



Dorothy West

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When I was a child of 4 or 5, listening to the conversation of my mother and her sisters, I would sometimes intrude on their territory with a solemnly stated opinion that would jerk their heads in my direction, then send them into roars of uncontrollable laughter. I do not now remember anything I said. But the first adult who caught her breath would speak for them all and say, ‘That’s no child. That’s a little sawed-off woman.’ That was to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

— Essence Magazine, August 1995

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Quick Facts

- * 1907-1998
- * African-American short story writer, novelist, and activist
- * Founded the journal *Challenge*

Biography

Dorothy West was born in Boston circa 1908, daughter of an emancipated slave. As a teenager, she moved to Harlem, New York. There, in 1926, she joined a group of writers, of which she was the youngest. Her talent, vivacious personality, and confidence in her ability to write made her a valuable member of this group, known as the New Negro movement, which became a driving force in establishing what is known as the Harlem Renaissance. Her first story, “The Typewriter,” won her second place in a national contest sponsored by the Urban League’s *Opportunity* magazine, and the approval of her peers. In 1932, West traveled to Russia to take part in a film, produced by the Communist Party concerning the issue of racial discrimination in the United States. The project was soon derailed by a white American who refused to allow America to be portrayed this negatively.

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Biography continued

Upon returning to the states, West discovered that the Harlem Renaissance had come to a close in her absence. The Great Depression had settled over the country and many of her fellow writers, no longer able to survive financially in New York, had moved further west to find work. West decided to stay behind. In 1934, she founded the “Challenge,” a journal dedicated to creative writing and issues of social and political activism. In 1937, Richard Wright joined her, and they collaborated to form “New Challenge,” a successor to her earlier efforts. These publications gave early exposure to many, later to be well-known, writers. Despite that, both projects were short-lived.

The Depression continued and worsened, and with that, West’s career took another turn. She became a welfare relief social investigator and also got involved in the Works Progress Administration Writer’s Project. In 1940, she took a job writing short stories for the *New York Daily News*. By 1943, West had moved to Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard. Her first book, *The Living Is Easy*, was published in 1948, receiving a fair amount of praise. After her first book came out, West faded into oblivion. After many years, she became closely acquainted with a successful editor for Doubleday who owned a summer home nearby. The publisher’s name was Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Onassis read short pieces in the *Vineyard Gazette* and began visiting her weekly. It was through Onassis’ encouragement that West wrote her second novel, *The Wedding*. She published this book at the age of 85. Shortly thereafter, West put together a compilation of short stories, entitled *The Richer; The Poorer: Stories, Sketches, And Reminiscences*.

Throughout her life, West never married or had a family, although she received plenty of opportunities to do so. West states, “I was afraid to get married, I thought I wouldn’t be a good wife.”

In her career, West has received many mixed reactions to her work and attitudes toward issues of race. Her stories are usually absent of interracial conflict. They deal with rites of passage in people’s lives, and obstacles they overcome along the way, desires and dreams, love and money, failure and success. She uses subtlety to create the underlying messages that race, class, and gender play a part shaping the world in which her characters live.



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Biography continued

Works by the author

The Living Is Easy (1948).

The Wedding (1995).

The Richer, The Poorer: Stories, Sketches, and Reminiscences (1995).

The Dorothy West Martha's Vineyard: Stories, Essays and Reminiscences by Dorothy West writing in the Vinyard Gazette, ed. James Rober Saunders and Renae Nadine Shackelford (2001).

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