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“I Work to Produce Stories That Save Our Lives” — Toni Cade Bambara

by Barbara DiBernard

Stories are important. They keep us alive. In the ships, in the camps, in the quarters, fields, prisons, on the road, on the run, underground, under siege, in the throes, on the verge—the storyteller snatches us back from the edge to hear the next chapter. In which we are the subjects. We, the hero of the tales. Our lives preserved. How it was; how it be. Passing it along in the relay. That is what I work to do: to produce stories that save our lives. (Toni Cade Bambara, “Salvation is the Issue,” in *Black Women Writers*, ed. Mari Evans, p. 41)

As this quote shows, Toni Cade Bambara is a writer of responsibility and hope, a writer who sees violence, injustice, and oppression, but who believes in the ability of human beings to transform themselves and their situations. She also writes:

I despair at our failure to wrest power from those who abuse it; our reluctance to reclaim our old powers lying dormant with neglect; our hesitancy to create power in areas where it never before existed, and I’m euphoric because everything in our history, our spirit, our daily genius—suggests we do it. (“Salvation,” p. 46)

In her two collections of short stories, *Gorilla, My Love* and *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive*, and her novel, *The Salt Eaters*, Bambara shows us the possibilities for laughter and transformation by oppressed people, especially the Black community of which she is a part. Many of the narrators or central characters of her stories are children—“tough little compassionate kids” she calls them—who live in a world where grown-ups often carelessly violate the contracts they’ve made with them. Bambara believes that for the most part U.S. society and especially the

educational system cripples Black children, by trying to force them into conformity, by telling them lies, by creating architectural forms such as low-income high-rises that break up their communities. But in her stories she shows counter forces at work, such as individuals who treat children with respect, children who see through the hypocrisy around them, and the Pan-African free schools of the Black community which begin with the premise that children are responsible, competent, and principled, and where teachers encourage students to raise questions, critique everything they read and see, take responsibility for themselves and their world.

Bambara says that she is a “message writer,” which makes many people, including some literary critics, nervous. Many of us have learned in school that great writing is obscure, difficult, and ambiguous. Critics often condemn writing with a distinct message as propaganda and not art, and assume it will be simplistic and clumsily written. But Bambara’s writing soars. Her characters are real, vital, alive, and often very funny. I know of no other writer who can capture that elusive thing called “voice” so wonderfully. Her narrators speak to themselves and to us directly and honestly in their own voices, with their puzzlements, questions, and struggles. Read “A Lesson”—you will *be there* with a Black girl who is confronted with the reality of an economic system where some people pay as much for a toy sailboat as a family of six does for food for a whole year. This “tough little kid” doesn’t want to admit what she knows either to herself or the woman who has confronted her with this inequity. As in all her stories, Bambara handles the details so deftly that we can feel what the character feels: “I’m mad, but I won’t give her that satisfaction. So I slouch around the store being very bored and say, ‘Let’s go.’” “. . . Miss Moore looks at me, sorrowfully I’m thinking. And something weird is going on, I can feel it in my chest.”

Some of my other favorite Bambara stories are “Gorilla My Love” (KZUM has a great tape of Rudy Dee reading this—call and ask them to play it) from *Gorilla, My Love* and “Medley” (if

you like singing in the shower, read this story!), “Witchbird,” and “A Tender Man” from *The Sea Birds*. The latter is the first story I’ve read where a man’s responsibility for the children he has fathered is a central concern. The male narrator meets a woman whose first question to any man she meets who wants to get to know her better is, “Can you be sure that no children of yours are starving tonight?” It’s a powerful story, one I believe would be especially good for classroom discussion. “The Apprentice” from *The Seabirds* is my favorite of all the Bambara stories I’ve read—I love its portrayal of political and transformative work as everything from talking (and listening) to folks in a nursing home to helping the hard-working owners of a burger joint in your community to clean up after an exhausting day and night of work.

Bambara’s novel *The Salt Eaters* is rich, powerful, and evocative, showing the importance of spiritual dimensions of healing. It begins with the healer’s question to the woman she’s been brought in to help, “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” The healer follows with a statement of responsibility that we all must understand: “Just so’s you’re sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight when you’re well.”

Toni Cade Bambara will be in Lincoln on March 3, 1988, sponsored by the Women’s Studies Program, the English Department, the Women’s Resource Center, the Research Council at UNL; the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities, and The Common Woman Bookstore and Coffeehouse. She will be at The Common Woman for discussion and book-signing from noon-1:00 and will give a reading from her works at 8:00 p.m. in the Nebraska Union on the UNL campus. Both events are free and open to the public. Bambara will also give a *prose* writers’ workshop from 2-4:00. Participants must bring some of their own writing with them and should be ready to *work*. Registration is limited and begins on Feb. 8. Call Barbara DiBernard at 435-5864 or 472-1828 for information and to register.

A number of women from Lincoln heard Bambara speak at the Women Against Racism conference in Iowa City last spring. She is a dynamic, exciting speaker. Her books are available at the reading.

Read Bambara’s work, come talk to her, and come hear her read on March 3. Come hear a woman who celebrates life and laughter and transformation, a woman who writes: Writing is one of the ways I participate in struggle—one of the ways I help to keep vibrant and resilient that vision that has kept the family going on. Through writing I attempt to celebrate the tradition of resistance, the attempt to tap Black potential, and try to join the chorus of voices that argues that exploitation and misery are neither inevitable nor necessary. Writing is one of the ways I practice the commitment to explore bodies of knowledge for the usable wisdoms they yield. (“What It is I Think I’m Doing Anyway,” in *The Writer on Her Work*, ed. Janet Sternberg, p. 154)

Words are to be taken seriously. I try to take seriously acts of language. Words set things in motion. I’ve seen them doing it. Words set up atmospheres, electrical fields, charges. I’ve felt them doing it. Words conjure. I try not to be careless about what I utter, write, sing. I’m careful about what I give voice to (“What It Is,” p. 163)

What I enjoy most in my work is the laughter and the outrage and the attention to language. (“Salvation,” p. 45.)

The issue is salvation. I work to produce stories that save our lives. (“Salvation,” p. 47)

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