

be so honored. In 1987, the *Boston Globe* had quoted her saying, "I've never seen myself as a person who would fit into the traditional female role. My parents instilled in me the idea that I had the intellectual capacity and physical strength to be the best, to achieve excellence in my life. I never felt limitations" (quoted by Vicki Crawford in *The Journal of African American History*, 2007).

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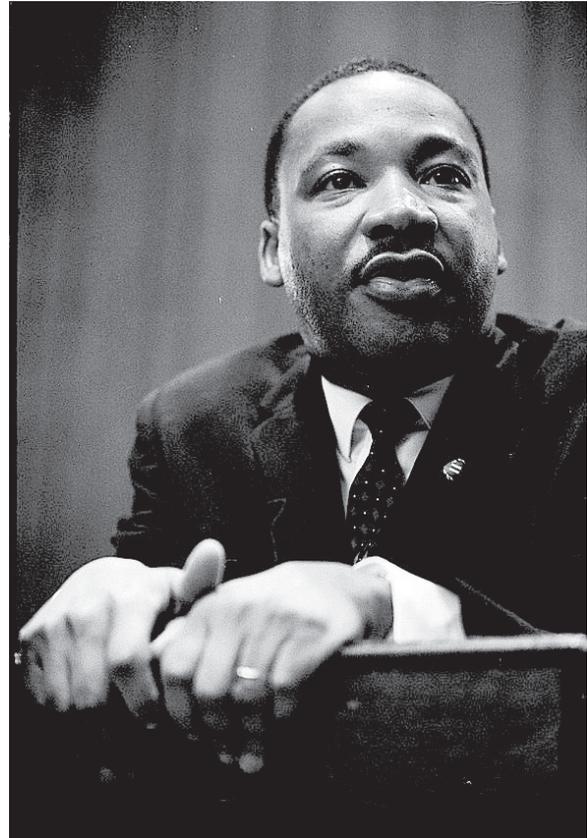
## King, Jr., Martin Luther

1/15/1929–4/4/1968

*Nonfiction—theology, civil rights*

Martin Luther King, Jr., is the best-known leader of the civil-rights movement, which took place in the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, he was so deeply involved in the movement and so instrumental in its successes that it is often hard to distinguish the story of the civil-rights movement from the story of Martin Luther King's life, and vice versa. In many ways, his upbringing and schooling taught him the philosophy that would make the movement a success, so the conflation of the man and the movement is not altogether unfounded.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1929, the son of Martin Luther, a Baptist minister and Alberta Christine Williams, a teacher. Martin Luther King, Sr., had inherited his ministry at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta from his wife's father, Adam Daniel Williams. King's childhood was spent listening to his father's and his grandfather's thunderous, wall-shaking sermons. From them, he learned the ideals of Christian love that would later permeate his writings and speeches, as well as the African-American Baptist oratory techniques that would make him into one of the best public speakers in the country.



Martin Luther King, Jr

While Martin Luther King, Sr., hoped that his son would follow in his footsteps and become a copastor of the congregation of Ebenezer Church, as a young man, Martin Luther King, Jr., did not want to become a pastor like his father and his grandfather. Despite the fact that he went to better schools than many African-American children in Atlanta, he had witnessed the evils of segregation firsthand growing up in the South and did not think that becoming a minister would allow him to combat the social evils he saw around him. He entered Morehouse College in 1944, determined to become a doctor or a lawyer, but, under the tutelage of his religion professor and the president of the college, he learned of the influence that ministers had on society, both socially and intellectually throughout history.

Thus, in 1948, King began studies at the Crozer Theological Seminary, where he was first introduced to the philosophy of passive resistance—nonviolent, direct confrontation. This philosophy

was first espoused by Mahatma Gandhi, who led a nonviolent revolution against colonial British rule in India in the 1950s. Through using this method of protest, the people of India had won their independence from British rule without spilling any blood. King was so moved by this ideology that he embraced nonviolent resistance as the best, most moral, and most practical way to achieve social reform in the United States. However, he was still not ready to implement these ideas on a social scale, so after finishing his studies at the seminary, he began doing Ph.D. work in theology at Boston University. It was during his time in Boston that he married Coretta Scott, who would remain his partner throughout his life.

