



Maryse Condé

Biography

Condé on the meaning of her works: “Je ne suis pas un écrivain y message. J’écris d’abord pour moi, pour m’aider y comprendre et supporter la vie.” Translation: I am not a messenger writer. I write for me, to help me comprehend and support the life.

Maryse Condé (Boucolon) was born in Pointe-ý-Pitre, Guadeloupe, on February 11, 1937. Condé was educated in Paris at Lycée Fénéleon and at the Sorbonne where she took her doctorate in Comparative Literature. She was an instructor at école Normale Supérieure, in Conakry, Guinea. She also worked at Ghana Institute of Language in Accra and Lycée Charles de Gaulle in Saint Louise, Senegal, and lived in the Ivory Coast and taught for a year in Bingerville.

More recently, Condé moved to London, where she worked as a program producer for the BBC and later became the course director at the Sorbonne. She is the first Francophone Caribbean novelist who has connected the English Caribbean with the colonial United States. She has written several plays performed in Paris and the West Indies, while continuing her academic career at UC Berkeley, the University of Virginia, the University of Maryland, and Harvard before coming to Columbia in 1995.

Her first novel, *Hérémakhonon*, appeared in 1976. Other Condé novels that have gained attention include *Segou*, (*La vie scélérate*) *Tree of Life*, and *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (*Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem*). Many of Condé’s novels have been translated into English, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese.



Quick Facts

- * Born in 1937
- * Grew up in Guadeloupe
- * One of the first, and most influential, Francophone Caribbean novelists

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The Guadeloupan novelist, playwright, critic and professor creates characters in family situations, drawn from her experiences in Paris, West Africa, and her native Guadeloupe. Her novels focus on personal human involvements in holy wars, national rivalries and migrations of peoples. Her novels emphasize the effects of the transition of ordinary characters by placing the protagonists in situations where they must choose between the existing social order and cultural changes prompted by the Western influence. Condé uses her characters as a tool for expressing herself by giving them their own voice in order to make her views on specific issues known. Her characters are often rejected by society because they are drifters, non-conformists, and rebels. She is interested in the cultural encounters, conflicts, and the changes which bring about a new awareness in the main characters centered in her works.

“In Condé’s novels, essays, and interviews, one can retrace the evolution of her ideas on the question of identity both at the collective and personal level” (Shelton, 1993). In Condé’s first novel, *Héremakhonon* (1976), she relates the journey of Veronica, an Antillean student searching for her roots in a newly liberated West African country. During her stay in the newly liberated country, Veronica becomes involved with a powerful government official and a young school director who opposes the struggle for liberty in Africa. As she leaves the country, she realizes that her expectations of what Africa would be differed from the reality of Africa. The setting was inspired by what Condé experienced in Guinea in 1962. In her realization, Condé saw “just how badly prepared [she] was to encounter Africa; [she] had a very romantic vision, and [she] just wasn’t prepared, either politically or socially.” At this point of her life in Guinea began a deep political awareness from her active involvement with Marxist militants and her experience of being intertwined with various cultures.

In her next two novels, *Segou: Les murailles de terre* (1984), and *Segou II: La terre en mietts* (1986), Condé recreates events in the West African kingdom of Segou (now Mali) between 1797 and 1860. This work documents the experiences and exploitations of a royal family whose lives were destroyed by the European-colonization, the slave trade, and the introduction of Islam and Christianity. “Her onslaught upon the idea that race, rather than poverty and weakness, is the base upon which the exploitation of Africans and exiled Africans was brought into being” (Bruner, 1977).



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I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem (1986) is an historical novel, rooted in American history. According to Condé, “I gave Tituba all my preoccupations, freedom, failure of freedom, revolution and the struggles and efforts to arrive at something in spite of it all.” Through the novel’s first-person narrative, Condé elaborates on history to educate the reader about both Puritans’ persecution of women and the lives of slaves in Barbados and America.

As a young girl, Tituba found that she could gain knowledge using herbal remedies while calling on her personal spirits for guidance. *Moi, Tituba Sorcière (I, Tituba the Witch)* re-creates the story of a black slave woman from Barbados who was among the women tried for witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts, during the late 1600s. “Condé’s imaginative subversion of historical records forms a critique of contemporary American society and its ingrained racism and sexism” (Kirkus Associations, LP, 1992).

In 1985, Condé obtained a Fulbright Scholarship to teach in the United States. She received the prestigious French award Le Grand Prix Literature de la Femme in 1986 for *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*. In addition, she was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1987-88 as well as a Puterbaugh Fellow in 1993. She teaches in the French and Romance Philology Department of Columbia University in New York, where she also chairs the new Center for French and Francophone studies.

Selected Bibliography

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