

Spotlight on seven southern authors

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U.S. African American women writers have entertained and enlightened readers since *Religion and Moral*, a collection of poems, by Phillis Wheatley was published in 1773.

In honor of Women's History Month, let's give a shout out, louder please, to our most read writers: Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison, and let's mention several high earning writers: Terry McMillan, Teri Woods, and Zane.

African American women have boldly and meticulously added our unique experiences via storytelling, plays, and literature to the pages of history.

Mentioned here are seven southern authors Unita Blackwell, Billie Jean Young, Shirley Sherrod, Carol Zippert, Darlene Collier, Ty A. Patterson, and Starkishia who stood up, fought back, refused to be silent, picked up the pieces, and spoke up for themselves and the powerless.

ONE. Unita Blackwell, coauthor of *Barefootin' Life Lessons from the Road to Freedom*, was born in Lula, Mississippi, on March 18, 1933. Her given name was U.Z. Brown. Naming a child with initials was a common practice during the Great Depression, but U.Z.'s teacher had a feeling the darkest and tallest girl in school was going to be something one day, and suggested U.Z.'s mother, Virdie Mae, change her name to Unita.

No significant changes occurred in U.Z.'s life after her name change. She worked in the fields with her family during planting and harvesting season, and went to school a few months during the year. Though she picked 300 pounds of cotton a day, she walked barefoot most days just as slaves, who were annually rationed one pair of shoes, had done two previous generations. Her parents could only afford to buy each family member one pair of shoes when patching and shoe repair was unachievable.

During the summer of 1964, two SNCC workers spoke to members of Unita and her husband Jeremiah



Unita Blackwell

Blackwell's church, and challenged them to register to vote so they could elect people to office who would make life better for them. Jeremiah and Unita stood up tall that day in church. The next day, Mr. Wilkerson, who owned the farm where Mr. and Mrs. Blackwell worked, told him they were not welcomed on his farm anymore since they had taken up with outside agitators.

"The man" ended their cotton picking days, and there was no stopping Unita after that. SNCC Chairman Stokely Carmichael heard about Unita's outspokenness and recruited her to become a field organizer. She recruited others, organized meeting, marched, sang, laughed, and cried. Even though her family were forced to sleep on the floor because local Klan members often drove by and shot in her house, Unita kept moving and advocating justice for her people. She helped lead the path for black politicians in Mississippi. She helped form the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. In 1968, she lost her Justice of the Peace election bid. But in 1976, she was elected mayor of Mayersville, becoming the first black female mayor in the state.

Yes indeed, U.Z. who grew up poor without any representation from her local government, ending up opening doors, running a Mississippi Delta town, installing a water treatment plant among other things, and helping her people.

TWO. Billie Jean Young, an author, playwright, actress, lawyer, community activist, and college professor, is a force to be reckoned with. Billie Jean grew up in a poor farming community in Alabama's Black Belt. She decided being a lawyer was the way she was going to rock! With her degree in hand, she went back to developing communities and organizing rural women. But, her one woman play of Fannie Lou Hamer who was underappreciated in the 1980s was really how Billie Jean found her voice. She was inspired by the saying, "We cannot entrust our stories to anyone else's telling. We must tell them ourselves; we must be the preservers of our own truths." She has dazzled audiences with over 800 performances of her one-woman show *Fannie Lou Hamer: This Little Light*. She is the editor of *Now How You Do? A Memoir*, and the author of *Fear Not the Fall*, and *Family Secrets*.



Billie Jean Young

Billie Jean is the playwright and director of *Jimmy Lee*, the story of how the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson prompted the historic 1965 Selma March which became known as Bloody Sunday. On March 7, 2015, Barack Obama, the first U.S. president of African descent, followed by an estimated 40,000 marchers, reenacted the steps Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and others took 50 years ago. Although progress has been made in terms of race relations, President Obama and Congressman John Lewis, who was severely beaten by police in 1965, both acknowledged there is still work to be done in the fight for human rights.

Today, Billie Jean Young is an Artist in Residence and Associate Professor of Fine & Performing Arts at Judson College in Marion, Alabama. She gives voice to the African American experience through theatre and her books. For her efforts we celebrate her life work.

