



Janet Mock

Born on March 8, 1983, in Honolulu, Hawaii, Janet Mock is a formative writer and transgender rights activist. In her autobiography, Mock describes how she started her transition in high school and funded this process by working as a sex worker, presenting a unique perspective on sex work as both potentially empowering but also demoralizing in its and American culture's fetishization of black women. During this time, she earned her Bachelor of Arts in Fashion Merchandising from University of Hawaii Manoa, and she would later earn a Master of Arts in Journalism from NYU. After she came out as a trans woman in an article for Marie Claire, she wrote her first book *Redefining Realness* in 2014 which, according to reviewer Melissa Harris-Perry, "tells a story of self, which turns out to be a reflection on all humanity." Janet Mock has gone on to win numerous awards and honors including the 2012 Rivera Activist Award, the 2014 Inspiration Award, and was a finalist for the 2015 Lambda Literary Award in transgender nonfiction. In the last year, Mock was named one of the "30 Most Influential People on the Internet" and "12 New Faces of Black Leadership" by TIME. Early in 2017, she published her second memoir, *Surpassing Certainty*, which debuted at 19th on the New York Times Best Seller List. Her memoir explains her experiences transitioning as a young adult in a queerphobic world, distinguishing her as a foremost voice in the intersectional inclusion of transgender and queer black women in modern feminism.



Suzan-Lori Parks

Born in Kentucky in 1963, playwright Suzan-Lori Parks knows that she stands on the shoulders of pioneering playwrights. During a 2003 interview for *Women in Theater*, theater critic Linda Winer asked her about being the first black woman to earn the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Parks acknowledged the women who came before her but were passed over, saying: "Well, you know, because Lorraine [Hansberry] shoulda, and Alice Childress shoulda, and Adrienne Kennedy shoulda, and Ntozake [Shange] shoulda, and you know, and Anna Deavere Smith shoulda, you know we had a lot of shouldas." Still, it was *Topdog/Underdog*, a play that carefully dissects the relationship between brothers Lincoln and Booth, which won Parks the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2002. Parks's body of work also includes titles across genres that spotlight the lives of black women. She penned the screenplay for Spike Lee's 1996 film *Girl 6*, in which an aspiring New York City actress takes a job as a phone sex operator and becomes attached to one of the callers. Her 2003 novel *Getting Mother's Body* features protagonist Billy Beede, an unwed pregnant teen who sets out to retrieve treasure buried with her mother in East Texas. However, her 1996 play *Venus* speaks most to the reclamation of the black female body. *Venus* chronicles the fictional life of Sarah "Saartjie" Baartman, also known as the Venus Hottentot, a black South African woman put on display for 19th century British audiences. In her reimagining of Baartman's story, Parks creates a critical conversation that draws parallels between the ways in which black women and their bodies have been denied agency and freedom.



June Jordan

Born in Harlem, New York, in 1936, is perhaps best known for her poetry, but her career spanned across genres, subjects, and decades. As a prominent literary figure during the Black Arts Movement, Jordan published her first book of poetry, *Who Look At Me*, in 1969, which included an epic poem of the same name formatted alongside twenty-seven paintings by black artists. This seminal poetry collection explored issues of black female identity and the ways in which the American dream has come at the cost of violence to the black female body. Her book *Haruko: Love Poems* (1994) explores her own sexuality and definitions of black love, especially her own bisexuality, effectively opening the floodgates for more critical conversations examining the intersections between traditional black feminist theory and black female sexuality. In addition to her poetry, Jordan was an essayist, activist, advocate, and educator, and her work was informed by an emphasis on the freeing of the black female mind and body. Jordan's work and legacy attests to her intersectional treatment of black feminism, politics, and class inequalities; but Jordan's emphasis on the importance of recognizing both individual and community identities and the need for collaborative dialogues about feminism and racial inequalities has fundamentally shaped discussions of black literature and black life. June Jordan passed away in 2002, and unfortunately many of her early poetry collections are now out of print.



