

## Black Writers Ponder Role and Seek Wider Attention



Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

From left, Walter Mosley, Lynn Nottage, Victor LaValle and James McBride. Mr. LaValle and Mr. McBride will participate in the National Black Writers' Conference this weekend.

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The 10th National Black Writers' Conference begins on Thursday at Medgar Evers College in New York, an anniversary that prompted [Walter Mosley](#) to remember his first conference, in the 1980s. He was just one of many unpublished, struggling writers who showed up, he said. An editor had passed on his first novel, about the detective Easy Rawlins, with the rationale that the publishing house already had a black detective novel.

"Terry McMillan said you have to sell books out of the trunk of your car," Mr. Mosley said.

But in the age of [President Obama](#), when successful black writers can be found across genres and a [Nobel Prize](#) winner, [Toni Morrison](#), can be tapped to be the honorary chairwoman of the event, do black writers still need a conference to call their own?

In interviews, many black writers and editors, and others in the book world said yes. Black authors are part of the broader society's struggles with the legacy of discrimination and exclusion, they said, and often need a more strategic approach to getting their work promoted, reviewed and sold.

The conference, expected to attract 2,000 people, is a chance for writers to study and celebrate one another and for readers to hear writers presenting their work and dissecting social and literary themes. Over four days of workshops and discussions, the participants can also grapple with issues like the value of black sections in bookstores, the paucity of



black editors in publishing and how to expand the list of black writers taught in schools.

"Is a black writers' conference still necessary? Absolutely," said Mr. Mosley, an author of dozens of books of all kinds who has since retired the best-selling Rawlins series. "Black writers are still facing all kinds of questions about the world they live in and the battle they're up against," he said. "This is a chance for us to pay attention to each other and not take on the values of the broader society."

But some in the book world worry that conference attendees end up talking mostly to themselves. "I respect the ability of the [Medgar Evers](#) conference to build community," said Martha Southgate, a novelist whose most recent book, "Third Girl From the Left," was published in 2005. "But what I struggle with is that it should be beyond our community."

In 2007 Ms. Southgate was part of a racially mixed group of writers, editors and booksellers who dreamed up [theringshout.com](#), a Web site devoted to literary black writers and the idea that they belong at the center of the American literary tradition, with readers of all kinds.

"We need cross-pollination," said [Lawrence Schiller](#), a film producer, director and writer who was a founder of the Norman Mailer Writers Colony in Provincetown, Mass. Mr. Schiller, who is white, asked Brenda M. Greene, the director of the conference and executive director of the Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers, in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, for help in finding a black writer to teach at the Mailer colony.

The conference is a step in raising the visibility of black writers, Mr. Schiller said, but those writers also need to be "part of the bigger picture": better represented at other conferences, on the curriculums of graduate writing programs and [community colleges](#) and more widely read by young nonblacks.

Ms. Greene said the conference, which she believed was the largest event of its kind in the country, helped achieve those goals.

"We are shaping and helping to redefine what constitutes literature and making sure that our voices are heard," she said. "Without these conferences, you don't even know who is out there," she added, noting that bookstores and schools often offer a limited menu of black writers.

The wide-ranging conference includes tributes to [Amiri Baraka](#) and to Toni Cade Bambara, who died in 1995; panels on topics including "the black writer as literary activist" and "politics and satire in the literature of black writers"; and sessions exploring the influence of phenomena like hip-hop, war and the Internet on black writers. The conference also features writing workshops for students in elementary, middle school and high school.

In addition to Ms. Morrison, who is to be honored at a reception on Saturday night, writers expected to take part include the novelists [Colson Whitehead](#), Bernice McFadden, Victor LaValle and Breena Clarke; the poets Sonia Sanchez and Staceyann Chin; and authors whose work crosses genres, like James McBride, Thulani Davis, Kevin Powell and [Touré](#).

With all the changes and challenges in publishing, said the writer Linda Villarosa, a former executive editor of Essence Magazine who teaches writing and journalism at City College, this conference is needed now more than ever.

"We need to get the heads of all the mainstream publishers there to explain — and it doesn't have to be angry — how the business model works and how to get more of our books published," she said. Among her concerns: the rise of racy "street lit" books, the small number of black editors at publishing houses and the way books by black authors are pigeonholed in stores.

Mr. LaValle, whose 2009 book, "Big Machine: A Novel," was critically acclaimed, said he retained a sense of optimism because the publishing industry always lags behind popular culture.

"The shock of Terry McMillan is that they didn't know there were millions of black and white readers interested in the lives and heartaches of upper-middle-class black women," said Mr. LaValle, who teaches fiction writing at [Columbia University](#).

Black writers, like all writers, have to keep doing "something new and surprising," he added. President Obama represents that originality both as a political phenomenon and in his two best-selling books, Mr. LaValle said. "The shock to the vast reading public is, 'I understand this dude,'" he said of Mr. Obama's work. Christopher Jackson, an executive editor at Spiegel & Grau, a division of [Random House](#), said the work of contemporary black writers is increasingly informed not just by race but by "a million other things." He is on a conference panel for agents, writers and publishers.

"Historically, black literary work has had to appeal to the expectations and desires and aesthetics of people who aren't black and that's an additional hurdle," Mr. Jackson said, adding that other writers also deal with unconscious bias of many kinds. Still, he said, "some of the most imaginative, lovely and interesting writers today are black."

Lynn Nottage, who won the [Pulitzer Prize](#) for drama in 2009 for "Ruined," about women in a brothel in war-torn Congo, said the conference could foment debate about the idea that black writers constitute a niche market and that the best ones would eventually find wider attention. "We are not a niche," she said.

One reason getting attention can be hard is that "there are next to no African-Americans at influential publications reviewing theater and books on a regular basis," Ms. Nottage said. "We are evaluated and critiqued by people outside the experience. Perhaps there is some resistance to penetrate the issues we're dealing with."

Mr. McBride, best known as the author of "The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother," said he did not especially like going to writers' conferences. But, he said, he planned to be at Medgar Evers on Saturday because it was good for established writers to meet young writers.

"James Baldwin and [Zora Neale Hurston](#) opened the door for me," Mr. McBride said. "If I can help someone, all the better."