For more information about Billie Jean Young visit <http://www.billiejeanyoung.com/>. For information or tickets to *Jimmy Lee* visit www.judson.edu/jimmy or www.JimmyLeePlay.com.

THREE. Shirley Sherrod, a native of Newton, Georgia, and a well-respected community activist known affectionately by 100s of farmers in southwestern Georgia as a friend, is the coauthor of *The Courage to Hope: How I Stood up to the Politics of Fear*. She is a mother, and the wife of Charles Sherrod, one of the founders of SNCC, one of the first blacks to sit on the Albany, Georgia city council, and the name sake of a city park.

On July 20, 2010, a row of news vehicles: CNN, NBC, ABC, CBS, and Fox news were outside the Sherrod's resident in Albany



Shirley Sherrod

covering a national news story wherein, as it turned out, Shirley had been wrongfully fired by the Obama administration.

Shirley, whose fallout with the Obama administration became the source of news around the globe, grew up on her father Hosie Miller's farm in Baker County, Georgia. Hosie had a house full of girls. Shirley was the oldest. In March of 1965, Hosie's wife was expecting a child; she had not had a sonogram taken, but Hosie had a gut feeling their next child was going to be a male; he passed out cigars, and even painted one of the room's blue.

One beautiful March evening, the head of racism visited the Millers and changed their family forevermore. On that day, Cal Hall, a neighbor of Hosie, shot him in the back over a cow dispute. Hosie had arranged for Cal to come get his cow but while Cal was on Hosie's property he wanted to take three cows with him. When Hosie suggested taking the issue up in court, and walked off, Cal shot Hosie in the back with his rifle. Hosie died ten days later. It was unbelievable. Cal was Mrs. Miller's uncle; her mother gave birth to Joe Nathan Hall while employed by Cal's father as a maid. Cal had intended to use "white privilege" to take Hosie's cows, but that day Hosie stood up to "white supremacy".

Cal Hall never had his day in court for murdering his neighbor, and Mrs. Miller sued Cal Hall for the wrongful death of her husband. Even though three black witnesses testified, the all-white jury ruled against the Millers. That was how it was – unfair and unjust.

Years later while directing the Federation of Southern Cooperatives' Albany office, Shirley was nominated to become the first black director of Rural Development. She was hired, broke a glass ceiling, and went to work doing what she had done most of her adult life – advocate and support rural America.

Hosie's oldest daughter was charged with the leadership of a statewide agency with an estimated \$1.3 billion budget which provides grants and loans to homeowners, police department, fire departments, Indian reservation food distribution programs, and much more. How about that?

She started her new job August 17, 2009 concentrating on nine Georgia counties with household incomes less than \$20,000 annually. A right wing blogger named Andrew Breitbart accused Shirley of reverse racist practices. Andrew disseminated a video clip of Shirley speaking in Coffee County at a NAACP Annual Freedom Fund banquet about her youthful disdain of whites in the context of the murder of her father.

Without being giving the benefit of the doubt or listening to the entire video, Shirley was asked by her superiors in the Obama administration to pull over on the side of the highway and write a letter of resignation with her blackberry phone. After the administration discovered they had wrongfully fired Shirley, they offered her another position which she turned down. National talk show hosts such as Meredith Vieira, Gayle King, and others interviewed Shirley, who stood up to the politics of fear and shared her story with households around the world.

Her book can be purchased online at <http://books.simonandschuster.com/The-Courage-to-Hope/Shirley-Sherrod/9781451651010>.

FOUR. Carol Prejean Zippert is a community activist, poet, educator, and newspaper publisher. She was born and raised in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, and is a long-time resident of Greene County, Alabama, where she and her husband John operate *The Greene County Democrat*, a weekly newspaper.

Carol is one of the initial organizers/founders of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, a founding board member of the Federation of Green County Employees Federal Credit Union, and a founder and current board member of the Black Belt Community Foundation. Previously, Carol served over a decade as



Carol Zippert

a trustee of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, taught at Tuskegee University, and served on the Greene County Board of Supervisors.

One of Carol's poems allude to the essence of womanhood which many grave, and it is as follows:

I don't want to be rich, just able.

Able to care for my family.

Able to work for my church.

Able to prepare my roots and herbs

To care for the sick in my community.

Able to bake my homemade breads and cakes

and serve lots of food when visitors come.

