

Writers conference brings out legends, dreamers

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CHAPEL HILL — Sonia Sanchez — noted poet, activist, playwright and teacher — was the keynote speaker for the George Moses Horton Society Poetry Conference at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on Saturday. On Friday night, Houston A. Baker Jr. one of the foremost scholars of African-American literature in the world, was the featured poet for the opening night of the conference.

More than 500 students and faculty members from various universities around the country came to the Hanes Art Center Auditorium to listen as Sanchez read from her various poetry collections, including "Home Coming" (1969), "We a BaddDDD People" (1970), "Homegirls & Handgrenades" (1984), "Love Poems," "Does Your House Have Lions?" and "Wounded in the House of a Friend." She has written more than a dozen books of poetry, plays and children's books. In 1977, she began teaching at Temple University in Philadelphia, where she was a Presidential Fellow and professor of English and women's studies before retiring in 1999.

Baker's most recent book of poetry is "Passing Over." The most memorable poems that Baker read, according to the students, were the ones that celebrate his wife Charlotte's survival and recovery after rape. He describes how he was bound hand and foot while his wife was assaulted. Hopeful cadences express, "So you have come back to me. ... And I love you more than ever. I love you more, more, more...."

Baker and Sanchez captivated their audiences. Sanchez wanted the students to concentrate on the lessons she came to teach them.

"Just listen. I know that you want to clap, but just listen. Instead, just wave your hand," Sanchez said. She often spoke with her eyes closed in meditation or rested upon the podium, intensely sharing her verse.

According to the students, one of the most memorable stories Sanchez told was about an elderly woman, Rosa

Lee Johnson, who taught Sanchez never to give up on love. The woman asked Sanchez, "Has you ever loved a pretty man, girl?"

Sanchez responded, "They keep their love up high in a linen closet, and I'm too short to reach it."

A whirl of laughter stirred the audience.

Sanchez challenged the writers in the audience to follow their calling.

"If you are a writer, you are put on this earth to write....Poetry is what I love. This thing that is light and life. It tells the world that it is possible to be human," she said.

Dr. Trudier Harris-Lopez, founder/president of George Moses Horton Society for the Study of African American Poetry, observed that many of the conference attendees sat in awe as Sanchez spoke.

"It was an amazing reading. Sonia Sanchez was so involved in her performance that she lost track of time. After her reading, she autographed books for two more hours," Harris-Lopez said.

Dr. Joanne B. Gabbin of James Madison University presented a paper about Sanchez called "Coming Correct: the Hip-ness of Sonia Sanchez's Poetry." Before the poetry reading, Gabbin recognized how much she has learned from "hanging out with Sonia Sanchez."

Sanchez told Gabbin about the passing of such cultural icons as Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Etheridge Knight, Shirley Anne Williams, Audre Lorde and others.

"She celebrates their lives and also celebrates their transition," Gabbin said. "Hanging out with Sonia Sanchez will teach you a lot about being generous. She puts her bread on the water, and it comes back."

Because Sanchez tends to intensify her adjectives by using adverbs, Gabbin introduced Sanchez as the "beautifully beautiful, the spiritually spiritual, the powerfully powerful, amazingly amazing Sonia Sanchez."

Sanchez thanked all of the organizers of the conference for inviting her to address the conference. She encouraged

the young writers "to learn about what Baraka, Neal, and Toure attempted to do. They challenged this country. This country tried to eliminate them."

As she read "A Poem for My Father," she expressed a tone of disappointment about his "makeshift manhood." When she read a selection from "A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women," she noted, "There is no place for a soft black woman."

Sanchez explained the source of the title "Homegirls and Handgrenades." During an interview with a journalist, Sanchez clarified that although she is a world traveler, she is "still a homegirl from Harlem," and she has "dropped some hand grenades around the world." She said, "I try to explode the myths that have been dropped about black people."

Baker culminated the poetry reading of several student and professional poets. Christian Campbell, Hermine Pinson, R. Flowers Rivera and Evie Shockley participated in the poetry reading on Friday.

Baker dedicated many of his poems to his family members. His verse called "This Is Not a Poem" celebrates his grandmother's hands and his grandfather's difficulty during the Depression. He also read from "Blues Journeys Home," a poem about "socializing roots" that reveals his wife's hidden knowledge of agriculture and planting seasons. He dedicated a poem to Naomi Long Madgett's Lotus Press and Dudley Randall's Broadside Press for helping African Americans get published.

His "Double Bass Variations" describes a loving encounter, while his poem about Lady Day questions what has happened to the woman who once held her head so high.

The George Moses Horton Society for the Study of African American Poetry was founded by Dr. Trudier Harris-Lopez, J. Carlyle Sitterson professor of English in 1996. It is named in honor of an enslaved poet in the Chatham County/Chapel Hill areas from his birth in the late 18th century until well after emancipation. To learn more, visit www.unc.edu/campus/signs/Horton.



Noted illustrator Ashley Bryan talks with Carole Boston Weatherford about some of her latest books.

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Well-known poet Lucille Clifton greets Sonia Sanchez (right), poet and activist.

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