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# REVIEWS

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Emmanuel S. Nelson, ed. *Contemporary African American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999. 530p.

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Nelson has edited several volumes similar in structure to the one currently under review: *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (1998), *Modern Irish Writers: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (1997), *Latin American Writers on Gay and Lesbian Themes: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (1994), *Contemporary Gay American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (1993), and *Writers of the Indian Diaspora: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (1993). The generally favorable reviews of these sourcebooks indicate that the most important function they serve is in introducing scholars and students to writers whose work has not been widely read. The newest addition to his sourcebook oeuvre, *Contemporary African American Novelists: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, continues this tradition, offering biographical, critical, and bibliographical material on 79 black writers (41 of them women), ranging from the famous — Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, James Baldwin — to the lesser known — Philip Lewis, William Melvin Kelley, Bebe Moore Campbell.

The most problematic aspect of the text is the unevenness among the entries in depth of scholarship, style, and tone. A more thorough and careful editing of the individual entries was needed in order to present a polished whole. At the root of this unevenness is the variety of scholars submitting entries, which range from professors at research institutions to graduate students — of the 79 entries, 21 are written by doctoral candidates or graduate students. The entries average about five to seven pages per author.

The tone of the entries ranges widely. For example, Eberhard Alsen's summary of Toni Morrison's work is preachy and plot-based. He sums up *Sula* by noting that "Sula comes across as a character whose life is a cautionary tale and the novel affirms the values that are the opposite of Sula's" (336). This seems a rather simple and dismissive judgment of one of Morrison's most complex works and characters. Balancing this rather too facile account of Morrison's novels is the beautiful assessment of Alice Walker's writing by Molly Roden, who weaves her way through

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Walker's novels focusing on common themes and on her intellectual and artistic development regarding issues of patriarchy, colonialism, and Christianity.

Some entries can be faulted for what they leave out. For example, the entry on Terry McMillan by Rita Dandridge mentions the short story McMillan published in *Breaking Ice*, but doesn't note that McMillan edited this important collection of African American short fiction. Kimberly M. Brown's discussion of June Jordan focuses on her novel for young adults, *His Own Where*, only very briefly mentioning Jordan's work as a poet and activist. While the focus of Nelson's text is on novelists, it seems necessary to contextualize a discussion of Jordan's prose with comments about her extensive poetic and political publications.

And then, the text omits some important novelists altogether. There are no entries for Amiri Baraka, for instance, who, like Jordan, isn't known as a novelist, but has novels in print, or for Rosa Guy, who has published several novels for young adults. Also, the definition of "African American" that the text employs may be too limited, as it also excludes powerful contemporary novelists like Edwidge Danticat and Lucille Clifton.

The bibliographic sections of the entries are as uneven as the biographical and critical sections. Some list exhaustive and current publications by and about the author; others fall short of the mark. For example, the entry on Frank Garvin Yerby by Louis Hill Pratt lists only Yerby's "best-selling novels," naming only 12 of his 33 works. The entries under "Studies of Paule Marshall" exclude some important publications on Marshall's works that could be easily found in a search of the MLA on-line database. Mary Ellen Quinn, who reviewed the book for *Booklist*, noted that "the bibliography for Alice Walker ends unaccountably in 1992."

The strength of the text is that it brings together in one easily accessible volume a survey of a wide selection of black American writers, many of whom are little known. It provides students and scholars of African American literature a good place to start their research on these writers whose literary reputation is obscure. But there are other sources that would be at least as effective for better known writers, including *Gale's Contemporary Authors*, the volumes on black writers in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, the on-line "Voices From the Gap" homepage for women writers (<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/>), and the "Writing and Resistance" homepage (<http://www.public.asu.edu/~metro/afit/authors.html>). Although this volume may serve as a useful introduction to some lesser known African American novelists, the unevenness of its scholarship, style, and tone mar its value for other purposes. ✽