

JOYCE CAROL THOMAS

(1938-)

Amy E. Earhart

BIOGRAPHY

Joyce Carol Thomas was born in Ponca, Oklahoma, on May 25, 1938. Thomas has returned to her birthplace and the experiences that occurred there throughout her career, using the town as a setting for her novels *Marked by Fire*, *Bright Shadow*, and *The Golden Pasture*. Her experiences working in the Oklahoma cotton fields, which delayed her entry to school each year, find their way into her work. In addition, Thomas learned much about language and storytelling from her family, friends, and community. She remembers the "porch sitters" in her hometown, the elders of the community who told and retold stories. Her experiences at church resound in the imagery, language, and rhythms of her writing. In fact, much of her work with language attempts to re-create the sounds of singing remembered from her childhood church experiences.

At ten, Thomas' family moved to Tracy, California, a rural town in the San Joaquin Valley. She fondly remembers the language of those who worked with her during the summers that she spent picking crops, including the language of Spanish-speaking migrant workers. Thomas comments, "I found foreign languages, the language of the church, and that of the Ponca and Tracy people to be a fitting foundation for writing." She continues, "The music of the word is what I want to create in my writing of books" ("Joyce," *Authors and Artists* 208).

Thomas completed a B.A. in Spanish and French at San Jose State University in 1966 and an M.A. in education at Stanford University in 1967. As she was working on her doctorate in education at Berkeley, she recognized that she had a talent for creative writing. Thomas has held various positions in education and English departments, including a full professorship in the Department of English

at the University of Tennessee. She has recently returned to Berkeley, California, and continues to write.

MAJOR WORKS AND THEMES

Thomas' work spans genres from young adult novels, to poetry, to plays. She states, "When I began to write novels, I still continued to write poems" ("Joyce," *Authors and Artists* 209). Her novels explore young adults' search to understand and come to terms with the joys and pains of life, as well as their desire to understand community, family, and identity. The novels utilize lyrical language, merge realism with the mystical, the natural with urban, and lovingly explore the life of the black community and church.

Her first novel, *Marked by Fire*, was highly acclaimed and brought comparisons to contemporary author Maya Angelou. The story begins a now-three-novel examination of Abyssinia Jackson, her family, and her community of Ponca City, Oklahoma, Thomas' hometown. Thomas creates sequential, dated, poetic vignettes to tell the story of Abyssinia, born in a cotton field and marked by an ember for a life of joy and pain. The novel follows Abyssinia's childhood joys experienced through music, community, and love, which are ruptured by her rape at age ten, forcing her violent entry into a confusing and painful adult life. Abyssinia retreats into muteness, and only through the strength of the community of Ponca City women does she fight the terrors, symbolized by the mad torture of Trembling Sally.

The sequel to *Marked by Fire* is *Bright Shadow*, which follows Abyssinia to college. Much like *Marked by Fire*, *Bright Shadow* emphasizes the need for Abyssinia to cope with the horrors of life through faith, hope, and love. After a dream of impending doom, Abyssinia discovers that her Aunt Serena has been brutally murdered and skinned alive by her mad husband, the Reverend Rufus Jordan. The loss of Aunt Serena, her best-loved aunt, leaves her devastated. After this brutal crime, she must also cope with the loss of Carl Lee Jefferson, her boyfriend, during the time in which Carl Lee leaves his abusive, alcoholic father and searches for his lost mother. Abyssinia learns, through these experiences, that with unspeakable joy comes unspeakable evil. The text emphasizes life's hope with nature's unusual signs: violets bloom in January, a cat leaves blooming flowers in its paw prints, and birds protect a young kitten. In addition, the text deals frankly with domestic violence, through both Aunt Serena's horrific marriage and the women's quilting gossip regarding an abused neighbor.

Water Girl expands Thomas' focus from Abyssinia to her extended family, as the main character, Amber Westbrook, discovers an old letter that exposes her cousin Abyssinia to be her mother. Amber embarks on a spiritual quest in the wilderness to understand the revelation. Through a vision and help from animals and music, she is able to reorganize her life. A strong female character, Amber is a tomboy who is an excellent hunter and outdoorswoman. Through Amber's

character, Thomas is also able to explore issues of colonization, prejudice, and genocide.

