



# Sonia Sanchez

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*This is the time for the creative  
Man. Woman. Who must decide  
that She. He. Can live in peace.  
Racial and sexual justice on  
this earth. This is the time for you and me.  
African American. Whites. Latinos.  
Gays. Asians. Jews. Native  
Americans. Lesbians. Muslims.  
All of us must finally bury  
the elitism of race superiority  
the elitism of sexual superiority  
the elitism of economic superiority  
the elitism of religious superiority.*

— Poem for July 4, 1994

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1934
- \* African-American poet, Civil Rights activist, and academic
- \* Author of *homegirls & handgrenades*

## Biography

Sonia Sanchez was born September 9, 1934 in Birmingham, Alabama. Her father, Wilson Driver, was a drummer in a jazz band. Her mother died in childbirth when Sonia was only a year old. After her mother’s death, Sonia and her older sister went to live with their paternal grandmother. “Mama,” as Sonia called her grandmother, died when Sonia was six and in the years that followed she drifted from family to stepmother to family friends. After high school she attended Hunter College, where she took creative writing courses. Sanchez spent three decades in Harlem before she settled in Philadelphia in 1976. She is currently a tenured Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Temple University in Philadelphia.

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# Sonia Sanchez

## Biography continued

She travels to give lectures, workshops, and poetry readings. She has traveled to read her poetry in Cuba, England, the West Indies, China, and many other countries. Sanchez is the winner of numerous awards for her work as an activist and a poet. Her book *homegirls & handgrenades* earned the 1985 American Book Award. She is also the author of children's fiction and plays. On the 1995 CD *Sacred Ground*, by Sweet Honey in the Rock, Sanchez reads her poem "I Have Come Into the City."

It was Sonia's relationship with her grandmother that unmasked her gift for poetry. Mama taught her to read at the age of four and little Sonia began to write at six and a half years. In her interview "Wear the New Day Well" for the *A Moveable Feast* video documentary series, Sanchez recalls that poetry kept her alive during the difficult times following her grandmother's death. In her book of poetry, *Under a Soprano Sky*, Sanchez pays tribute to her grandmother in "Dear Mama." Sonia was an active and playful child with scrapes on her knees and dirt on her hands. But when the adults would verbalize their disapproval, Mama would say, "Let her be. She got a right to be different. She gonna stumble on herself one of these days. Just let the child be." Sanchez ends with a powerful, "And I be Mama. "

During her years in New York City, Sanchez became active in the civil rights movement. She was a member of the New York activist group CORE. During this time she came into contact with Malcom X, also an activist working in Harlem. In *A Moveable Feast* Sanchez states that she learned a lot about language from Malcom X and applied it to her poetry. Malcom X was direct, truthful, and gave his black audience a sense of history and self worth. Sanchez's works are often passionate poems or works of prose that touch on social issues of modern times and history. Many of her poems are blunt, passionate, and painfully truthful. She addresses the history of African-Americans from slave times to modern oppression. From Malcom X she also learned how to present her poetry and always sustain the attention of the audience—a skill characteristic to Sanchez's work. (See *A Moveable Feast* for an example of the powerful delivery with which she presents her poems. )

Sanchez also refers to the influence of Martin Luther King, Jr. She met King in 1957 during a stop on his book tour. In an audio interview with a Seattle newspaper, Sanchez reflects on Dr. King's work and recalls her reaction to his death.



# Sonia Sanchez

## Biography continued

In 1985 a tragedy occurred in Philadelphia that affected Sanchez very deeply. A group of black political radicals were barricaded against the police in their place of residence. The group of citizens called themselves “MOVE.” In retaliation to the uncooperative members, the police dropped a bomb on the residential building. The drastic and catastrophic actions of the police resulted in fires that grew from the explosion and wiped out an entire city block. Many MOVE members, including children, were killed. In the midst of all the chaos, Sanchez recalls that others forgot that the victims of this violent act were people:

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*Are you saying to me that we are at war with each other in this country? Is the message to be given to people that if we speak out and become non-conformists that certainly we can be killed? Or are you saying that in a black neighborhood anything goes?*

-- A Moveable Feast

” ”

In response to this unforgettable tragedy Sanchez wrote “Elegy: For Move and Philadelphia.” Sanchez wanted people to see the horrible significance of this tragedy and to never forget that it happened. She waited three years to present this poem to the people of Philadelphia. She believed they needed time to heal in order to understand the poem and realize it wasn't a personal attack. Sanchez took on the heavy responsibility of this elegy because she believes “we must never let this happen again.”

