



Voices from the Gaps

June Jordan

“

In part we grew as we were meant to grow ourselves with kings and queens no white man knew.

— Who Look at Me

”



Biography

June Jordan was born on July 9, 1936 in Harlem, New York, to Granville and Mildred Jordan, Jamaican natives. Her father was a night shift postal worker and her mother was a nurse. When Jordan was five, the family moved to the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn. During her high school years, Jordan was “completely immersed in a white universe” while a student at Milwood High School and Northfield School for girls in Massachusetts. At Northfield, Jordan “discovered her poetic voice.” Jordan’s home situation was a source of conflict and anguish because of her father’s physical abuse and her mother’s denial. This environment resulted in Jordan’s writing extensively about her parents and their positive and negative influences.

In 1953, Jordan enrolled at Barnard College. Two years later, she married Michael Meyer, a student. While her husband completed graduate studies at the University of Chicago, Jordan continued her studies there until 1956 when she went to Barnard College, where she remained until February 1957. In 1958, she gave birth to her only child, Christopher David Meyer. Being in an interracial marriage in the 1950’s was especially difficult due to societal attitudes and laws. In 1965, Jordan’s marriage ended in divorce and Jordan faced the trials of being a single, working mother and forming her identity.

Quick Facts

- * 1936-2002
- * African-American poet, novelist, and children’s book author
- * Taught at several universities

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June Jordan

Biography continued

In 1969, Jordan wrote her first book of poetry, *Who Look at Me*, which dealt with African-American life. In addition to writing, she held several other jobs, including working as a research associate and writer for the Technical Housing Department of Mobilization for Youth in New York; Professor of English and Literature at the City University of New York, Connecticut College, and Sarah Lawrence College, where she remained until 1974. She became a tenured professor at State University of New York at Stony Brook. Currently, Jordan is a Professor of African Studies and Director of Poetry for the People at the University of California at Berkeley.

Her first novel, *His Own Where*, which was nominated for the National Book Award in 1971, is representative of her interest in urban planning and commitment to Black English. Jordan felt it was important to write in Black English:

“ “ *As a Black poet and writer, I am proud our Black, verbally bonding system born of our struggle to avoid annihilation. . . and so I work, as a poet and a writer, against the eradication of this system, this language, the carrier of Black-survivor consciousness.* ” ”

His Own Where can be interpreted as an autobiographical reference to Jordan's relationship with her parents.

Jordan has also been a significant contributor to children's literature. Among her children's works are *Dry Victories*, *Fannie Lou Hamer* (a biography), and *New Life: New Room*. In her children's literature, she does not patronize young readers, but places emphasis on social realities and survival in a racist society.



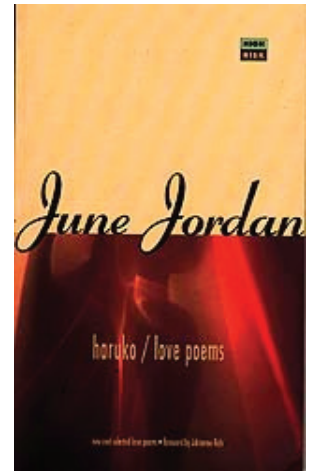
June Jordan

Biography continued

Jordan is best known for her poetry, which has been noted for its range of emotions. Her works create conflict prior to optimism. Some of her poetry has political undertones and has been described by Moore as “powerful and beautiful . . . and among the greatest of their kind.” Conversely, some of her poetry, such as *Passion: New Poems*, has been criticized for its radical stance. In discussing her poetry, Jordan states, “I expect a distinctively Black poem to speak for me as-part-of-an-us.”

In 1981, Jordan wrote *Civil Wars*, a collection of essays, letters, and speeches ranging on topics from Black feminism to racism, violence, and homosexuality. Among many contributions to the arts, one of her most recent has been the composition of 22 song lyrics and the libretto for a new American opera in two acts, “I was Looking at the Ceiling and then I saw the Sky.”

Jordan has received numerous honors and awards, including a 1969-1970 Rockefeller grant for creative writing, a Yado fellowship in 1979, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship in 1982, and the Achievement Award for International Reporting from the National Association of Black Journalists in 1984. Jordan also won the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Writers Award from 1995 to 1998; the Ground Breakers-Dream Makers award from The Woman's Foundation on May 18, 1994; she has been included in the *Who's Who in America* from 1984 to the present; she received the Chancellor's Distinguished Lectureship from the University of California at Berkeley, and the PEN Center USA West Freedom to Write Award, 1991. These awards just name a few of the honors Jordan has received throughout her lifetime. June Jordan died of breast cancer on June 14, 2002.





June Jordan

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