



Shay Youngblood

“

If you don't remember nothing else I tell you, baby, you remember this: if you got to dance or dream or anything at all, take it a step at a time and don't let nothing and nobody get in your way when you doing right. I ain't saying it's gonna be easy, but we all got a dance to do. You remember this, you hear?

— The Big Mama Stories

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Biography

Shay Youngblood is best known for her three enthralling texts, *The Big Mama Stories*, *Soul Kiss* and her most recent novel, *Black Girl in Paris*. Youngblood was born in Columbus, Georgia. Youngblood has been fascinated with the written word since she first learned how to read. Her favorite reoccurring dream as a child was one in which she lived in a library. As a young adult Youngblood attended Clark-Atlanta University from which she received a BA in Mass Communications in 1981. She went on to earn a MFA (Master of Fine Arts) in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1993.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1959
- * African-American playwright and novelist
- * Winner of the Lorraine Hansberry Playwrighting Award

This page was researched and submitted by Lindy Gardner and updated by Maria Zavalova on 02/28/05.



Shay Youngblood

Biography continued

Youngblood is recognized as a poet, playwright, fiction writer, and has also written, produced and directed two short videos. She also won a Pushcart Prize for her short story, “Born With Religion.” Other awards on Youngblood’s impressive list include; the Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting Award, the Astaea Writes’ Award and several NAACP Theater Awards. Along with being a writer, she has taught writing at the Syracuse Community Writer’s Project, playwriting at the Rhode Island Adult Institution for Women and Brown University. She now resides in New York where she is now teaching creative writing at the New York School for Social Research.

Many elements of Shay Youngblood’s life are reflected in her fiction. Like many of her heroines, Youngblood herself was an orphan at an early age. When her mother died Youngblood was raised by a community family: grandfathers, uncles and many women with similarities to those described in *The Big Mama Stories* and the play *Shakin’ the Mess Outta Misery*. The “mamas” that raised Youngblood taught her “how to be an independent free-thinking person” (Lambda interview) and much about the art of storytelling. A college trip to Haiti and her time spent as an agriculture information officer in the Peace Corps heightened her political awareness that is apparent in much of her writing.

Youngblood states that her first published text, *The Big Mama Stories* is the closest to autobiographical of all of her works. The compilation of short stories focus around the coming of age of a poor, young African-American girl named Chile. Chile’s biological mother, Fannie Mae, has died and so Chile and her brother go to live with a woman called “Big Mama,” who raises the children with the help of the entire community.

Of these community members, many are women who all help Chile into womanhood through fascinating stories. The story culminates after Chile gets her first period and the Mamas “take her to the river” for a sacred ceremony. This ceremony consists of Chile’s many caregivers presenting her with gifts such as African scarves and a Bible. Chile is then anointed with oil and blessed by each mama. As fun, entertaining and touching as the stories are, it is the opinion of some that the writing, as the voice of a pre-adolescent child, is not entirely believable and sometimes feels obvious that an educated adult is speaking rather than an uneducated child.



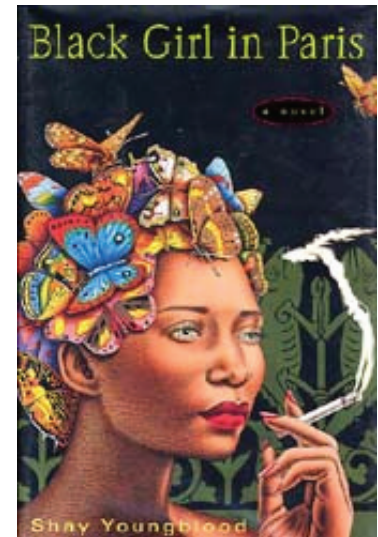
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Biography continued

Soul Kiss, Youngblood's haunting debut novel which nominated her for the Quality Paperback Book New Voices Award, tells the tale of a broken youth who experiences childhood in troubled fragments of time, during a radical time in history. It drips with poetic heaviness and leaves the reader aching with a richness that can't quite be defined. At times, the erotic tone and irony may leave the reader feeling uncomfortable and overwhelmed. However, one can't help feeling but immeasurable tenderness towards lonely Mariah Santos. One wishes to take her in our arms and swallow her pain away. Youngblood's writing is filled to the heart with honest language that flows with an urgency that compels the reader to hungrily devour the book while forcing oneself to let the sad but lyrical words to settle.

In Shay Youngblood's second novel, *Black Girl in Paris*, she gives a tour guide through the dreamy streets of Paris as followed by the main character Eden. Eden has fled the deep American South, in search of a childhood dream of a color-blind, liberal atmosphere in which to develop as a writer. The reader gets to delight in Eden's excitement and fear while she clumsily maneuvers through all-new experiences abroad, while encountering metaphorical caricatures along the way. It is the way Youngblood so vividly and beautifully displays these caricatures that allows them and Paris to come alive.

This novel conjures a multitude of feelings and a varied array of emotions and ideas. This story contains, in addition to its literary merits, a profusion of cultural, political, racial and ethnic ideologies. If this book is viewed as a travel guide, many areas of familiarity, as well as unfamiliarity can be encountered. Youngblood uses the metaphor of following a map repeatedly throughout the story. In this novel, Youngblood boldly weaves together ideas of political thought while balancing encounters of intimacy that bring Youngblood's character a subtle sense of hope and beauty at times and places where she needs it most.





Shay Youngblood

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Plays

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