Sonia Sanchez’s poetry includes a variety of styles, languages, and dialects. Mixed in with poems are short stories, short works of prose, and personal reflections. She fills pages with powerful images through haiku, tanka, and sonku. Her poetry is free, structured by neither punctuation nor the censorship of society’s close-mindedness. Through the characters in her poems and through her words Sanchez brings the tragedies and truths of life to her readers.



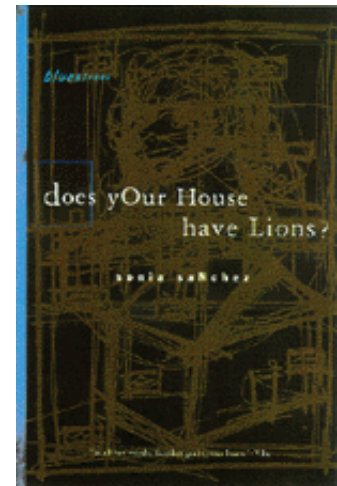
# Sonia Sanchez

## Biography continued

*Wounded in the House of a Friend*, her thirteenth and most recent book, is her first book of poems in eight years. In *Wounded in the House of a Friend* Sanchez explores and portrays a brutal rape scene, the murder of a woman by her granddaughter, an unfaithful spouse, a mother who sells her young daughter for drugs, racism, anger, self doubt, and other serious issues. Yet the book is also a journey towards healing, hope, and a newfound strength within the human spirit. Here and in other books, she reaches from the villages of Africa to the ghettos of America, from the violated slaves of the past to the victims of the 1985 MOVE tragedy.

Sonia Sanchez has been recognized as one of the most important figures in African-American literature. In support of *homegirls & handgrenades* Margaret Walker states, “The book is another expression of the continuing creativity of Sonia Sanchez. Some pieces are plaintive and poignant, others are tough and militant, but all are significant, brilliant and original. Here again is another example of Black speech, a vernacular familiar to all who know and love this author’s previous work.”

Donna Seaman of *Booklist* wrote a short review of *Wounded in the House of a Friend* in the March 1, 1995 issue:



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*Her ringing voice gives voice to the emotions of many; she is compassionate, proud, angry, and determined as she writes about betrayals both private and public. . . Sanchez forces us to confront these bewildering and horrifying tragedies that take place behind closed doors and scar and scorch the American psyche, but she also reminds us that war rages in Nicaragua, Bosnia, and Rwanda. Grim matters, but Sanchez offers hope and heroes. She celebrates quiet victories in poems. . .*

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# Sonia Sanchez

## Biography continued

The praise Sanchez has received from the literary and black communities is richly deserved, but sadly, it is not plentiful. “Sanchez is undoubtedly one of the most under-appreciated poets writing today,” states Gloria Hull (from *Shakespeare’s Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*). Even ten years later this is undoubtedly true. Information on Sanchez is limited and not easily found. Most of the material I came into contact with was either her own work or selections of her work contributed to magazines or other books. Few available critiques or biographies are available. Considering the many books she has written, the wide span of time she has been writing, and the fact that she is currently living, it is a tragedy that there is such a small amount of information available on such a talented poet and incredible human being.

I had the honor of meeting Sonia Sanchez on February 21, 1997, at a poetry reading in Minneapolis. It was a fulfilling and unifying experience for all of the people within that room. I can only speak for myself of course, but it was obvious from the faces of those around me that Sonia Sanchez reached out and touched the hearts and souls of each individual. Her voice was not only speaking the poems to us, it was singing and chanting the words to the rhythm of our heartbeats. When I first began reading her poetry my thirst for it was unquenchable. I could read the same poem over and over and still be affected by it. But to hear her speak the words to me was a completely different experience. I was physically, emotionally and spiritually moved. There does not exist an adjective beautiful enough to capture the power of that evening. After the reading I took her hand and thanked her with words that could not express the depth of my emotions. A year ago I knew nothing of Sonia Sanchez; now I cannot imagine my life without her writing and the memory of that night. I thank you, Sister Sonia Sanchez.



# Sonia Sanchez

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