

The Behrend Beacon

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February marks 100th anniversary of the birth of Langston Hughes

by Vaughn Watson
The Providence Journal

Langston Hughes chronicled the celebrations and setbacks of being black and living in America.

As a poet, essayist and novelist, his writing reflected injustice, disappointment, loneliness and plain old bad luck. But he didn't just highlight the stormy spots. Hughes was a biographer of black America, writing of black Americans going about their everyday lives: finding a job, falling in love.

"He created families on paper," says Ramona Bass, a Providence, R.I., storyteller who is co-administrator of the Hughes estate.

February is the 100th anniversary of the birth of this literary father figure. And this month, his legacy is being celebrated around the nation.

Hughes was born Feb. 1, 1902 in Joplin, Mo. He published his first book of poetry - "The Weary Blues" - in 1926.

His writing life was framed by an interest in black art, writing and performance in the 1920s, and a surge of civil protest for equality - not just appreciation - in the 1960s.

With a soothsayer's replication of reality, he created full worlds. In the Simple series of humorous books about the outspoken character Jesse B. Semple, a homespun philosopher from Harlem, "Hughes was Black America," says Ray Rickman, a book collector and Rhode Island's deputy secretary of state.

"He had a touch of class, dignity. He understood common people," Rickman says. "The Simple series gives us the essence of the wholesome everyman. He hung out in a bar talking to people. That was Hughes guiding America.

"I've never seen 'The Simpsons' in my life but know what it's about. Hughes was like that. Everyone knew Mr. Hughes - that was his name. Every black person in the world knew who Langston Hughes was - and cared."

Somebody upstairs in Simple's house had the combination turned up loud with an old Dizzy Gillespie record spinning like mad filling the Sabbath with Bop as I passed.

"Set down here on the stoop with me and listen to the music," said Simple.

"I've heard your landlady doesn't like tenants sitting on her stoop," I said.

"Pay it no mind," said Simple. "Ool-ya-koo," he sang. "Hey Ba-Ba-Re-Bop! Be-Bop! Mop!"

"All that nonsense singing reminds me of Cab

Calloway back in the old scat days," I said, "around 1930 when he was chanting, 'Hi-de-hie-de-ho! Hee-de-hee-de-hee!'"

"Not at all," said Simple, "absolutely not at all."

"Re-Bop certainly sounds like scat to me," I insisted.

"No," said Simple. "Daddy-o, you are wrong. Besides, it was not Re-Bop. It is Be-Bop."

"What's the difference," I asked, "between Re and Be?"

"A lot," said Simple. "Re-Bop was an imitation like most of the white boys play. Be-Bop is the real thing like the colored boys play."

"You bring race into everything," I said, "even music."

New stamp sends message about Hughes

by Vaughn Watson
The Providence Journal

The U.S. Postal Service has recognized the Langston Hughes centennial by issuing a commemorative postage stamp. Part of the Black Heritage series, the 34-cent stamp features Hughes in a 1946 photograph taken by Henri Cartier-Bresson.

"It's special, because stamps elevate people," says Ray Rickman, a book collector and Rhode Island's deputy secretary of state. "People will pick up the stamp and say, 'Who is he?' Millions of people will think of Hughes on his 100th birthday."

Ramona Bass, whose husband, George Houston Bass, was literary executor of Hughes's estate until Bass's death in 1990, says that when she sees Hughes in the photo on the stamp, "I can hear him laughing."

"As George noted, Mr. Hughes was widely known for his laughter, which irked George because he would say, 'This is not a laughing matter.'

"He realized Mr. Hughes sometimes laughed to keep from crying. It was part of his shield to the world."

"It is in everything," said Simple.

When Hughes began to write poetry in the 1930s it "has appeal because of a certain kind of dignity, and relevance, and it has a positive story that people respond to," said Arnold Rampersad, Hughes's biographer and the other co-executor of his estate.

Hughes's family had moved around the Midwest and even to Mexico City in his youth. In 1922, he withdrew from an engineering course at Columbia University and began traveling the world. Ultimately he spent a great deal of time in New York City, and became a key figure in the current of writing, art and music known by black artists known as the "Harlem Renaissance."

In Hughes's writing, race is not ducked, talked around, elbowed back or stared past.

"He was talking about the beauty of black skin long before any other poet was talking explicitly that way," said Rampersad. "He delighted in celebrating the masses of African Americans."

Hughes also held an interest in jazz, and in the blues, which articulates everyday life as Hughes did.

Hughes's interest in the blues "was as a source of sorrow, but also a source of joy," says Rampersad. The blues "usually tells sad things but there are songs that make people laugh. He was interested in capturing a sense of laughter as well as pain.

"Hughes really broke ground when he wrote about the blues, or tried to write blues poetry," Rampersad says.

"That brought him under severe attack from all kinds of people. He was going against the grain, letting people know that black music was an important cultural achievement."

The message of the 1951 poem "Dream Deferred," Hughes's best-known work, laments life in another way, in how it squelches optimism.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up -

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore -

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over -

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

To a reader, the rest of Hughes's work suggests an answer: that the ultimate response to struggle is surviving

A cool cat survives three-week sea saga

by Melissa Grace
New York Daily News

NEW YORK - Curiosity killed a cat - almost.

The latest twist on this age-old proverb happened last week at Berth 80 Maher Terminal on the waterfront in Newark, N.J.

It was there early Jan. 29 that a black cat was discovered - nearly frozen to death - in a huge refrigerated wine cargo container that had been shipped across the Atlantic from a vineyard in Italy's Tuscany region.

Surprised Marchesi Antinori Wines workers, who found the frost-covered feline when they opened the 1,200-case shipment, feared the worst. The 2-year-old, green-eyed male didn't move, didn't react to a flashlight and couldn't even be coaxed by a bowl of milk.

"Everyone thought he was dead," said Francine Bryan Brown, a spokeswoman for the wine importer.

An animal rescue unit was called, and the cat - which was lucky despite the color of its coat - was ultimately revived. He's been recovering at Newark's Associated Humane Societies.

The workers who found him dubbed him Peppoli, for the brand of chianti that was in the container.

They said the cat may have been poking around in the container just before he was locked inside and the cargo ship set sail on the three-week Italy-to-New Jersey voyage.

Peppoli survived, they believe, on the condensation that can gather along the edge of the 40-foot-long container, which is kept at 55 degrees while at sea.

Wine company workers were trying to discover whether Peppoli - who was not wearing a collar - has an owner who misses him in Italy. If not, they said, they'll keep him.

Cathy, 40, a wine warehouse dispatcher who didn't want her last name used, said, "This poor guy came over an ocean, sat in there for three weeks without food and water. I refuse to believe he came to America" to be left in a shelter.


TOYOTA


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