Thomas returns to Carl Lee Jefferson's story in *The Golden Pasture*, which chronicles the young Carl Lee's journey to an understanding of his father, Samuel Jefferson. Through a rescue of an injured Appaloosa horse and his rodeo grandfather's wisdom, Carl Lee moves from childhood to emerging manhood. Thomas fuses tall tales and folklore with magical events to produce a fanciful ending. Unlike her other novels, which focus on women's interaction, this is her only novel that focuses on men's communities; *The Golden Pasture* was written as a response to Thomas' son's request for a novel about boys.

Journey focuses on Meggie, blessed at birth by a tarantula, who finds herself at the center of a horrifying mystery. When Meggie stumbles upon one of the several teenagers killed in the Eucalyptus Forest, she embarks on an adventure that leads her to the center of a strange organ-harvesting plot. Meggie is a self-reliant, unafraid female character who bravely forces the resolution of the murders, remembering her Reverend's admonition to "[k]eep a light in your heart" (148). Thomas merges lyrical passages laden with refrains from religion and folklore with mystical spiders and protective animals to create a story that explores the life cycle. In addition, the story's subtext examines ingrained prejudices, intercultural violence, and the effect of both on children and adults.

When the Nightingale Sings, Thomas' most recent novel, follows the fantastic journey of a young girl, Marigold, and three adult sisters, who move from disjunction over an old love affair to a family reunion. Focusing on the search for a new Queen Mother Rhythm, the healing and blessing head gospel singer of the Rose of Sharon Baptist Church, Thomas merges descriptive written passages with extended gospel songs. Her characters, Marigold, the orphaned child, Anthony, Minister of Music, and River Rainbow and Sparrow Sunrise, Royal Runners, merge into the swamp in which the action occurs. The beautiful descriptions of the swamp and the blending of the birds with human characters, such as the nightingale with Marigold during her search for her singing voice and her position as the new Queen Mother Rhythm, help to aptly describe a young woman's coming-of-age. *When the Nightingale Sings* was also rewritten and performed as a musical play.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Joyce Carol Thomas' work has garnered generally positive critical responses and a variety of awards, including the American Book Award (now National Book Award) for *Marked by Fire* and the Coretta Scott King Award from the American Library Association for *Bright Shadow*. In addition, both *Marked by Fire* and *Bright Shadow* have become standard texts in many public schools. Critical discussions of Thomas' work have been limited to reviews of her texts and reference articles. Of her young adult fiction, *Marked by Fire* and *The Golden Pasture*

have received the most enthusiastic responses, with writers Maya Angelou, James Baldwin,* and Alice Childress,* among others, praising the novels. Reviews of her other novels have been mixed.

Critics consistently comment on Thomas' use of lyrical language. Carolyn Caywood, in a review of *Bright Shadow*, notes Thomas' "sensuously descriptive passages celebrating the physical beauty of the black characters" (90). Other critics praise Thomas' "delicate hand with language" (Davis 50) and her novel's "lyrical style grounded in black experience" (*Kirkus Reviews* 1410) and call her a "weaver of words" (*Publishers Weekly* 191).

Critics seem less comfortable with Thomas' mixture of reality and fantasy. Alice Childress, in a review of *Marked by Fire*, praises Thomas' ability to find "a marvelous fairy tale quality in everyday happenings" (38). But critics were less comfortable with the use of fantasy in *Journey*; for example, LaTronica notes, "This discordant mixture of fantasy and mystery is composed of too many elements that never blend successfully" (165).