After he completed his Ph.D. coursework, he decided not to join his father in the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta but instead took a pastorate in Montgomery, Alabama, knowing that Montgomery was one of the areas in the United States where segregation was most heartily enforced and where he might do the most good combating it. He rose to the head of the Civil Rights Movement rather quickly, brought into the spotlight by his role in the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955. This boycott was initially organized by a number of black activist groups who came together to protest the arrest of Rosa Parks, an African-American woman who had been arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus to a white passenger (as the segregation laws required her to do). These groups all joined together to create the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), a group that was supposed to work with city and bus line officers to establish better treatment of blacks in Montgomery. They elected King as the MIA's first president.

It was during his time as president of the MIA that King delivered his first civil rights address at Holt Street Baptist Church. The speech urged the boycotters to continue their fight for equal rights, which they did for 382 days. During this time King helped to organize various means of alternate transportation for the boycotters and kept the pressure high on the city and bus line officials. As a result, he was arrested, received hate mail and verbal insults, and even had his house bombed. Nevertheless, he managed to maintain his adherence to the philosophy of nonviolence, and as a result of his teachings and beliefs, the

protesters won their battle when the Supreme Court declared Montgomery's bus segregation laws to be unconstitutional in 1956.

King's work, however, had only just begun, and in 1957, he gathered with other black leaders to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which was created to spread the movement out from Montgomery and through the South as a whole. The movement's first goal was to increase black voter registration in the South, which had been held back by various discriminatory laws that allowed for literacy tests and poll taxes that prevented many African Americans from access to the voting booths. Their ultimate goal, of course, was the complete elimination of segregation.

To achieve this end, King began an extensive tour of the country, giving speeches and sermons attacking segregation, meeting with various public officials, and writing a book, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, which chronicled the experience of the bus boycott in Montgomery and explained King's politics of nonviolence. He also took a trip to Ghana, a country in sub-Saharan Africa, where he spoke at a ceremony celebrating its independence. The cornerstone of his travels, however, was a trip to India, where he and his wife met with various people who had known Gandhi and visited the major sites where the Indian leader waged his nonviolent struggle against the British. Upon returning, King was infused with a greater commitment to nonviolence, not only as a philosophy and a way of achieving social change but also as a way of life. He resigned from his position at Dexter Church and joined his father as copastor of Ebenezer Church so he would have more time to devote to his work for civil rights.

His work reached a crucial stage when he decided to focus on fighting segregation in Alabama's capital, Birmingham, which King believed was the most segregated city in America. In Birmingham, every place from restaurants to stores was segregated, and African Americans did not have equal opportunities in gaining employment. Local leaders invited King and the SCLC to their city to help them remedy these conditions. They decided to march in protest, and in preparation for the march, King and the SCLC trained the protesters in nonviolent techniques, exposing them to the kinds of abuse they would receive as they marched

and teaching them how to take the physical and verbal abuse and not hit or talk back.

Volunteers took part in a series of marches that turned out to be some of the most gruesome events in American history. The Birmingham police met the first set of absolutely peaceful demonstrators with attack dogs and clubs. One thousand protesters were arrested and a court order was issued forbidding any more protests. King defied the court order and was arrested and placed in solitary confinement. While in jail, King wrote his famous essay "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in response to the criticism that he was hearing from local white opponents to his work. This letter became one of the classic protest pieces not only of the civil-rights movement but also of literary history, and it became a definitive work in laying out the principles of nonviolent protest.

King was released from jail on appeal after being convicted of contempt and soon rejoined the protesters. As the enthusiasm of the adult marchers began to falter under the constant opposition of the police and the repeated refusals of the Birmingham business owners to end their segregationist practices, King decided to use children in the demonstrations. This decision proved to be a crucial one, as it created one of the most lasting pictures of the evils of segregation ever recorded. The peaceful children were met with the same clubs and dogs that the police had turned on the adults; the police also employed tear gas and high-pressure fire hoses to turn back the protesters. The millions of viewers who saw this on television and the even greater numbers of people who saw pictures of this published in their newspapers were outraged by the brutality being turned against innocent children, and a national and international cry went up to bring an end to segregation.

