



Marilyn Nelson

Author Program In-depth Interview Insights into *A Wreath for Emmett Till*

The following is a transcript of an audio interview found on www.TeachingBooks.net between Andrea Davis Pinkney, Vice President and Publisher, Houghton Mifflin Children's Division, and Marilyn Nelson, author of *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005.

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY: This is Andrea Pinkney with Marilyn Nelson for a brief dialogue about the creation of *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. Marilyn, the format of the poem, a heroic crown of sonnets, is really quite striking. Can you explain what it is and why you chose it for *A Wreath for Emmett Till*?

MARILYN NELSON: It's very mathematical. I should probably first explain what a sonnet is. A sonnet is a poem, 14 lines of rhymed, usually iambic pentameter. And a crown of sonnets is a sequence of 7 interlinked sonnets in which the first line of the first sonnet becomes the last line of the last sonnet, and the last line of each sonnet is the first line of the following sonnet. That's a crown of sonnets.

A heroic crown of sonnets is a sequence of 15 sonnets, which are interlinked like the normal crown of sonnets, except that in the heroic crown the last sonnet is made up of the first lines of the previous 14 sonnets. So that's a heroic crown of sonnets. My crown is slightly different because the last sonnet is also an acrostic. So the first letters of each line, if you read down, spell out the phrase, "RIP Emmett L. Till."

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY: And let me say that you've, again, mastered it just spectacularly, and I know it's quite a challenge to achieve this rare crown of sonnets.

MARILYN NELSON: It's a challenge.

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY: Your poem includes literary and cultural allusions from Shakespearean sonnets to recent world events, including the World Trade Center bombings. How do you think these relate to Emmett Till's murder in 1955?

MARILYN NELSON: I think the relevance of some of the references has to do with the idea of terrorism. The Ku Klux Klan and racist organizations related to the Klan were the first organized terrorist group in the world. The period during which many lynchings happened was at the beginning of the 20th Century, especially in the 19-teens. And this epidemic of lynchings was intended to terrorize the Black population in the South. These were acts of terrorism. And I wanted to relate those acts of terrorism with the acts of terrorism that are happening in our era.

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY: And I think what's especially relevant, too, is that young people of today, who were alive during the World Trade Center bombings, can perhaps relate the two.

MARILYN NELSON: Yes.

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY: Can you talk about the symbolism of the natural world included in your poem: the wreath, the wildflowers and the voice of the tree witnessing Emmett Till's murder?

MARILYN NELSON: Yes. The sonnet form was originally a poetic form that was used to declare love, and love poems very often use flowers as a symbol of romance. What I wanted to do is to turn around that tradition and describe something really beautiful in the form that is traditionally related to love, and I wanted to use the language of flowers to describe something horrible.

I wanted to present a picture of a wreath made of white flowers, which symbolize, as the poem says, innocence and hope. So that the flowers for me are kind of complicated in that they refer to the tradition of the sonnet and to the older tradition of the language of flowers.

The voice of the tree witnessing Emmett's murder is, I suppose, symbolic, but it's also a literary reference. It's a reference to a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, early 20th Century African-American poet, one of whose poems is called *The Haunted Oak*. And in Dunbar's poem, this haunted tree describes a lynching that it has witnessed. My poem makes a reference to the Dunbar poem.

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY: The story of Emmett Till's brutal murder, it's incredibly difficult and painful, and your poem addresses his death quite graphically. How do you think young readers and listeners are going to react to this?

MARILYN NELSON: I hope they will react with shock. I hope they haven't been so jaded by the violence and brutality we see every day in the media that they will be unable to be shocked by this because it is a very shocking story. I hope they will react with empathy. I hope they will understand and empathize with the horror that Emmett must have felt, and his mother. And I also hope they will appreciate the history that's being portrayed here, that they will learn something about a very difficult and painful and brutal period in American history.

ANDREA DAVIS PINKNEY: Marilyn, I thank you. Clearly, there was a tremendous amount of thought that has gone into the creation of *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, and I look forward to the reactions of readers.

MARILYN NELSON: Thank you, Andrea, and thank you for suggesting I write on the subject.

For teaching resources on *A Wreath for Emmett Till*, and to hear author Marilyn Nelson reading her book and discussing its creation, go to www.TeachingBooks.net

Books by Marilyn Nelson

(Note: Marilyn Nelson is also published as Marilyn Nelson Waniek.)

- CACHOIERA TALES AND OTHER POEMS, THE, Louisiana State University Press, 2005

- WREATH FOR EMMETT TILL, A (illustrated by Philippe Lardy), Houghton Mifflin, 2005
- FORTUNE'S BONES: THE MANUMISSION REQUIEM, Front Street Books, 2004
- CARVER: A LIFE IN POEMS, Front Street Books, 2001
- RUMORS OF TROY: POEMS INSPIRED BY THE ILIAD, Addison Wesley, Longman, 2001
- SHE-DEVIL CIRCUS, Aralia Press, 2001
- TRIOLETS FOR TRIOLET, Curbstone Press, 2001
- FIELDS OF PRAISE, THE: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS, Louisiana State University Press, 1997
- MAGNIFICAT: POEMS, Louisiana State University Press, 1994
- HOMEPLACE, THE, Louisiana State University Press, 1990
- MAMA'S PROMISES, Louisiana State University Press, 1985
- CAT WALKED THROUGH THE CASSEROLE AND OTHER POEMS FOR CHILDREN, THE (written with Pamela Espeland; illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman), Carolrhoda, 1984
- HUNDREDS OF HENS AND OTHER POEMS FOR CHILDREN: TRANSLATIONS FROM THE WORKS OF DANISH POET HELFDEN WEDEL RASMUSSEN (written with Pamela Espeland), Black Willow, 1983
- FOR THE BODY, Louisiana State University Press, 1978

Selected Essays by Marilyn Nelson

- "Aborigine in the Citadel," The Hudson Review, Winter 2001
- "Owning the Masters," Gettysburg Review, Spring 1995, vol 8, number 2
- "The Gender of Grace," Southern Review, Spring 1993, vol 27
- "A Black Rainbow: Modern Afro-American Poetry" (with Rita Dove), POETRY AFTER MODERNISM, Story Line Press, 1990

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