

"[Sue] was giving birth to the child, a baby girl it was, and it died as she died. Never knowing what her second child was or who her first child really was. Her death liked to kill Doak. He loved his wife and his blue-eyed son.

"Everyone missed her because she had been kind. But Doak grieved and grieved, and made Always move back into the house. Altho Always gave birth to his children, it was for business reasons, not for love, so he didn't count them to be much to

him. They was for work, or sale.

"Master Doak was miserable and lonely. Used now to a sweet white wife, he wanted another one so he could go off and leave her all the time like he done the first one."

[The new wife] "Loretta came in her new home, head held high, eyes searching to see everything. She saw many things she wanted changed, bettered. There was much papering of walls and painting of

ceilings, even a room added and a regular room for bathing. She bought clothes for the first time in years. Lovely laces and fine cloths as they could afford. Doak was happy with his new bride til he began to count all the money going out. He fought her over a new dining room. She won that battle, not knowing how many others she was losing with that one win. He preferred his money to her from that time on."

—from J. California Cooper, *Family*



keep that [bad stuff] from you...in doing that, we lost the good stuff, too."

Out of all the suffering, Always, the slave who's the main character in *Family*, stayed with the land, improved it even while a slave, and consequently had a better life after slavery ended. She made it her business to know what was going on. She learned, and then taught others to read. "If she could do all that back then, what you could do now!" Zulu said.

"We are strong enough," a man said, and Zulu added, "we do make it through. You do have more strength than you realize."

Zulu said Cooper tells a lot of stories "about people who thought they knew" what they were getting into in a relationship. "We as women have to see who's causing the pain.

Reading campaign gets to the heart of the heritage

by Margo Ashmore

You-all who know Nothando Zulu can hear her inflection, reading these passages from J. California Cooper's book, *Family*; a fire burning in the fireplace at Oak Park Center, real sumptuous soul food served up on the table for those who needed sustenance Nov. 22. Portions of chapters Zulu read served as the jumping off points for the first discussion in the Givens Black Books Community Reading Campaign.

On Tuesday, Jan. 18, they'll be back at Oak Park, 1701 Oak Park Avenue, North Minneapolis, 6 p.m., discussing *A Piece of Mine*, a collection of Cooper's short stories, and on Saturday, Jan. 22, 2 p.m. at Brookdale Library, 6125 Shingle Creek Pkwy., a group will discuss Cooper's latest book, *Life is Short but Wide*. Copies of the books are available while supplies last, in advance at the venues.

"Some of us are told our heritage, some are not. We're mixed once, twice, three times over," said a mother who attended the discussion with her daughter. "It's amazing how we end up in different places."

A man added "How quick we could lose our heritage. It's done so quickly, slaves sold at age 3, or 5-6. You could be my cousin.

Massah did my Gramma and split her kids up," selling them to whoever had the money.

"You'd think we wouldn't cut people off, given what happened," said another.

"The sense of community we had, where all of the adults were responsible for all of the children. Even 20 years ago," a 41-year-old remembered people watching out for the kids. "We kind of let it go because of how others acted, the young mothers who weren't adult themselves...we didn't feel like dealing with that. So let it go."

A teenage daughter commented that when teenagers are by themselves or with adults they're well behaved, "but in a group, no, they have to show off for others."

Reading books like Cooper's, the generations are discovering their history; some black people are descended from slaves, some are not, some don't know. An older black woman sitting on a plane with one of the people at the Oak Park discussion had told her it's "our fault" that many children don't know the slave-precursor history, "because we wanted to

When you find that special one, you have to see what he's like with his mama, and his sisters. You want someone who gonna love you when you can't get out of the chair."

Readers can span Cooper's career in the works chosen for January. She wrote 17 plays and was named Black Playwright of the Year in 1978. Cooper compiled her short stories in *A Piece of Mine*, published in 1984. *Family* is from 1991 and *Life is Short but Wide*, 2009.

More about the Black Books campaign

by Robert O'Connor
Twin Cities Daily Planet

The Givens Foundation has launched a program intending to give students greater access to African American literature. Givens Black Books is a reading campaign that celebrates the works of acclaimed playwright and novelist J. California Cooper.

"It's important to know where you're from," Nothando Zulu said in a voice that easily filled the room Nov. 22. "Otherwise you risk losing your heritage." Zulu said that *Family*, whose

narrator talks about her ancestors and descendants, was about intergenerational help.

"Maybe twenty years ago members of the community would help children who weren't theirs."

Zulu said that it was a painful subject for some African Americans to deal with, pointing to the example of Zora Neale Hurston, who, before she wrote the classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was an anthropologist who documented African American culture. "Her attitude was 'don't remind me of back there,' and when she went back to the south, she had to learn where she was from before people started talking to her."

"Stories help us know we're not the only one," she added.

Zulu is one of the artists participating in the program. Others include Beverly Cottman and Danielle Daniel.

As part of the program, Givens is sponsoring an after-school program at North High School in partnership with KBEM, which the jazz station will do in addition to its courses on broadcasting and radio production.

Zulu, Cottman and Daniel will serve as artists-in-residence for the program and the participating students will meet weekly for two and one-half hours from November

through April at KBEM's studios at North High School.


According to Eartha Bell, assistant director of Givens, in this program, students will explore Cooper's literary influences and choose other authors they like. They will produce short spots about African American literature that will be played on-air. They will also be able to respond creatively (poetry, spoken word, etc.) to Cooper's work with opportunities to perform at community events.

Bell said Givens is in negotiations with more schools to participate as well as St. Paul schools. The book discussions will take place at community centers or local libraries—the mentioned Rondo, Brookdale and Sumner libraries as locations for future events.

Givens will hold a number of discussions and other events throughout the school year with the program culminating with J. California Cooper's visit to the Twin Cities in April (no specific date is fixed yet).

The next Givens-sponsored event is a book discussion of Cooper's collection of stories, *Life is Short But Wide*. It will take place Jan. 22 at the Brookdale Library.

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