



Voices  
from the  
Gaps **Vg**

# Paule Marshall

“

*I grew up among poets. Nothing about them suggested that poetry was their calling. They were just a group of ordinary housewives, my mother included -- the basement kitchen of the brownstone house where my family lived was the usual gathering place. Once inside the warm safety of its walls the women threw off the drab coats and hats, seated themselves at the large center table, drank their cups of tea or cocoa, and talked while my sister and I sat at a smaller table over in a corner doing our homework, they talked--endlessly, passionately, poetically and with impressive range. No subject was beyond them. When people at readings and writers' conferences asked me who my major influences were, they are sometimes a little disappointed when I don't immediately name the usual literary giants. True, I am indebted to those writers, white and black, whom I read during my formative years and still read for instruction and pleasure. But they were preceded in my life by another set of giants whom I always acknowledge before all others; the group of women around the table long ago--this is why the best of my work must be attributed to them; it stands as testimony to the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me in the wordshop of the kitchen.*

— *The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen*

”



## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1929
- \* Caribbean-American novelist
- \* First published novel was *Brown Girl, Brownstones*

This page was researched and submitted by: Talmage Weller, Sharlene Washington, and Alicia Sims on 5/23/01



# Paule Marshall

## Biography continued

Paule Marshall was born Valenza Pauline Burke in Brooklyn, New York, to Ada and Samuel Burke who had recently emigrated from Barbados. Marshall first visited Barbados when she was nine years old, and she recalls writing a series of poems after that visit which reflected her impressions (Denniston, Dorothy H., xii). Marshall was raised in a close-knit West Indian community and gives credit to the women of that community with being her most important teachers. There is a consistency of West Indian dialect and culture in Marshall's writing. Her work confronts the conflicts that Caribbean-American immigrant families, like her own, faced.

In 1950 Marshall married psychologist Kenneth Marshall. In 1953 Marshall graduated cum laude from Brooklyn College, where she majored in English literature, and was then inducted into Phi Beta Kappa. After graduating Marshall worked briefly as a librarian before working for *Our World* magazine, a popular 1950s African American magazine, where she was the only woman on staff. She gave birth to her son, Evan-Keith Marshall, in 1959. In order to finish the novel she had begun writing and despite her husband's protests she hired a babysitter for her son. In 1959 her first novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* was published, and her husband contributed the title. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is about a young, first-generation Caribbean-American girl growing up in an African-Caribbean community. As she struggles to find herself, the community is desperately trying to differentiate themselves from this new environment to keep their culture alive.

In 1960 Marshall received a Guggenheim Fellowship and in 1961 published *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, a collection of novellas for which she received the National Institute of Arts Award. Marshall divorced in 1963; seven years later she married Nourry Menard, a Haitian businessman. *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) was deemed "the best novel to be written by an American Black woman, one of the two important black novels of the 1960s, and one of the four or five most important novels ever written by a Black-American" (Robinson).

*Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) established her reputation as a major writer. For this she received the Columbus Foundation American Book Award. This novel was written in honor of her ancestors and is dedicated to Marshall's grandmother (To Da-Duh). *Daughters* (1991) was about a West Indian woman in New York who returns home to assist her father's re-election campaign. The character, like most characters in Marshall's fiction, has an epiphany after confronting her personal and cultural past.



# Paule Marshall

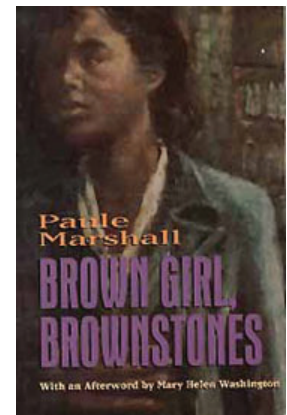
## Biography continued

In 1970, Paule Marshall taught at Yale and lectured at many other institutions. She has received many awards and honors throughout her career, including an American Book Award and a John Dos Passos Award of Literature. Marshall published her seventh novel, *The Fisher King*, in October of 2000, “rich with characters so textured that I’m plumping for a sequel” (Simmons). This novel demonstrates the universality of Marshall’s characters, which is a prevalent theme in her works.

Paule Marshall deals with several major themes that carry through most of her works and reflect her own issues and obstacles in life. She feels as though her work serves not only as a career but also as a means of healing for herself - a vehicle through which she is able to work through issues and recurring themes in her own person odyssey. These include the search for identity, which Marshall herself has struggled with, and is seen especially in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. Also is the aforementioned universality of characters, as in *The Fisher King*, which allows her readers to relate fully to the characters, regardless of the past they bring into their reading of her novels. Another theme involves looking at ancestors and heritage to glean some kind of meaning in one’s present life. “Marshall admits that as a child, she tried to deny her West Indian heritage” (Denniston, Dorothy H., 9). Marshall works through this in her adult life by creating Selina’s character in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, who admits that she had “long hated her [self] for her blackness” (p. 89). Additionally, her use of language reflects her West Indian culture and her treatment of women as oral translators of that culture.

“Her central point, however, concerns the sense of alienation and displacement which minority peoples experience. She suggests the need for reconciling cultural conflict through self-empowerment, which becomes possible with responsible involvement with others” (Denniston, 54).

Paule Marshall uses words to weave a net around her own experiences in life and those of her ancestors who came before her, to catch and examine the big issues in life within the context of her own Caribbean-American heritage.





# Paule Marshall

## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

*The Fisher King* (2000).

*Daughters* (1991).

*Reena and Other Stories* (1983).

*Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).

*The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* (Originally titled *Ceremonies at the Guest-House*) (1969).

*Soul Clap Hands and Sing* (1961).

*Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959).

### Works about the author

DeLamotte, Eugenia C. *Places of Silence, Journeys of Freedom* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

Denniston, Dorothy Hamer. *The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender* (The University of Tennessee Press, 1995).

Hathaway, Heather. *Caribbean Waves: Relocating Claude McKay and Paule Marshall* (Indiana University Press, 1999).

Melvin, Rahming. "Towards a Caribbean Mythology: The Function of Africa in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*" (*Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 1993).

Pettis, Joyce. *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction* (University Press of Virginia, 1995).

Schenck, Mary Jane. "Ceremonies of Reconciliation: Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*" (*MELUS*, 1994).

Sascha, Tamor. "Merle of Bournehills" (*Durham University Journal*, 1982).