President Kennedy, responding to this public outcry, quickly dispatched a representative from the U.S. Justice Department to negotiate between the protesters and the Birmingham business owners. Fearing the negative publicity, the Birmingham officials agreed to meet King's major demands, resulting in the desegregation of drinking fountains, restrooms, lunch counters, and fitting rooms. They also agreed to more equal hiring practices, which allowed African Americans to gain employment in positions that had always been closed to them. While the nation, the

Kennedy Administration, and the protesters celebrated this victory, white supremacists displayed their anger at the agreement by bombing King's hotel and the home of King's brother. These actions inspired rioting, and the Kennedy Administration ordered federal troops into Birmingham to stop the violence so that the agreement would have time to take effect.

**Editor's Note:** King's sermon collection, *Strength to Love* (1963), was also published during this time.

After this victory, King became involved in a massive march on Washington, which he had planned with leaders of other civil-rights groups, with the goal of raising national consciousness of the civil-rights movement and to urge Congress to pass a civil rights bill that was coming up for a vote. In front of 250,000 people, King delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial. This speech, which was largely improvised, has been called "the most eloquent of his career." He mesmerized the crowd with his deep, resounding voice, his rhythmic repetition of the phrase "I Have a Dream," and the picture he painted of a "promised land" where there was racial equality and equal justice for all. He pointed out that although the nation was celebrating the centennial anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the children of the freed slaves did not feel emancipated at all, but rather were still fighting for equal rights. Early in 1964, King stood by as President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which declared that the federal government was firmly dedicated to ending segregation and discrimination in all public places.

The "I Have a Dream" speech and the signing of the Civil Rights Act marked King's elevation to a position of national and international prominence. This status was confirmed as he became the first black American to be named as *Time* magazine's "Man of the Year" in 1964. In November of the same year, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, becoming the youngest person to ever win the award.

He continued his efforts on behalf of the civil-rights movement, focusing on a campaign for voter's rights in Selma, Alabama. Again, he and his protesters were met with violent opposition—the multitude of schoolchildren who had cut school to join King's protest were arrested for juvenile

delinquency; adults were arrested for picketing the county courthouse; nonviolent demonstrators who were marching from Selma to Montgomery to present their demands for voting rights to the governor were beaten by state troopers. In frustration, King asked for help from ministers throughout the nation and was gratified when they joined him in the march, only to feel great sorrow when he learned that two of the white ministers who had joined him were beaten so severely by white supremacists that one of them died.

The death of the minister, however, did gain President Johnson's attention and within days he appeared on television urging that Congress pass a voting rights bill, which became the Voting Rights Act that was signed into law in 1965. King had finally gained one of his main objectives as a civil-rights leader, as the act made literacy tests illegal, gave the U.S. Attorney General power to oversee federal elections in seven southern states, and asked the Attorney General to challenge the legality of poll taxes in local and state elections.

**Editor's Note:** The "literacy tests" were actually spurious, in that the testers would ask prospective African-American voters incredibly arcane questions about obscure passages of the law and would judge their answers harshly to prevent them from being able to vote, whereas they'd give European-American voters ridiculously easy questions and would judge their answers generously, so they could vote.

However, not all of King's protests were successful. In 1966, he and the SCLC launched a campaign in Chicago, which was designed to expand the civil-rights movement into the North and to raise awareness of racial discrimination as manifested in urban areas and in the issues of housing, schools, and employment. The protests broke into violent rioting just two days after they began. This was followed by rioting in Boston, Detroit, Milwaukee, and other Northern cities throughout the United States.

These events marked the beginning of discord in the civil-rights movement, as more radical black leaders such as Malcolm X and the black-power movement refused to accept King's nonviolent ethos, believing that violence could and should be used when necessary. In his book *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, King fought the

ideology of the black-power group. He reasserted his unequivocal belief in the philosophy of peaceful protest and pointed out that by resorting to violence, the black community would become self-destructive, pessimistic, and separatist. He also expressed the concern that in resorting to violence, the movement would lose the support of whites by creating fear instead of understanding. However, more and more, he witnessed the nonviolent ideals among his earlier protesters breaking down.

