

Sherley Anne Williams (1944-1999)

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SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS (1944-1999)

Sherley Anne Williams, a leading African American author, poet, playwright and professor of literature and writing at the University of California, San Diego, died July 6 at Kaiser Permanente Hospital of cancer. She was 54 years old.

Williams, a native Californian who grew up in the San Joaquin Valley, was best known for her historical novel "Dessa Rose." First published in 1986 by William Morrow & Co., "Dessa Rose" was an instant critical and popular success. The novel is now in its fourth printing and has been translated into German, Dutch, and French. At the time of her death, Williams was working on a sequel to "Dessa Rose" and on another novel set in the 20th century.

The story of an enslaved black woman and a white Southern belle, "Dessa Rose" was praised by the New York Times as "artistically brilliant, emotionally affecting and totally unforgettable." Williams told the Los Angeles Times that her research on slavery while writing the novel "brought me to the brink of despair, because I realized how circumscribed our circumstances had been."

Williams' prodigious talent won her acclaim in many literary genres. Her first book of poetry, "The Peacock Poems," was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. She won an Emmy Award for a television performance of poems from her second poetry book, "SomeOne Sweet Angel Chile," another National Book Award nominee. Her full-length, one-woman drama, "Letters from a New England Negro," was a featured play at the National Black Theatre Festival (1991) and the Chicago International Theatre Festival (1992).

"Working Cotton," Williams' 1992 Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich children's tale, won an American Library Association Caldecott Award and a Coretta Scott King Book Award, and it was listed among "Best Books of 1992" by Parents Magazine. She also recently published a second children's book, "Girls Together."

Literary scholar Barbara Christian has written: "Williams' writing is rich, intellectually stimulating, beautifully crafted, and unique. [It] is brilliant, and her contributions to the field of African American literature are long lasting."

Williams was an alumna of California State University, Fresno, where she earned a B.A. in English in 1966, and of Brown University, where she earned an M.A. in American Literature in 1972. She joined UCSD's Literature Department in 1973, received tenure in 1975, and served as chair from 1977 to 1980.

In addition to her literary achievements, Williams was a renowned scholar of African American literature and culture. She is the author of "Give Birth to Brightness," a 1972 study of the hero in modern African American literature. In addition to her 26-year teaching career at UCSD, she was a Senior Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Ghana, and Visiting Professor at the University of Southern California, Cornell University, Stanford University, and Sweet Briar College in Virginia. She was named 1987 Distinguished Professor of the Year by the UCSD Alumni Association.

In May 1998, Williams was a guest of honor at a UCSD conference on "Black Women Writers and the 'High Art' of Afro-American Letters." The conference was organized in part to celebrate the 12th anniversary of the publication of *Dessa Rose*. "At that time, the profound impact of the novel and her life work was reflected in presentations by the most eminent scholars of African American literature, and it was in evidence in the attendance and vigorous participation of our extended community," said Lisa Lowe, Chair of the Literature Department.

On the final night of the conference, leading actors from the San Diego area staged a public reading from "*Dessa Rose*." At the end of their performance, Williams stood up and said, "Thank you for giving me my book back."

Williams' colleagues are planning to restage the dramatic reading of "*Dessa Rose*" for videotape release and future broadcast. This event will coincide with a memorial service planned for the Fall at UCSD.

Williams is survived by her son, Malcolm, three grandchildren, a sister and three nieces. In lieu of flowers, her family has asked that donations be made to the Jamila Ramsay Scholarship Fund, Christian Fellowship Church, 1601 Kelton Rd., San Diego, CA 92114.

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