Ann Petry

Born in Old Saybrook, Connecticut, in 1908, writer Ann Petry was one of the foremost novelists of the 1940s. She is best known for her novel *The Street*, which was the first novel written by an African American woman to sell over one million copies. Published in 1946, *The Street* was praised as following in the tradition of the Richard Wright school of social protest novels--he had published his seminal novel *Native Son* in 1940--but to simply associate Petry with Richard Wright and his work would ignore the individuality of her writing style and intent. *The Street*, set in Harlem, follows Lutie Johnson, a single black woman with a young child, as she tries to navigate the obstacles of urban life. Lutie confronts issues of racism, classism, and sexism throughout the book, but perhaps most prominent is the repeated objectification and sexualization of her own body by others. *The Street* and its publication were important not only for the exploration of issues of female sexuality and individuality but also for bringing to center a female protagonist during a time of literary production where many of the best-selling and most well-known black novels were written by men and focused on male protagonists. In addition to her novel, Petry also published a young adult nonfiction biography of Harriet Tubman, *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad*, in 1955. Petry's writing centered the experiences and difficulties faced by black women, and her work probed the intersection of sexism and racism in order to bring issues facing black women to the forefront.



Yaa Gyasi

Few authors have splashed onto the literary scene like Ghanaian-American writer Yaa Gyasi. Born in Ghana in 1989, Gyasi moved to the United States in 1991, and her childhood trans-Atlantic relocation influenced the settings for her debut novel *Homegoing*, which chronicles the stories of two sisters born in 18th-century Ghana. Effia is bartered away to the British governor of the Cape Coast Castle, a slave fort, so that he may take her as a wife. Esi is kept in the castle before being sold into slavery and taken to America. The family saga spans seven generations and traces the legacy of slavery to modern-day Alabama. Through this narrative, Gyasi chronicles the lasting legacy of slavery and the ways that the trauma of slavery have affected and continue to affect black women in America, bringing a uniquely humanistic perspective to her writing. "It was important to me to always focus on the individual's stories," Gyasi said during a 2016 interview. "Their stories about love, and hope, and fear, and kind of all of these things that make them human so that it wasn't a history lesson." The result is a breakout novel that has garnered a number of awards, including: the 2016 National Book Critic Circle John Leonard Prize; the 2017 PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Novel; and a 2017 American Book Award.



Octavia Butler

Octavia Butler, born in Pasadena, California in 1947, was an award-winning science fiction novelist and short story writer. In a story she affectionately told often in public venues, Butler says she began writing science fiction in response to watching *Devil Girl from Mars* at the age of 12, fully convinced that she could write a better story. She would write throughout her high school and college career, and was noticed by noted science fiction writer Harlan Ellison. Ellison mentored Butler, encouraging her to go to the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop. There, Butler met Samuel Delaney, a rising black science fiction writer in his own right. Five years later, her first novel series was published, the *Patternist* series, which includes *Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), and *Survivor* (1978). Her continued success as a novelist set the stage for her winning the the MacArthur "Genius" Grant in 1995, the first science fiction writer to win such a prestigious award. Perhaps her most famous novel, *Kindred* (1979) is a revision of the classic time-traveling novel as a neo-slave narrative, wherein Dana, the protagonist, is involuntarily pulled from her 1970s California home to antebellum Maryland with her several-times great-grandparents; Dana learns that it is up to her to save her ancestors so that she can save herself. All of Butler's work offers a conversation about black women's bodies, power, and agency. Shortly after publishing her last novel, *Fledgling* (2005), Butler passed away in her home in Washington. Her legacy lives on in the current Black Speculative Arts Movement, much of which is inspired by her trailblazing in the face of a predominantly white industry.



Alice Dunbar Nelson

Alice Ruth Moore Dunbar Nelson was born in New Orleans in 1875, making her one of the first members of the generation of African Americans to be born “free” after the Civil War. Nelson’s work runs the gamut in terms of genre: she wrote short stories, essays, columns, poetry, and plays. As a prominent figure and writer during the Harlem Renaissance, her body of work is undeniably fundamental to the 20th and 21st century black literary tradition. Her best-known play *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) brought to the forefront a discussion of the rampant lynching that was taking place across the country, especially in the South. Her column for the *Pittsburgh Courier* “From a Woman’s Point of View” (whose name would later be changed to “Une Femme Dit”) was published between February and November of 1926, and it was in this column that she explored issues that specifically affected the black American woman. Throughout the publication of this column, Nelson takes to task the many stereotypes present in plays, novels, poems, short stories, and other literary works that negatively portray black women. Through her work as an activist, she extended her critique of the misunderstanding and oversimplification of black female identities and sexuality that she found in literature to the stage of American politics. Though she passed away in 1935, she stands as a prominent literary and political pioneer of the black female literary tradition.