He soon turned his attentions to human-rights issues as he began to speak against the Vietnam War and on behalf of the poor in urban and rural areas. Many civil-rights leaders begged him not to take on the Vietnam War, fearing that in speaking out against it, he would lose the support for the movement from those who believed in the war. However, he felt that his Nobel Peace Prize had given him a commission to work for peace in all areas of the world, even if that meant speaking out against the actions of his nation.

While still speaking out against the Vietnam War, King also turned his attentions back to the nation and in 1967 initiated the Poor People's Campaign, designed to recruit the poor of all races and backgrounds, train them in nonviolent techniques, and lead them in a protest designed to fight for greater economic rights. They were supposed to march on Washington, D.C., to begin a series of marches, sit-ins, rallies, and boycotts designed to disrupt the government so that they would pass antipoverty legislation. This movement was never fully realized, however, because on April 4th, 1968, while staying at a hotel in Memphis to plan a demonstration, he was assassinated on the hotel balcony.

News of his death was met with a myriad of reactions—in 150 cities, furious blacks rioted; world leaders praised him as a great man and a martyr; close friends and family determined to establish a permanent memorial on his behalf and succeeded in establishing his birthday as a national holiday—the only national holiday commemorating the birthday of a person from the 20th century. This holiday, as well as his published and collected speeches, essays and books and the profound changes he had effected in American society during his 12 years of working toward civil rights assured that his memory would live on.

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## King, Jr., Woodie

7/27/1937–

*Essays, short stories, anthologies, plays, scripts, drama criticism, autobiography/memoir; director, producer, actor, educator*

No matter what, King would be important to African-American theater for founding the Concept East Theatre (1960, with Ron Milner; manager and director until 1963), housed in a 100-seat Detroit bar; and the New Federal Theatre (1970) company, based in New York City. Perhaps more important, he made major contributions to the Black Arts Movement as an anthologist, producer, and director, as well as a shepherd to the careers of more than a few aspiring writers (e.g., Ntozake Shange, Ron Milner, Elaine Jackson, J. E. Franklin, Ed Bullins, Amiri Baraka). He has also taught at numerous universities (e.g., Yale, Penn State, Hunter College). He and his wife (since 1959), casting agent Willie Mae Washington, jointly produced three children: Michelle, W. (Woodie) Geoffrey, and Michael.

King adapted Langston Hughes’s poetry and short stories to the stage in *The Weary Blues* and *Simple’s Blues*, respectively, and he adapted Julian Mayfield’s novel to the big screen in *The Long Night* (1970). He also wrote and directed a documentary film (*The Black Theatre Movement: “A Raisin in the Sun” to the Present*, 1979), and he has written original movie scripts (*The Torture of Mothers*, 1980; *Death of a Prophet*, 1982) and television scripts (e.g., for *Sanford and Son*). His approach to writing and directing dramas: “We give the audience a lot

of fun—and let the message sneak up on them” (quoted in *CAO-01*).

King has contributed many short stories and drama-criticism pieces to numerous periodicals, and some of his own short stories have appeared in the anthologies of others (e.g., Langston Hughes), but he is better known for editing outstanding anthologies of other writers’ works, including *A Black Quartet: Four One-Act Plays* (1971), *Black Drama Anthology* (1972/1986, with Ron Milner), *Black Poets and Prophets: The Theory, Practice, and Esthetics of the Pan-Africanist Revolution* (1972, with Earl Anthony), *Black Short Story Anthology* (1972), *Black Spirits: A Festival of New Black Poets in America* (1972), *The Forerunners: Black Poets in America* (1975, with Addison Gale and Dudley Randall), *New Plays for the Black Theatre* (1989), *The National Black Drama Anthology: Eleven Plays from America’s Leading African-American Theaters* (1996), and *Voices of Color: 50 Scenes and Monologues by African American Playwrights* (2000). King has published two retrospective views of his experiences in the theater: his essay collection, *Black Theater: Present Condition* (1981) and his notebook/memoir, *The Impact of Race: Theatre and Culture* (2003). In 1997, he was given an Obie Award for Sustained Achievement, and in 2003, he was given a Paul Robeson Award. He has also been inducted into the American Theater Hall of Fame (2011).

