



Marita Odette Bonner

Biography

Marita Odette Bonner was born on June 16, 1899 to Joseph Andrew and Anne Noel Bonner. The Bonner family moved to a middle class community in Massachusetts where Marita, one of four children, was educated. At Brookline High School, Bonner contributed to The Sagamor, a magazine organized by students. Bonner also was a talented pianist and excelled in music and German.

After graduating from Brookline High School in 1918, Bonner enrolled in Radcliffe College, where she majored in English and Comparative Literature and won two music competitions. She applied for and gained admission to the writing seminar of Charles T. Copeland. Professor Copeland was a well-respected writer whose limited seminars were highly sought after. Bonner was also a founder of a chapter of the black sorority, Delta Sigma Theta.

After graduating from Radcliffe in 1922, Bonner taught for a couple of years at Bluefield Colored Institute in West Virginia. She then accepted a position at Armstrong High School in Washington, D.C. , from 1924 to 1930. Between 1924 and 1926, both of Bonner’s parents passed away prematurely, and their deaths affected her deeply.



Quick Facts

- * 1898-1987
- * African-American writer of short stories, plays, and essays
- * Key figure in the Harlem Renaissance

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The aftermath of those tragedies caused her to write her first essay, “On Being Young-A Woman-And Colored,” published in *Crisis* magazine in December of 1925. The essay covered the negative conditions that black Americans, especially black women, had to endure. Bonner explains how black women, because of their race and gender, are doubly victimized. As a young woman of the 1900s, a black woman could see opportunity around her, but she could only watch and wait. The essay counsels women to not dwell on the bitterness, but try to outsmart negative situations. She proposes that, until we, as a nation, become wiser and learn not to judge each other by our skin and sex, we will lack the understanding we need to become great. Like the Greeks and Romans, we, as Americans, will fail to live to our full potential.

Bonner also wrote numerous short stories. Her first, “The Hands - A Story,” was published in the August issue of *Opportunity* in 1925. The main character of this story is an unattractive young woman who finds solace in a pair of hands that she notices while riding on the train one day. The man’s hands are also unattractive, yet they tell the story of his life. She uses his hands to let her imagination take her to a game, Christ-in-all-men. She looks at the man’s hands and imagines that he has worked just as hard in his lifetime as Christ did in his time. “Prison Bound,” Bonner’s second story, was published in the September issue of *Crisis* in 1926. It is about a couple whose lack of communication causes them to feel trapped in their own home. The wife is unhappy because she feels unloved and unnoticed, while her husband wonders why she just sits around crying and never talks to him. They both feel trapped with one another. Compared to most of Bonner’s short stories, “Nothing New,” published in the November issue of *Crisis* in 1927, has a deeper tone. It is set on Frye Street, where all different nationalities and races live together in cooperation. The neighborhood is unlike any other because the people get along with each other, but those outside of Frye Street do not share the same sense of unity. Some do not uphold the harmony of Frye Street. As the character Denny Jackson finds out, he has to fight to the very end for what he wants. Tragically, as in most of the writer’s stories, the young protagonist pays a price.



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Among her most popular short stories is “One Boy’s Story.” It is written from the viewpoint of a ten-year-old boy named Donald Gage. He and his mother live in a town where they are the only blacks. They live a very regular life, but his mother has a secret that threatens their stability. His mother refers to their home as a prison, and Donald is confused, but when he finds out why it is her prison, it becomes his, too. As the journey through this young boy’s mind continues, the reader gets to experience his loss of innocence, and his discovery that his imagination is not the only thing set against him. Similar to that of the character Oedipus, his life is forever scarred by his having killed Dr. Swyburne, his biological father and his mother’s secret married lover, with a slingshot, in an attempt to free his mother from her prison. At the time of the murder, Donald does not know that Dr. Swyburne is his father. It is an accident of sorts. “Drab Rambles,” another well-known short story, is composed of two other sections with the same themes. The story mirrors the life of two hard-working black people. One is male, and the other is female. They are each confronted with the dilemma of being black and surviving in a world controlled by whites who dislike blacks and try to corrupt them. In the end of each section, the protagonist of the story must go on with his or her life regardless of the many difficulties.

Bonner also produced three plays, *Pot Maker*, *The Purple Flower - A Play* and *Exit, an Illusion*. Of these, her most legendary play was *The Purple Flower*, written in 1928, which depicts black liberation. The play shows black people wanting to be free, to have something and somewhere to call their own, and white people wanting to hold them back. Black people are represented as a group called Us, and those of the white race are called White Devils. This play was published in the October 1929 issue of *Crisis*. When she entered it into a playwriting contest, Bonner won.

Many of Bonner’s later writings reflected her Chicago environment. They dealt with color discrimination, poverty, and poor housing in the black communities, and showed the way in which an urban environment has a distinctive negative influence on communities. One, called “Light in Dark Places,” was written in 1941 and published in 1987 in *The Collected Works of Marita Bonner*. This book contains all of Bonner’s previously published works, as well as first time published works. It was co-edited by Bonner’s daughter, Joyce Occomy Stricklin, and Joyce Flynn.



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“Light in Dark Places” is a story of a teenage girl, Tina, under the protective wing of her Great-Aunt Susie, who is eighty years old and blind. Tina’s mother works long hours, leaving her in the care of her great-aunt. They live in a poor neighborhood, and Tina is not doing very well in school. Tina is looking forward to getting married and quitting school. She meets a smooth talking young man in the city and invites him to her home. He expects more to take place than Tina is prepared for. Her wise great-aunt, with her keen sense of hearing, is alerted to his intentions. The young man pretends to leave and beckons Tina to join him in the bedroom. Tina doesn’t know what to do. Aunt Susie, who is alert to the situation, quickly acts in a way that terrifies the young man, and he runs out of the house without his trousers and shoes.

In 1930, Bonner married William Ocomy, and they moved to Chicago, where she raised three children. She wrote several other short stories until 1941, after which she concentrated completely on teaching. Bonner taught mentally challenged individuals until her death in a house fire on December 6, 1971. Critics overlooked Bonner’s published works for several decades, due to her scattered publication record and a lack of critical interest in black female writers. Early criticism was almost impossible until recently, when her work was compiled in a volume in 1987. Thanks to later generations of critics, Bonner’s works and legacy are now being resurrected after decades of seclusion.



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