Angela Davis

Born January 26, 1944, Angela Davis is a lifelong activist-scholar and prison abolitionist. In the 1960s, she rose to prominence as an outspoken member of the Communist Party USA and Black Panther Party; her iconic afro is a lasting symbol and reminder of the Black Power Movement. As a native of "Dynamite Hill" in Birmingham, AL, Davis knew too well the vulnerability of black people of racial terror, especially black women--she knew the four girls of the 1963 16th St Baptist Church bombing well. In 1970, Davis was placed on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitive List on charges for the aggravated kidnapping and murder of Judge John Haley in California when she only owned the gun used in the murder. As her autobiography tell us, she fled the state and hid in the homes of her comrades in the Party and many months later was released, put on trial, proclaimed not guilty. In recent years, Davis has reflected on being hunted by the FBI: "It was not about me...I was the easy target, it was about attacking an entire movement." In 1997, Davis founded Critical Resistance, an organization with the mission to abolish the prison-industrial complex. Davis is Distinguished Professor Emerita at the University of California, Santa Cruz in the History of Consciousness Department. Her body of work, and her most recent book *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, implores us to reconsider the racist and sexist grounding and functions of the prison industrial complex.



Assata Shakur

Assata Shakur was born JoAnne Deborah Bryon in 1947, but assumed the name Assata ("she who struggles") Shakur ("the thankful one") in 1971 after joining the Black Panthers: "I didn't feel like no JoAnne, or no Negro, or no amerikan. I felt like an African woman," Shakur writes in *Assata: An Autobiography*. She left the Black Panthers after a short period and joined the Black Liberation Army, whose activities made her a target of the FBI. After her arrest and conviction for the 1973 death of a New Jersey state trooper, Shakur escaped from Clinton Correctional Facility for Women in Union Township, NJ, in 1979. She eventually fled to Cuba in 1984, where she was granted political asylum. Renewed interest in Shakur arose in 2014 when then-President Barack Obama opened up diplomatic ties with Cuba; Cuban officials, however, said they would not extradite Shakur, and she remains there today. Her autobiography allowed her to claim and tell her story for the first time, chronicling her life from childhood and offering critical commentary on black Americans and politics, the police, and incarceration. Since its publication, her autobiography has become an important text in the field of critical race theory. In addition to being an author and activist, Shakur is an undeniable cultural icon; she is especially celebrated in rap and hip hop by musicians such as Tupac Shakur (step-nephew to the Activist), Common, and Public Enemy frontman Chuck D.



Marita Bonner

Born June 16, 1899, in Boston, Massachusetts, Marita Bonner got her start writing for her high school magazine, the *Sagamor*. She attended Radcliffe College in Cambridge but was forced to commute because African Americans were not allowed to live in campus dorms. As a prominent member of the Harlem Renaissance, Bonner's work helped to lay the foundations for the literary and cultural conversation about black female authors, writing, and feminism that continues today. Bonner's first essay "Being Young--A Woman--And Colored," published in December 1925 in *The Crisis*, addressed the discrimination black women faced in reference to both racism and sexism, anticipating the work of other 20th century scholars, such as Kimberle Crenshaw, that focus on black feminism and intersectionality. She went on to write *The Pot Maker* (1927) and *The Purple Flower* (1928), surreal one act plays that centered heavily on racial issues in the United States. Bonner then moved to Chicago where she wrote a series of short stories, later collected in *Frye Street & Environs* (1987), that were based in a fictitious Chicago where people lived in a multicultural community, establishing her as a writer that not only brought attention to racial inequalities but also actively imagined liberated futures for black Americans through her writing.



Nnedi Okorafor

Born in 1974 in Cincinnati, Ohio to immigrant parents, Nnedi Okorafor is a Nigerian-American fantasy and speculative fiction author. A rising star on the literary scene, Okorafor has won awards consistently over the last several years, including the 2011 World Fantasy Award for Best Novel for her novel *Who Fears Death* and most recently both the Nebula and Hugo Awards for the novella *Binti*. Okorafor's writing is significant for integrating African and diasporic culture and traditions into memorable characters set in fantastical worlds. Her work is redefining African literature through her unique use of politically complex science fiction with coming-of-age stories. Her post-apocalyptic novel, *Who Fears Death*, offers an examination of how black women reclaim their bodies in finding self love in the midst of sexual trauma and other societal conditions, especially war and poverty, rooted in racism, capitalism, and sexism. Okorafor's novel most recently has been picked up by HBO to be a television series produced by George R.R. Martin, producer of the popular series *Game of Thrones*. It is evident that Okorafor will rise to be a bigger literary giant as she remasters the world of sci-fi and fantasy.