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## Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press

1981–1992

*Publisher of books by, about, and for African-American feminists and other feminists of non-European-American descent, particularly including lesbians*

The Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press can directly trace its roots to the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), which led twins Beverly and Barbara Smith and their associate Demita Frazier to cofound the Combahee River Collective (CRC). Barbara Smith later recalled an early or mid-October 1980 phone conversation with poet Audre Lorde, CRC member and Barbara's friend, in which Lorde said, "We really need to do something about publishing" (quoted in //en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitchen\_Table:\_Women\_of\_Color\_Press).

By Halloween weekend, Barbara Smith had called together a group of feminists of color, who met with her in Boston. This meeting led to the cofounding of Kitchen Table:Women of Color Press, which claims to be the first publisher owned and operated by American women of color and dedicated to publishing their literary and critical works. The cofounders have since been identified as Rosie Alvarez, Helena Byard, Leota Lone Dog, Alma Gomez, Hattie Gossett, Audre Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, Ana Oliveira, Smith, and Susan Yung.

When Smith left the University of Massachusetts at Boston, she took the Press with her to New York. (On most of the Press's publications, it lists its location as Latham, New York, near Albany.) Among the first three publications of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press were three groundbreaking anthologies still considered to be landmarks: Alma Gómez and Cherríe Moraga's *Cuentos: Stories by Latinas* (1983); Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1984, 2nd ed.; originally published by Persephone Press in 1981); and Barbara Smith's *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983; reprinted by Rutgers University Press, 2000).

In addition to these books, in 1986, Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press published its Freedom Organizing Pamphlet Series, including Combahee River Collective's *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (No. 1), Audre Lorde and Merle Woo's *Apartheid U.S.A. / Freedom Organizing in the Eighties* (No. 2), Audre Lorde's *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities* (No. 3), Barbara Omolade's *It's a Family Affair: The Real Lives of Black Single Mothers* (No. 4), Angela Y. Davis's *Violence Against Women and the Ongoing Challenge to Racism*

(No. 5), and Merle Woo's *Our Common Enemy, Our Common Cause: Freedom Organizing in the Eighties*.

Other press publications include Cheryl Clarke's *Narratives: Poems in the Tradition of Black Women* (1983); Mila D. Aguilar's *A Comrade Is as Precious as a Rice Seedling* (1987); Mitsuye Yamada's *Desert Run: Poems and Stories and Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* (both 1988), and *Camp Notes and Other Poems* (1992); Gloria T. Hull's *Healing Heart: Poems, 1973–1988* (1989); and Audre Lorde's *Need: A Chorale for Black Woman Voices* (1990).

Audre Lorde died in 1992, and the Press became inactive soon after. Barbara Smith turned her attention to politics and other concerns, later becoming a member of the city council of Albany, New York.

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**Further Reading:** See also Combahee River Collective (CRC) and anthologies of African-American literature, written by and for heterosexual or lesbian women.

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## Knight, Etheridge

4/19/1931–3/10/1991

*Poems, anthology; magazine editor, educator*

One of seven children in an impoverished family, Etheridge dropped out of school at age 14 and hung out with older men and other adolescent males in pool halls, bars, and juke joints. Although he learned few or no marketable vocational skills in that environment, he did learn the distinctly African-American craft of *toasting*: long, humorous, rhyming oratory, requiring great verbal competence and skill—as well as a little audience participation. As a youth, his oratorical skills may have earned him the respect of his peers in

the juke joints, but they didn't win him any honest means of earning a living. In 1947, when Etheridge was 16 years old, he pursued one of the only legitimate means of livelihood available to him in the segregated South: the deadly career of soldier—and he joined the U.S. Army.

In the juke joints, Knight had learned to use alcohol and other drugs, and his service career didn't teach him to stop that use. At first, he was a medical technician in the Korean War and learned about the appropriate uses for pharmaceuticals. After he suffered a shrapnel wound, however, he was given narcotics to treat the pain of his wound, and he eventually became addicted to narcotics.