Positive were responses to Thomas' treatment of black youths. *Kirkus Reviews* states that "Thomas has neatly integrated into it [the plot] a celebration of black youth" (1410). *Booklist* calls *Marked by Fire* a "lyrical celebration of black womanhood" that also "evokes[s] a vital sense of a rural black community as well as individuals within it" (754).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works by Joyce Carol Thomas

- Bittersweet*. Berkeley, CA: Firesign, 1973. (Poetry)
Crystal Breezes. Berkeley, CA: Firesign, 1974. (Poetry)
Blessing. Berkeley, CA: Jocato, 1975. (Poetry)
Look! What a Wonder! Berkeley Community Theatre, Berkeley, CA. 1976a. (Play)
A Song in the Sky. Montgomery Theater, San Francisco. 1976b. (Play)
Magnolia. Old San Francisco Opera House, San Francisco. 1977. (Play)
Ambrosia. Little Fox Theatre, San Francisco. 1978. (Play)
Black Child. New York: Zamani, 1981. (Poetry)
Inside the Rainbow. Palo Alto, CA: Zikawuna, 1982a. (Poetry)
Marked by Fire. New York: Avon, 1982b. (Novel)
Bright Shadow. New York: Avon, 1983. (Novel)
The Golden Pasture. New York: Scholastic, 1986a. (Novel)
The Water Girl. New York: Avon, 1986b. (Novel)
Journey. New York: Scholastic, 1988. (Novel)
Gospel Roots. California State University, Carson City. 1989a. (Play)
I Have Heard of a Land. Classen Theatre, Oklahoma City. 1989b. (Play)
 Ed. "Young Reverend Zelma Lee Moses." *A Gathering of Flowers: Stories about Being Young in America*. New York: HarperCollins, 1990. 99-134. (Short Story and Anthology Editor)
When the Nightingale Sings. Clarence Brown Theatre, University of Tennessee, Knoxville. 1991. (Play)

- When the Nightingale Sings*. New York: HarperCollins, 1992. (Novel)
Brown Honey in Broomwheat Tea. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. (Poetry)
Gingerbread Days. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. (Poetry)

Studies of Joyce Carol Thomas

- Caywood, Carolyn. Rev. of *Bright Shadow*. *School Library Journal* 30.5 (1984): 89-90.
 Childress, Alice. Rev. of *Marked by Fire*. *New York Times Book Review* (18 April 1982): 38.
 Davis, Thulani. Rev. of *Bright Shadow*. *Essence* 14.12 (1984): 50.
 Estes, Sally. *Booklist* 82.12 (1986): 861-62.
 "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Authors and Artists for Young Adults*. Ed. Kevin S. Hill. Vol. 12. Detroit: Gale, 1994. 205-13.
 "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Black Writers*. Ed. Sharon Malinowski. 2d ed. Detroit: Gale, 1994. 614-16.
 "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*. Ed. Pamela S. Dear. Vol. 48. Detroit: Gale, 1995. 439-43.
 "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Daniel G. Marowski. Vol. 35. Detroit: Gale, 1985. 405-7.
 "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Inter/View: Talks with America's Writing Women*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman and Katherine Henderson. Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1990. 125-31.
 "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Literary Criticism Series: Children's Literature Review*. Ed. Gerard J. Senick. Vol. 19. Detroit: Gale, 1990. 219-23.
 "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Meet the Authors*. Ed. Debbie Kovacs. New York: Scholastic Professional Books, 1995. 92-95.
 "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Something about the Author*. Ed. Joyce Nakamura. Vol. 40. Detroit: Gale, 1986. 208-9.
 "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Women Writers of the West Coast*. Ed. Marilyn Yalom. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra, 1983. 31-39.
 LaTronica, Starr. Rev. of *Journey*. *School Library Journal* 35.2 (1988): 165.
 Raburn, Josephine. "Bright Shadow." *Masterpieces of African-American Literature*. Ed. Frank N. Magill. New York: HarperCollins, 1992. 79-82.
 ———. "Marked by Fire." *Masterpieces of African-American Literature*. Ed. Frank N. Magill. New York: HarperCollins, 1992. 285-88.
 Rev. of *The Golden Pasture*. *Publishers Weekly* 230.4 (1996): 191.
 Rev. of *Journey*. *Kirkus Reviews* 56.18 (1988): 1410.
 Rev. of *Marked by Fire*. *Booklist* 78.12 (1982): 754.
 Toombs, Charles P. "Joyce Carol Thomas." *Dictionary of Literary Biography: Afro-American Fiction Writers after 1955*. Ed. Thadious M. Davis and Trudier Harris. Vol. 33. Detroit: Gale, 1984. 245-50.