

Professor of literature Sherley Anne Williams publishes first novel "Dessa Rose"

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UCSD PROFESSOR OF LITERATURE PUBLISHES FIRST NOVEL

The story of how friendship crossed color lines--when slavery was legal in America--is the basis for this first novel by poet Sherley Anne Williams, a professor of literature at the University of California, San Diego.

"Dessa Rose," based on the lives of two historical characters, tells of how two women, one black and one white, faced the events of their time: Dessa Rose as a runaway slave, and Rufel as an abandoned wife who lives on an isolated farm, harbors runaways and does the best she can to survive.

Although Williams' characters come from different backgrounds, they come to respect each other and gradually to regard each other as friends. "It wasn't easy for them, but it was rewarding. They had to experience growth as individuals in order to become friends," she said.

Starting her career as a fiction writer, Williams discovered that in the mid-1970s poetry found a more successful marketplace than did fiction. She published "The Peacock Poems," nominated for a National Book Award, in 1976. "Some One Sweet Angel Chile," her second volume of poetry, was published in 1982.

Williams' first play, "Letters From a New England Negro," opened at Brown University in 1982. The play received good reviews, Williams said, and played to standing-room audiences.

For her next literary project, Williams is eyeing a trilogy. "Each volume would cover a decade, and would trace the development of a group of blacks from the early days of the black power movement to the present. The movement would not be the focus, but would provide the historical background," she said.

"The black power movement was a unique experience, a kind of movement against which one can judge experiences. It was the start of profound self-questioning on the part of blacks. The trilogy will have to do with situations between and among blacks in a small California town, in relation to the growth of the state.

Williams grew up in Fresno, which she refers to as an idyllic childhood place, having lots of fruit trees and wide, dusty streets. Before coming to UCSD in 1973, Williams taught at Cal State, Fresno and worked on her master's at Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island. Her first book, "Give Birth to Brightness," was accepted as her master's thesis. It is the study of the hero in modern Afro-American literature.

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