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### "Notable African American Writers" Book Review

M. Elaine Hughes

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help fill a need in what is currently a hot area of study and is a much better purchase than any of the single-volume efforts released over the past few years.—Craig Shufelt, Director, Fort McMurray Public Library, Alberta, Canada

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**Notable African American Writers.** Ed. by the Editors of Salem Press. Magill's Choice. Pasadena, Calif.: Salem, 2006. 3 vols. acid free \$207 (ISBN 1-58765-272-2).

The scope of *Notable African American Writers* is coverage of "eighty great novelists, poets, playwrights, short-story writers, and writers of nonfiction from Colonial America to today" (vii). Its purpose is "to help readers to better understand the experience of African Americans and provide an opportunity to examine African American literary culture across history from poet Phillis Wheatley (1753) to playwright Susan Lori Parks (1963)" (vii).

Sixty-eight of the essays in these volumes originally appeared in other Salem Press sets: *Critical Survey of Drama* (2003), *Critical Survey of Poetry* (2003), *Critical Survey of Short Fiction* (2001), and *Critical Survey of Long Fiction* (2000). Only twelve essays were commissioned specifically for *Notable African American Writers*: those on Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Alex Haley, Virginia Hamilton, Martin Luther King Jr., Nella Larsen, Terry McMillan, Walter Dean Myers, Gordon Parks Sr., Booker T. Washington, and Cornel West.

Those readers familiar with Magill's literary criticism series of books will find the layout of this three-volume set instantly recognizable. Magill's is known for its precise layout: author's name, major genre, place of birth, place of death, chronological listing of the works, achievements, biography, and finally the analysis of the author's literary career as well as an annotated bibliography at the end of each article.

Among the titles classified by the Library of Congress with the subject heading: American Literature—African American Authors—Dictionaries, this set is a much better buy in comparison with other familiar titles, such as Shari Hatch's *African American Writers: A Dictionary* (ABC-Clío, 2000); Valerie Smith's *African American Writers* (Scribner, 2001) and Philip Bader's *A to Z of African Americans: African American Writers* (Facts On File, 2004). *Notable African American Writers* adds so much more value.

For the purposes of comparison, I took a look at the coverage of one author, Jean Toomer (1894–1967), a well-known writer who is covered in each set. Each of the three comparison titles includes the name and birth and death dates at the beginning of the entry. Similarities fall off dramatically after that.

Both Hatch's *African American Writers: A Dictionary* and Bader's *A to Z of African Americans* go right into Toomer's life and intersperse it with his literary contributions. They both devote around two to three pages to the author and provide references or further reading without annotations. So for an abbreviated treatment of Jean Toomer, look to these titles.

Smith's *African American Writers* devotes most of its pages to an analysis of Toomer's book, *Cane* (Harper, 1923), choos-

ing not to spend its time analyzing Toomer's lesser known works as *Notable African American Writers* does. For an in-depth analysis of the author's life and how he came to his life's work, consult *African American Writers*.

*Notable African American Authors* offers a much better layout of the main facts about an author's work and breaks it down into genres. After an analysis of the author's major achievements and a short biography, the genre is identified (for example, short fiction) with an analysis of each of the author's major works within that genre. In addition, *Notable African American Writers* gives the researcher an added bonus in volume three: four overview essays on the African American writer's contribution to the various literary genres.

For the more extensive and precise treatment of the author and his major works, consult first *Notable African American Writers* and if that title is not available, then Smith's *African American Writers* as a second choice. I highly recommend *Notable African American Writers* for large academic and public libraries.—M. Elaine Hughes, *African American Studies Liaison Librarian, Georgia State University, Atlanta*

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**Notable Latino Writers.** Ed. by the Editors of Salem Press. Magill's Choice series. Pasadena, Calif.: Salem, 2006. 3 vols. acid free \$207 (ISBN 1-58765-243-9).

*Notable Latino Writers* recompiles 122 essays on Latino authors, most previously included in Magill's *Cyclopedia of World Authors*, 4th revised ed. (2004), and in several other Salem titles. The current work stands out for its use of a distinctively broad definition of Latino, used "to refer to authors living in the Americas who speak—or descend from those who spoke—any romance (hence 'Latin') language, as well as those of Latin American descent living in the United States..." (vii). In addition to U.S. Latino writers, the set covers some of the best-known authors from Latin American countries (including Brazil) and historical periods from the colonial to the twenty-first century. The main criterion for the inclusion of a Latin-American writer is that significant works are commonly available in English.

Arranged alphabetically, each entry contains a brief biography, quotations from representative works, and a partial list of the author's works by genre in both the original language and English translation. Many entries include photographs or portraits of the author. Volume 3 contains seven overview essays on Latin American and Latino literary genres (drama, long and short fiction, poetry), a list of some four hundred-plus Latino authors not covered in the work, a bibliography of secondary sources, and an excellent annotated listing of electronic resources for Latin American and Latino literary research. Several indexes allow users to find material by genre, country, chronology, title, and subject.

*Notable Latino Writers* is a useful compilation for the subject area and makes no claims to being comprehensive, but it also does not provide the reader with any idea of its selection criteria, other than that the authors' works be available in English. This is certainly problematic in an area of literary