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Dorothy West: Biography

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Dorothy West (1909-1998)

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(Dorothy Mary Christopher West)

Novelist, Story-writer, Autobiographer,
Essayist, Letter-writer/ Diarist, Librettist,
Travel writer.

Active 1927-1998 in Russia, United States

Although most reports on Dorothy West's life list her birth year as 1907, she very likely was born in 1909, if one is to judge from the various printed reports on her attendance at the second *Opportunity* magazine literary awards banquet. It was in April 1926 that she traveled from Boston to New York with her cousin Helene Johnson, who was nineteen, to be honored with second prize for her story "The

Typewriter” in the *Opportunity* magazine literary contest (a prized she shared with Zora Neale Hurston's short story “Muttsy”). West was just under seventeen years of age and a recent high school graduate. This gathering of African American writers, including Countee Cullen, Arna Bontemps, and Waring Cuney had to be immensely exciting for the young West, as this was a time of optimism and promise among the rising New Negro/Harlem Renaissance era writers. In August 1998, the end of Dorothy West's life also signaled the end of the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance era, as she was the last of its writers. West's last book, *The Wedding*, was begun in the late 1940s and published in 1995.

Dorothy West, an only child, was born 2 June 1909 in Boston, Massachusetts. She was the daughter of Isaac Christopher West and Rachel Pease Benson West. Isaac West, who was significantly older than his wife, was born into slavery and, as a child, gained his freedom upon passage of the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Rachel Pease Benson, whose mother's red hair was the same color as that of the man to whom Rachel's mother had been enslaved, moved to Boston from Camden, South Carolina at the age of

fifteen. Isaac West wanted to name his daughter Mary. His wife, Rachel, disagreed, yet could not decide between the names Dorothy or Elsie, so she allowed the census recorder to decide; he chose Dorothy. Rachel West apparently was determined to position her family among the exiguous circle of successful, black, upper-middle-class families in Boston, as her husband, Isaac, owned a wholesale fruit business in the Boston Market.

Apparently a precocious child, Dorothy West entered school at the age of five and later attended the prestigious Girls' Latin School in Boston. She also studied at Boston University as well as at the Columbia University School of Journalism. West reports that she was drawn to literature as a result of the pride her father took in her writing and through her mother's storytelling. West's mother also provided this writer with the fuel for an ironic approach to the issues of gender, race, class, and color-consciousness, which inform much of her writing. As a teenaged secondary school student and before traveling to New York, Dorothy West's story "Promise and Fulfillment" won for her the top prize in the *Boston Post* literary contest—a prize for which she would become a regular recipient.

For more than seventy years following her introduction into the circle of black writers in Harlem, Dorothy West lived a writer's life, which was briefly interspersed with periods of employment including work as an extra in Du Bose and Dorothy Heyward's stage play (based on Du Bose Heyward's novel) *Porgy*. (West went on the road with the cast and traveled to London in 1929). West also worked as a welfare investigator, a clerk at the *Vineyard Gazette*, and a cashier in a restaurant on Martha's Vineyard. West's father was among the first African Americans to purchase a vacation home in the Oak Bluffs, one of the villages on this exclusive island. Oak Bluffs is the setting—fictionalized as the Oval—of West's last novel *The Wedding*.

Dorothy West's literary life included her membership in the 1920s in the Saturday Evening Quill Club, an African American writers' group. Some of her stories were published in their magazine, *The Saturday Evening Quill*. From the mid-1920s forward, Dorothy West also could be found among Harlem's literati, as she—through a character named Doris Westmore—is depicted in Wallace Thurman's 1932 roman à clef *Infants of the Spring*. In 1932, West joined a group of

black writers and artists, including Langston Hughes among others, who traveled to the Soviet Union as part of a film project sponsored by the Fellowship of Peace. The film, titled *Black and White*, was supposed to address race relations in the United States, but was never completed. After the project was abandoned, West remained in the Soviet Union until 1933. For a short time in the 1930s, Dorothy West also worked in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration Federal Writers' Project. Throughout the 1930s, she published stories in *Opportunity*, *Messenger*, as well as in her own literary magazines, *Challenge* and *New Challenge*, where she sometimes used the pen names Mary Christopher and Jane Isaac. In 1934, West started her own literary magazine *Challenge* (1934-37), with the objective of nurturing post-Harlem Renaissance literary talent such as Margaret Walker, Ralph Ellison, Pauli Marshall, Sterling Brown, and William Attaway, all of whom she published in her magazines. Dorothy West joined with Richard Wright and Marian Minus in 1937 in an effort to revive her literary magazine. The publication of *New Challenge*, which lasted one edition, was the result of their joint effort.

Beginning in 1940 and continuing through the 1960s, Dorothy West wrote short stories for the *New York Daily*. West reports that her implicit agreement to avoid references to color resulted in the paper's regular publication of her stories and secured for her an income. Dorothy West placed a high value in the short story genre and used them to work through and re-work important themes. For example, West writes a number of her stories from the innocent perspective of a child through whose eyes West returns to her readers the contradictions that children learn from adult examples. West's stories and novels often focus on black middle-class characters and ironise their empty bourgeois striving as well as their absurd color-consciousness. And while her writing is concerned with intra-group issues relating to class and color, a compelling issue in her writing is gender. Indeed a recurrent character in her fiction and personal sketches is the repressed female who dreams of, or connives to achieve, a position of power for herself. This is often a Pyrrhic victory.

From the 1960s into the 1990s, Dorothy West contributed occasional pieces to the *Vineyard Gazette*, including a weekly column on the social activities around Oak Bluffs, where West

resided year-round during the last half of her life. While there, she wrote both of her novels, *The Living Is Easy* (1948)—which takes its title from “Summertime,” Ira Gershwin and Du Bose Heyward's aria from the 1935 folk opera *Porgy and Bess*—and *The Wedding* (1995), as well as her collection of short stories, sketches, and memoirs, *The Richer, the Poorer* (1995).

At the end of her life, Dorothy West was hailed as the last living New Negro/Harlem Renaissance era writer, a distinction that produced an upsurge of interest in her writing and in her experiences as a member of this important group of black writers. She is the subject of a PBS film, *As I Remember It: A Portrait of Dorothy West*, as well as many articles. Her second novel, for which she received a grant in the 1940s from the Mary Roberts Rinehart foundation, was completed and published in 1995. West's editor for this novel was a fellow resident at Martha's Vineyard and the person to whom the novel is dedicated Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, about whom she says “Though there was never such a mismatched pair in appearance, we were perfect partners.” Dorothy West's novel *The Wedding* also was made into a television movie

produced by Oprah Winfrey. Approaching the ninth decade of her life Dorothy West continued to plan new projects. She had begun writing, "The White Tribe of Indians," a manuscript that focuses on the web of denials concerning ancestry among some African Americans. Her last project was an historical book on Oak Bluffs, the small black neighborhood at Martha's Vineyard.

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