Definition: **Marshall, Paule** from *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

US writer. She is known for her stories and novels that celebrate the lives of African-Americans and individuals living in the West Indies and Barbados, as in *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983).

Marshall was born in New York City to Barbadian parents. She studied at Brooklyn and Hunter colleges before working as a librarian and as a staff writer for *Our World* magazine (1953–56). She has taught at a number of institutions, including Virginia Commonwealth University (1984–94) and New York University (1994–2007).

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**Summary Article: Marshall, Paule**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

Paule Marshall is one of the most important US writers addressing the legacy of the African diaspora in the Americas in the second half of the twentieth century. Spanning nearly 50 years, beginning with the short story “The Valley Between” (1954), Marshall's works consistently focus on the daily lives of working-class and middle-class minority women, the difficulties facing West Indian immigrants to the United States, and the legacy of the slave trade in the Americas. In addition to five novels, Marshall has published several collections of novellas and short stories, a memoir, and many speeches and lectures. Her short stories are regularly included in literary anthologies.

Born Valenza Pauline Burke in Brooklyn, New York on April 9, 1929 to Barbadian immigrants Samuel and Ada Burke, Marshall grew up in the aftermath of the stock market crash of 1929 and then during the Great Depression. She graduated from Brooklyn College in 1953 and pursued graduate studies at Hunter College. She married Kenneth Marshall in 1950, and they had one son before divorcing in 1963.

Marshall’s major contribution to American letters is that she brings to light the specificities of national, linguistic, and cultural origins of and differences among African Americans in the United States. By focusing on West Indian immigrants, she stresses the limitations of conceiving of African diaspora in the Americas as a monolithic phenomenon. Her attention to the particularities of West Indians as a subgroup of African Americans requires readers to recognize intraracial as well as interracial conflicts.

It was only accidentally that, as an adolescent, she stumbled upon the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar in the Macon Street branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, an event which inspired her to become a writer. Her first job was as a writer for *Our World*, a magazine aimed at a black reading audience. Due to the lack of exposure to black writings and literature as a youth, her main influences on writing her first novel were the *Bildungsromanen* of Thomas Mann. It was only later, through self-education, that she drew upon black writers, such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Ralph Ellison.

An important element of Marshall's fiction is her ability to imagine and dramatize the hardships facing African Caribbean immigrants to the United States. Marshall's attention to dialogue, character development, and storytelling brings alive unique perspectives from a variety of social, racial, national, and gendered positions. While *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), a coming-of-age story of a young African American woman growing up among a community of Barbadian immigrants in Brooklyn, offered a semiautobiographical perspective, Marshall’s other works clearly illustrate her agility in crafting multiple
points of view. For example, while her first short story describes the growing frustration and eventual freedom of a middle-class white woman, her most recent novel, *The Fisher King* (2000), is a tersely written novel about intergenerational family conflict that takes place in New York and Paris as told from the perspective of an 8-year-old boy. In her epic *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), Marshall delivers a sharp criticism of the economic and political postcolonial strife in the Caribbean nations and of US cultural and economic interference impeding the autonomy of the island nations. Marshall's other novels are *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983a), a saga of a middle-class African American widow who takes a Caribbean cruise vacation only to find herself coming into cultural and spiritual awareness in Grenada; and *Daughters* (1991), a story about a young immigrant woman from the fictional island of Triunion, who must come to terms with the women in her extended family. Among her short stories, "Reena," "Merle," "To Da-Duh: In Memoriam," and "Some Get Wasted" are the most widely anthologized.

Marshall has been the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1961, a Ford Foundation Grant in 1963, a National Endowment for the Arts Grant in 1967, and a MacArthur Foundation Award in 1992. She won the Rosenthal Foundation Award for the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1962 for *Soul Clap Hands and Sing*, the Before Columbus Foundation American Book Award in 1984 for *Praisesong for the Widow*, and the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature in 1989 for *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and *Praisesong for the Widow*. In 1994, she was named a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library. Marshall has taught at Virginia Commonwealth University; the University of California, Berkeley; the Iowa Writers’ Workshop; and Yale University. She currently teaches creative writing at New York University and holds the Helen Gould Sheppard Chair of Literature and Culture.

**SEE ALSO:** Ellison, Ralph (AF); Ethnicity and Fiction (AF); Postcolonial Fiction of the West Indian/Caribbean Diaspora (BIF); West Indian Fiction (WF)

**REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS**


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