Contemporary African-American Literature

African-American literature is written by black Americans of African descent. Its themes include the exploration of black identity, the condemnation of racism, and the celebration of the unique aspects of African-American culture. The first published African-American fiction appeared in the mid-1800s and was similar in content to slave autobiographies. William Wells Brown and Charles Waddell Chesnutt are considered to be the first major African-American writers of fiction.

African-American ethnic pride and creativity flourished during the 1920s. The period’s exceptional outpouring of black literature came to be called the Harlem Renaissance. Important writers of fiction of the time include Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston. Ralph Ellison became the first African-American to win the National Book Award for Invisible Man in 1953. In the 1970s, Holloway House established itself as the leading publisher of profane, violent, life-as-it-really-is novels about surviving in the black urban underclass by publishing the works of Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines. In 1983, Alice Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for The Color Purple, a novel about an unwed mother forcibly separated from her children. In 1993, Toni Morrison became the first African-American to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. She wrote about the lives of black women in the north in such novels as Sula and Beloved. A boom in black-oriented titles is the best way to describe the growth in the range and number of titles aimed at African-American readers over the last ten years. Popular authors include California Cooper, Eric Dickey, Lynn Harris, Terry McMillan, Omar Tyree, and Zane among others. African-American authors today are National Book Award and Pushcart Prize winners. They have been heard through National Public Radio and Oprah's Book Club.

Connie Briscoe. **Big Girls Don't Cry.** 1996.

The heroine, Naomi Jefferson, experiences the Civil Rights movement of the 60’s from the perspective of a young resident of Washington, DC. Later she experiences college, career, personal relationships, and family strife, all set against the backdrop of contemporary historical events through several decades.

Pearl Cleage. **What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day.** 1999.

Ada has spent the last ten years living in Atlanta. When she discovers that she’s infected with the HIV virus, she sells her hairdressing business and heads back to her childhood home in Michigan to spend the summer with her recently widowed sister. Once there, she finds herself embroiled with problems such as drugs, violence, teen pregnancy, and an abandoned crack-addicted baby. She also meets a man with a troubled past who just might change her mind about the imprudence of falling in love. Such a catalog of disasters should make for a maudlin, melodramatic read; however, the author has a very sharp and funny way with her characters so that it isn't that way at all. Instead, the reader is left with positive, hopeful feelings at the novel’s end.

Donna Hill. **An Ordinary Woman.** 2002.

When Lisa’s new husband Ross has an affair with her best-friend Asha, all three must deal with the heartbreak that ensues and learn to grow through their pain.

Christine Lincoln. **Sap Rising.** 2001.

Lincoln’s debut novel takes us inside the hearts and minds of African-Americans whose lives unfold in a vividly described southern rural landscape. Most are torn between the question of staying where they grew up among friends, neighbors, and the familiar or leaving and striking off into unfamiliar places with strangers. The characters come alive with great depth of insight and emotion.
James McBride. **Miracle at St. Anna.** 2002.

The author tells a story that connects the tragedy of war with the intimate stories of individual soldiers. This novel follows four of the American army's 92nd Division of all black buffalo soldiers during World War II as they become trapped between forces beyond their control. They find themselves stranded between worlds in a remote Italian village with the German army hidden on one side and their racist American commanding officers on the other. The strange world of the village floats between myth and reality, where belief in magic coexists with the most horrific acts of war. This is also a tale of a mute Italian orphan boy who teaches the American soldiers and Italian villagers that miracles are the results of faith and trust.

E. Lynn Harris. **Just As I Am.** 1994.

Raymond and Nicole were lovers, until Raymond revealed his bisexuality. Alternating chapters follow each of them, as they try to overcome past (and present) traumas, gain self-acceptance, and find true love.


Herbie and Noon, a young couple living in Philadelphia in the 1940’s, have the unusual distinction of having had two little girls abandoned on their doorstep, five years apart. A terrible secret from Noon's past has kept them from consummating their marriage. So Herbie seeks satisfaction elsewhere, while Noon raises the two girls and devotes herself to the local church and community, especially when it is threatened by outside developers.

Martha Southgate. **The Fall of Rome.** 2002.

As the only African American teacher at an exclusive boys boarding school, Jerome Washington is able to hide from his feelings and his past, until a new white female teacher and a bright African American student force him onto a collision course with himself.


Hope Robinson is a talented young reporter in Philadelphia coming to terms with the anger she feels inside through a series of experiences, including an affair with the white boyfriend of a coworker, a relationship with an Afrocentric journalist, and a trip to Africa.