When he was discharged from the service, he rambled from city to city frequently, often staying in Indianapolis, Indiana, but never for long at a time. His drug addiction, his lack of education, and his restlessness made steady work virtually impossible for him, and in 1960, he was arrested for robbery and sentenced to prison. While in prison, Knight started educating himself, reading the poetry of Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), as well as the traditional poetry of the Anglo-American tradition and the poetry of Greece, China, ancient Rome, and Japan—especially haiku.

Knight also started to draw on the verbal skills he had developed in his youth. Soon, he was writing poems, and such noteworthy poets as Gwendolyn Brooks, Dudley Randall, and Sonia Sanchez recognized his talent. Their receptivity to his work may have been aided by the times in which he was imprisoned. The 1960s was a time of tremendous political foment for prison reform, for civil rights, and for black power. For instance, the flickering flames of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X came to full brightness—and were extinguished. By the time Knight's sentence was up for parole review, Gwendolyn Brooks had visited him in prison and Dudley Randall's Broadside Press was in the process of publishing his *Poems from Prison*.

In 1968, Knight was released from prison, although he was not freed from his habitual use of alcohol and other drugs. (In fact, for the rest of his life, he intermittently incarcerated himself in Veterans' Administration hospitals to undergo treatment attempting to free himself from drugs.) Soon after his release, the high school dropout Etheridge Knight was invited to hold academic

positions at a few different universities, and he met and married Sonia Sanchez. Despite his newfound success, Knight was unable to control his drug addiction, and the marriage to Sanchez disintegrated as a result.

About a year after divorcing Sanchez, Knight married Mary Ann Mc Anally, with whom he had two children. The peripatetic Knight continued moving from city to city (in Minnesota, Missouri, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and his most-frequent home state, Indiana). A frequent contributor to magazines, he also served as magazine editor (of *Motive* and of *New Letters*) on occasion. During the 1970s, he also got to know and mutually respect several contemporary white male poets, such as Robert Bly, Galway Kinnell, and James Wright, and he was frequently invited to give poetry recitations (not readings, as he could movingly recite long works without glancing at the text). By 1978, Knight's marriage to Mc Anally had dissolved, and in December of that year, Knight married Charlene Blackburn, with whom he had a son.

As a leading voice of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Knight rejected the traditional techniques and themes of lyrical verse. In terms of techniques, he used free verse, highly graphic street language, jazzy and bluesy rhythms, and unconventional punctuation in his works. Although he often wrote of love (sexual, as well as familial or companionate), his poetic themes frequently centered on the experiences of a black man in a racist society, oppressed by racial segregation but uplifted by a rich African-American cultural heritage. He often talked of imprisonment, particularly focusing on incarceration, but also in terms of the constraints of slavery, poverty, and racism. Using the prison as a metaphor, he even acknowledged his own self-imposed imprisonment due to his addiction to drugs. Other common themes in his work included sex, families, violence, and African-American identity.

His writings on imprisonment influenced not only the literary world of the Black Arts Movement, but also the very down-to-earth world of the inmates of the Attica Penitentiary. Many have said that his writings helped shape the thoughts and actions of the prisoners who staged a revolt in Attica in the 1970s. His great prestige rarely earned him financial rewards, however, and he and his

family usually lived in—or very near—poverty. He was, nonetheless, well received among white and black audiences. In 1972, he was given a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and in 1974, he was awarded Guggenheim Fellowship. Although he spoke in a distinctively African-American voice, he clearly acknowledged that much of what he said applied to the experiences and emotions of both blacks and whites.

Knight's first volume of verse, *Poems from Prison* (1968), clearly emerges from his experiences as a toastmaster and is probably his best-known work. His *Belly Song and Other Poems* (1973) diverges from the prison theme and includes many poems on love and ancestry. In his title poem "Belly Song," he speaks of how love's pain and passion is centered in the belly. Often considered his finest work, this collection earned him nominations for both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. In his 1980 collection, *Born of a Woman: New and Selected Poems*, he acknowledges the role women have played in his life, turning him toward life-affirming expressions and away from life-threatening outlets. Perhaps his most outstanding poem in the collection is "The Stretching of the Belly," in which he observes that his wife's scars (stretch marks) appear as evidence of the growing life within her, whereas the scars on black men's bodies show evidence of violence, such as war (and slavery). In 1986, he published *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (1986), which features many of the poems from each of his previous poetry collections, embracing topics from freedom to family.