Able to tend my garden, my chickens, ducks, and rabbits.

Able to quilt with my sisters.

Able to meet my debts and keep my good name.

To contact Carol Prejean Zippert visit www.greencountydemocrat.com.

FIVE. Darlene Collier is a native of Heidelberg, Mississippi, and a long-time resident of Brandon. It took over a decade for Darlene to see her memoir *Married to Sin* in print. But, it was printed by a company which she co-founded, Mose Dantzer Press, named in honor of her great grandfather. During her school years, she got off



Darlene Collier

the little short yellow bus. When she first put her pen to paper, most people told her she had undertaken an impossible feat, but she kept writing, often needing assistance to spell five letter words. Readers and students can find Darlene's memoir in public and college libraries, and online.

Mose, born in 1867, was a remarkable man who purchased 243 acres of land in Jasper County, Mississippi in 1905. Darlene and her siblings grew up on the hill on the Dantzer farm, but they fell through the cracks. Her mother died when she was three years old, and she and her siblings were removed from their home in 1968. She married into a family of sinners and abusers and lived to tell about it. Darlene overcame many obstacles in her life; she is a very outspoken citizen who copyrighted the first Rebel Flag Protest t-shirt in U.S. history.

One of Darlene's former classmates once told a small audience at the Pearl Library that Darlene accomplished more than other students who were considered smarter.

Her memoir was translated into Spanish *Casada al Pecado*. For more information about her works visit www.mosedpress.com.

SIX. Ty A. Patterson is a local poet. Her first book of poetry, *Southern Jewel: The Elements Within*, was released August 18, 2014. Her publisher Meredith Etc awarded her *Best New Author*, *Most Pre-orders*, *Best Book Release Party Rollout*, and *Most Online Sales* last December. Ty is a remarkable artist with remarkable showmanship and social connectivity. Ty attended Jackson State University,

Mississippi State University, and obtained a master's degree from Ashford University.

Alice Tisdale, Publisher, *Jackson Advocate*, had these words to say about Ty's poetry:

"Ironically or purposefully, the first chapter of poet Ty A. Patterson's first book, *Southern Jewel: The Elements Within*, is Earth. It alone has the power to bury the reader alive with conceit or excavate their soul with remorse... Good luck in trying to stop to catch your breath."

Ty was born on Ft. Benning U.S. Army base in Georgia; she grew in Center, Mississippi. She is the mother of two. Her oldest daughter Tyra appeared in *Get on Up*, a movie about James Brown last year. Tyra and a group of children sang, "Say it loud, I'm black and



Ty A. Patterson

I'm proud." For more information about Patterson's book, visit <http://meredithetc.com/southern-jewel/>.

SEVEN. The youngest of the seven southern authors featured in the *Jackson Advocate's* special Woman's History edition is Starkishia Rountree. Starkishia is the author of her memoirs *Starkishia: Estrella* which details portions of her young life from age 12 to 18. As a child, Starkishia found solitude reading books at her local library. By age 14, she was in the state of Texas, homeless. Her mother signed for her to marry a native of Mexico a few weeks after she turned 15. Eventually, he was deported, and with one child in her arms, and carrying another in her womb, she crossed the border to Mexico to join him.

Starkishia was awarded *Best Literature* December 20, 2014 by her publisher Meredith Etc. Her story is remarkable in part because like Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, and other black writers, Starkishia is not college educated; she learned the craft of writing by reading and learned style and English rules through self-study. She once told an audience at a book reading, "I graduated from the school of real life." But, even so, she made it. Today, she works full-time in the health profession, and she is co-writing Mary Coleman's memoir. Coleman was the first licensed



Starkishia Rountree

woman barber in the state of Mississippi, who founded the state's first school of barbering, Trendsetters College of Barbering and Style in Jackson. Today, Mrs. Coleman, at age 82 cuts hair twice a week.

One day Starkishia hopes to be able to make a living writing full-time. Who knows?

For more information on this featured African American woman visit her author page at <http://meredithetc.com/starkishia-estrella/>.

Highlighted here are seven authors, Unita Blackwell, Billie Jean Young, Shirley Sherrod, Carol Zippert, Darlene Collier, Ty A. Patterson, and Starkishia who have made great contributions to our literature. Their works are worthy of reading.