age 13 to nurture a talent she would soon come to master.

By the time she was sixteen, Walker had completed high school and was halfway through college. Her parents had accepted teaching posts at New Orleans College, now Dillard University, and moved the family from Alabama to Louisiana. During her sophomore year in college, Walker had the opportunity to meet renowned poet Langston Hughes. Hughes advised Walker's parents to have their daughter educated in the North and encouraged Walker to continue working and refine her style. Consequently, in 1932 Walker transferred to Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois where she received her Bachelor of Arts in English in 1935.



Quick Facts

- * 1915-1998
- * African-American poet and novelist
- * Her first poems were published when Walker was 19 years old

This page was researched and submitted by Danye A. Pelichet, Shanese Baylor, and Kinitra D. Brooks on 12/9/99 and edited and updated by Lauren Curtright on 8/4/04.



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During her enrollment, an encounter with W.E.B. DuBois led to her first publication in the May 1934 edition of *The Crisis*, a magazine of the NAACP. Margaret Walker was already a published author at age 19.

In 1936, Walker began working for the Federal Writers' Project under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), thus mingling with many great writers of the era such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks. Upon completing her work with the Federal Writer's Project, she decided to return to school and become a professor. She entered the University of Iowa's creative writing program where she earned a Master of Arts degree in 1940 and returned to earn her Ph.D. in 1965. She began her first teaching job at Livingstone College in 1941, shortly before releasing her award-winning master's thesis, *For My People*, a feat that catapulted her career as a poet to national heights. Following her newly found acclaim, she married Firnist James Alexander. After the birth of three of their four children, the Alexanders relocated to Jackson, Mississippi. Walker began teaching at Jackson State College, now Jackson State University, in 1949 and continued until her retirement in 1979. Here, in 1968, she created and directed the Institute for the Study of the History, Life, and Culture of Black People. She also began the Phyllis Wheatley Poetry Festival and has served as a lecturer, a visiting professor, staff member of the Cape Cod Writers' conference, as well as a participant in the Library of Congress' conference on the Teaching of Creative Writing.

Margaret Walker found comfort in writing about that with which she was most familiar. Her father had taught her the essential elements of the poem: pictures, music, and most importantly, meaning. The Southern landscape of her youth and the vivid narratives of her grandmother provide the imagery for her writings. Her sense of rhythm is attributed to her mother's musical expertise and the meaning comes from her father's philosophy. In applying the poetic elements to her desire to illuminate the black experience, Margaret Walker produced works that address the reality of black life and the meaning behind it.



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For My People, a volume of poetry chosen for the Yale Series of Younger Poets in 1942, was Walker's first published book. It is perhaps the work for which she is best known. Within its pages, Walker exhibits her ability to write in three specific forms: ballads, lyrical sonnets, and a long-line free verse punctuated with short lines. It is also within this volume of poetry that readers are introduced to folk characters such as Poppa Chicken, Kissie Lee, Stagolee, and Molly-Means. These characters walk, talk, and behave much like actual human beings and parallel characters familiar with African-American culture. Additional features included in *For My People* are sonnets fashioned in a unique rhyme scheme characterized by Walker's style, poems about the South, poems about her displaced feeling in the North, and poems about the homeland of black Americans: Mother Africa.

Jubilee, a novel published in 1966, represents the fruition of Walker's lifelong dream to publish her grandmother's stories. In addition, the novel served as her doctoral dissertation in 1965. It is the story of her maternal great grandmother as told to her by her grandmother, a story that Margaret had written for much of her life. Moreover, it is a personal document of her family's history as well as a historical text that outlines crucial years in American history. *Jubilee*, a tripartite narrative, chronicles the story of Vyry, a mulatto slave girl and her struggle and survival during the antebellum period, the Civil War and Reconstruction. It represents approximately forty years of the author's planning, research, dreaming, writing, and revision. Moreover it is a permanent recording of the oral tradition of storytelling in African-American culture. What began as the inquisitive curiosity of a twelve-year old girl listening to the marvelous tales of her grandmother has been transformed into a classic piece of literature to be enjoyed by generations to come.

Although Margaret Walker Alexander has never received the national acclaim of other contemporary writers of her stature and contribution, she is held in high critical regard. The focus of her writing has always been the Black experience. Walker's racial pride allowed her to dedicate over seven decades of her life to this experience, dealing with such themes as time, racial equality, love, and freedom. Her work has a powerful message, despite having fallen through the cracks of literary recognition; many agree that she has proven herself to be a literary great.



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Since the publication of her award winning collection of poetry in 1942, Walker's peers, reviewers, and critics have rarely commented negatively on her work. Having a style similar to that of Walt Whitman, Walker's work focuses on the intricacies of everyday life. Through her rhythmic verses and strong imagery, Walker reintroduces the mores and folkways of the southern heartland to contemporary America. Critics continually praise her for her straightforward and simplistic writing style, her inclusion of Biblical allusions, and the deep sincerity of all her poems. Negative criticism surrounding Walker comes from those who disapprove of her style of writing sonnets. Some critics are highly approving of her innovative style, while others believe she has created an idiosyncratic style of her own. Nevertheless, the sonnet seems to be the backbone of her career since some of her greatest works exemplify this form.

Before her death in November, 1998, Walker had written more than 10 books and an unknown number of poems, short stories, essays, letters, reviews, and speeches. Walker was honored with a host of awards and accolades as well as four honorary degrees. Jackson, Mississippi, her home for much of her life, has honored her by naming July 12 "Margaret Walker Day."



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