



Sherley Anne Williams

“

I am the women I speak of in my stories, my poems. The fact that I am a single mother sometimes makes it hard to bring this forth to embody it in the world, but it is precisely because I am a single mother of an only son that I try hard to do this. Women must leave a record for their men; otherwise how will they know us?

— Sherley Anne Williams

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Quick Facts

- * 1944-1999
- * African-American poet, novelist, and academic
- * She was the first African American professor of literature at UC-San Diego

Biography

Born August 25, 1944, in Bakersfield, California, to Lena-Leila Marie Siler and Jesse Winson Williams, Sherley Anne Williams is the third of four daughters. She, her parents, and her three sisters, Ruby, Jesmarie, and Lois, fought the constant despair of life in the housing projects in Fresno, California. Her family earned their living by picking fruit and cotton. Williams’s father died of tuberculosis when she was eight years old, and her mother died when Williams was 16. An older sister, whom she credits with being a major influence in her life, reared her after the mother’s death. During her early years, Williams found herself associating with people whom she said could be termed “juvenile delinquents” (Draper 1950). However, she was able to separate herself from those influences through her love of history and biography. Along with encouragement from her science teacher, she was also influenced by books such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* and Eartha Kitt’s *Thursday’s Child*. Williams has been quoted as saying, “It was largely through these autobiographies I was able to take heart in my life” (CLC 318). Other writers such as Amiri Baraka, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, and poet Philip Levine, her professor at Fresno State University, also greatly influenced Williams.

This page was researched and submitted by: Gregory Alexander, Jennifer Bryant, Deborah Coleman, Lesley Dixon, Patricia Jefferson, Debra H. Matthews, Paula McKenzie, Sherry Robinson, and Andrea Traphagen



Sherley Anne Williams

Biography continued

She was educated at Fresno State College (known today as California State University) and received her bachelor's in English in 1966. Williams also studied on the graduate level at Howard University and received her master's in English from Brown University in 1972. She began writing in 1966 and literally wrote for the remainder of her life. Supporting herself with her writings and by teaching, Williams in 1973 became the first African American literature professor at the University of California at San Diego. She constantly worked toward diversification of, not only the faculty and students, but also the canon. On the cover of her children's book *Girls Together*, Williams states that teaching satisfied her desire "to help students see relationships and make connections between some of what has gone before and what is going on now and what may come later."

Although Williams contributed greatly through her teaching, her writing career is even more impressive. Her first short story, "Tell Martha not to Moan," was published in 1967, and in 1972 her first book, a literary criticism called *Give Birth to Brightness*, followed. Mel Watkins notes that this book examines black fiction from the nineteenth century to the present with particular focus on contemporary works which Williams labels as "neo-black writing" (Draper 1951). *The Peacock Poems*, Williams's second book, was published in 1975. Highly influenced by blues music, these poems focus on Williams's life as a single mother as well as on her young son, Malcolm. The book also includes poems that relate to her early life with her family and the work they did in the fields. A second volume of poetry entitled *Some One Sweet Angel Chile* followed in 1982. The poems in this book are sectioned into three parts. The first part addresses a free black woman in the 1860s who travels south to teach slaves. The second part focuses on the blues and Bessie Smith with the final section focusing on the author's youth. In addition, in 1982, Williams produced *Letters from a New England Negro*, a full-length, one-woman drama that is an excerpt from *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*.



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Biography continued

Williams published her first novel, *Dessa Rose*, in 1986. This novel describes the fictional relationship between a pregnant young slave woman and a white woman who has been abandoned by her slaveowner husband in Alabama. *Dessa Rose* is based on two true incidents, one involving a pregnant black woman who helps lead a slave uprising in Kentucky in 1829, and the other involving a white woman living on a farm in North Carolina in 1830 who gave refuge to runaway slaves. Williams, having read of these two accounts, expressed in the novel's introduction, her sadness that the two women never met. *Dessa Rose* reflects Williams's interest in history, biography, and women and race issues. In 1992, Williams's children's book *Working Cotton* was published. This autobiographical work records a day in the life of a young girl working with her farmhand parents in the cotton fields of California. Williams's experiences as a child picking fruit and cotton are described vividly in this award-winning book. In 1999, her second children's book, *Girls Together*, was published. It is the happy story of the strong friendships that develops between five girls growing up in the projects in poverty.

Williams has been nominated for and has received several awards and honors for her work as both a writer and professor. *The Peacock Poems*, her collection of autobiographical poems, drew a National Book Award nomination in 1976 and was nominated for a Pulitzer. In the collection, Williams uses blues poetry to express herself. She won an Emmy for the television performance of *Some One Sweet Angel Chile*, and this book of poetry was also nominated for a National Book Award. In 1984, she had the honor of serving as a Fulbright lecturer at the University of Ghana. Her drama, *Letters from a New England Negro*, was the feature play at the 1991 Black Theater Festival and the Chicago International Festival in 1992. Williams also won a Caldecott Award and the Coretta Scott King Book Award for *Working Cotton*. In 1998 at the UCSD conference celebrating "Black Women Writers and the High Art of Afro-American Letters," Williams was the guest of honor. The mayor of San Diego, Susan Goding, officially proclaimed May 15, 1998 "Sherley Anne Williams Day." In the same year, Williams was also awarded the AALCS's Stephen Henderson Award for Outstanding Achievement in Literature and Poetry.

On July 6, 1999, at the age of 54, Sherley Anne Williams, one of the great talents of the literary world, succumbed to cancer. Her son Malcolm, a sister, three nieces, and three grandchildren survive her. At the time of her death, she was working on a sequel to *Dessa Rose*. Williams identified with the struggles of lower income black women, and through her work, she continues to allow the rest of us to identify with them as well.



Sherley Anne Williams

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