In addition to his poetry, Knight published the anthology *Black Voices from Prison* (1970), which includes not only his own poems about his prison experiences, but also the poetic and prose writings of many other male prisoners. Ironically, given all of Knight's addictions, the addiction that killed him was cigarettes: He died at age 59 from lung cancer.

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## Komunyakaa, Yusef (né James Willie Brown, Jr.)

4/29/1947–

*Poems; educator*

When Komunyakaa won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1994, he grabbed the attention of the literary world, but his love of words had started decades earlier. When Komunyakaa was a child, his mother fostered his love of reading, buying a set of encyclopedia for him at a grocery store in Bogalusa, Louisiana. His grandmother later remembered, "He was always reading something or writing something" (quoted in *Black Biography*). As a young teenager, he read all the sonorous verses of the Bible—twice. At age 16, he discovered James Baldwin's essay collection *Nobody Knows My Name*, which inspired him to try his own hand at writing. His first verses were modeled on the British poets he had heard in school. At some point, James Willie realized that his name did not adequately reflect his cultural heritage. He recollected family lore that his great grandparents had been forced to give up their surname Komunyakaa when they arrived here from Trinidad, so James Willie Brown, Jr., renamed himself Yusef Komunyakaa.

After high school, Komunyakaa moved to Phoenix, started working on an assembly line, and joined the U.S. Army. In early 1969, his daughter, Kimberly Ann, was born, and within a month, he was shipped to Vietnam, taking along two books of poetry. There, he reported from the battlefield, was awarded a Bronze Star, and edited *The Southern Cross*, a military newspaper. He later recalled, "Vietnam helped me to look at the horror and terror in the hearts of people and realize how we can't aim guns and set booby traps for people we have never spoken a word to. That kind of impersonal violence mystifies me" (quoted in *Black Biography*).

Disillusioned, Komunyakaa returned home and completed a baccalaureate (University of

Colorado, 1975) and two master's degrees (Colorado State University, 1979; University of California at Irvine, 1980). Meanwhile, he footed the bill to self-publish his first two poetry collections, *Dedications and Other Darkhorses* (1977) and *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory* (1979/2006). University presses and other small presses published his other early poetry collections, including *Copacetic* (1984), *I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head* (1986), *Toys in a Field* (1986), *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), *February in Sydney* (1989), *Magic City* (1992), *Neon Vernacular* (1994, the Pulitzer winner), *Thieves of Paradise* (1998, nominated for the National Book Award), *Scandalize My Name: Selected Poems* (2002), and *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems, 1975–1999* (2001). The prestigious Farrar, Straus, & Giroux has published many of his subsequent collections, such as *Talking Dirty to the Gods* (2000), *Taboo: The Wishbone Trilogy, Part I* (2004), *Warhorses: Poems* (2008), *The Chameleon Couch* (2011), and *The Emperor of Water Clocks* (2015).

Komunyakaa also works well with others. Radiclan Clytus edited an eclectic collection of Komunyakaa's work in *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries (Poets on Poetry)* (2000). Komunyakaa collaborated with Chad Gracia to dramatically adapt the ancient Sumerian epic, *Gilgamesh: A Verse Play* (published in 2006; performed in 2008). He also collaborated with photographer Tyagan Miller to create the large-format *Covenant: Scenes from an African American Church* (2007). In addition, Komunyakaa edited an issue of *Ploughshares: Poems and Stories* (Spring 1997), *Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991, with Sascha Feinstein), *Second Set (The Jazz Poetry Anthology, Vol 2)* (1996, with Sascha Feinstein), and *The Best American Poetry 2003* (series editor David Lehman).

In addition to his Pulitzer, Komunyakaa has won two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1981, 1987), the second annual \$50,000 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award (1994), and other poetry awards. He was also elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets (1999). He was elected as a 2016 American Academy of Arts and Sciences fellow. Komunyakaa has supported his poetry habit through teaching, first in the New Orleans public schools (1984–1985) and at the University of New Orleans (1984–1985), then at Indiana University in Bloomington (1985–1996), despite absences to teach at the University

of California at Berkeley (1992) and at Washington University in St. Louis (1996). In 1997, he started teaching creative writing at Princeton University, which he left to become Professor and Distinguished Senior Poet at New York University.

Though Komunyakaa's poetry has been considered brilliantly radiant, his love life has been darkly tragic: He married Australian fiction writer Mandy Jane Sayer (1985–1995), whom he later divorced. He was later involved with poet Reetika Vazirani, with whom he had a son, Jahan Vazirani Komunyakaa (2001), but she apparently killed herself and their son in 2003.

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## Kweli, Talib (né Talib Kweli Greene)

10/3/1975–

*Poems, spoken word—rap, hip-hop; performer, social activist, bookstore co-owner*

Kweli's parents, an English professor and a sociology professor, named their son *Talib*, Arabic for "seeker" or "student," *Kweli*, Swahili for "truth or knowledge," Greene. While still in high school, Kweli met Dante Smith, better known now as actor and rapper Mos Def, who encouraged Kweli's rapping. While still in his teens, Kweli met Tony Cottrell, better known as DJ [disc jockey] Hi-Tek. Later, DJ Hi-Tek invited Kweli to emcee some tracks on Hi-Tek's 1997 album *Doom* with Hi-Tek's rap group Mood. Soon afterward, Kweli and Hi-Tek formed the duo Reflection Eternal and recorded *Fortified Live* (1997). The following year, the duo became a

trio when they invited Mos Def to join them, re-naming themselves Black Star, and putting out an album labeled simply *Black Star* (1998). Their highly acclaimed album offered an alternative to gangsta rap or hip-hop versions of popular songs. They even captured some mainstream attention for their emphasis on rhythms, rhymes, and real life. The highly popular Dave Chappelle's Show invited the whole group and individual members of the group onto his show numerous times, and Chappelle and Kweli have since become friends.

The following year (1999), Kweli and Mos Def bought Nkiru, the oldest African-American-owned bookstore in Brooklyn, but Mos Def soon struck out on his own as an artist, releasing his debut solo album, *Black on Both Sides* (1999), and then moving away from rapping and toward acting. Kweli and Hi-Tek revived their Reflection Eternal duo and released a second album, *Reflection Eternal* (2000), which went gold, but it earned the duo more critical acclaim than money. Next, Kweli made his own solo album, *Quality* (2002), which also included some tracks with up-and-coming artists such as Kanye West. This album, too, earned more respect and admiration than money, but it, too, sold enough to go gold.

Two years later, Kweli released his second solo album, *The Beautiful Struggle* (2004), which included lyrics featuring his trademark social-political commentary. Soon after, Kweli created his own record label, Blacksmith Records (distributed by Warner Bros. Records). His label released his third solo album, *Right About Now: The Official Sucka Free Mix CD* (2005), then he collaborated with producer Madlib to create a digital-only album, *Liberation*

(2006). Next, Blacksmith released Kweli's *Ear Drum* (2007) album. His other solo albums are *Gutter Rainbows* (2011), *Prisoner of Conscious* (2013), *Gravitas* (2013), *Fuck the Money* (2015), and *Radio Silence* (2017). Reuniting with Hi-Tek as Reflection Eternal, Kweli released *Revolutions Per Minute* in 2010. He's also collaborated with the singer Res, as Idle Warship, on *Habits of the Heart* (2011), with beatmaker 9th Wonder on *Indie 500* (2015), and with the MC Styles P on *The Seven* (2017).

Through collaborations with Chappelle, Mos Def, West, and others, and appearances on television (e.g., on MTV's *Wild 'N Out* and *MADE*), Kweli has promoted his own work.

Kweli's more personal collaborations include having a son and a daughter with Brooklyn-based novelist Darcel Turner, and marrying DJ Equé in 2009.

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