

Introducing the SRPR Illinois Poet: Haki R. Madhubuti



Photograph by Lynda Koolish

As poet, publisher, editor and educator, Haki R. Madhubuti has published 24 books (some under his former name, Don L. Lee) and is one of the world's best-selling authors of poetry and non-fiction, with books in print in excess of 3 million. His *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?: The African American Family in Transition* (1990) has sold over 1,000,000 copies. His poetry and essays were published in over thirty anthologies from 1997-2001. He is a much sought-after poet and lecturer, and has convened workshops and served as guest/keynote speaker at thousands of colleges, universities, libraries and community centers in the U.S. and abroad. Mr. Madhubuti is the founder, publisher, and chairman of the board of Third World Press (1967), co-founder of the Institute of Positive Education/New Concept School (1969), and co-founder of Betty Shabazz International Charter School (1998) in Chicago, Illinois. He is also a founder and chairman of the board of The International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent, founder and director of the National Black Writers Retreat. Currently, Haki R. Madhubuti is the Distinguished University Professor, founder and director emeritus of the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing and director of the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program at Chicago State University.

A Discussion with Haki R. Madhubuti

SRPR: Professor Madhubuti, you have just published your eleventh book of poetry, *Run Toward Fear: New Poems and a Poet's Handbook*. This rich book is one of the most unusual poetry books I've run across: it contains many imperatives and instructions for the reader, such that *Run Toward Fear* seems as much an *ars vivendi* as it is a book of poems. Can you please comment on how you came to write it?

Madhubuti: The poems in *Run Toward Fear* are in keeping with my traditional body of work. I include praise poems for individuals, serious cultural and political criticisms, as well as work attempting to define some aspect of our cultural conversation, such as the prose poems "Art."

This type of poetry is not unusual for me, and if one surveys the landscape of my work over the last 40 years, one can see this connecting thesis throughout. There is so little poetry in existence keeping in mind that in America, we're talking about a population of blacks folks a little over 40 million. Out of that number, less than 1% are published poets who have a political and cultural identity and mission to their work. That is without a doubt African and African American centered. *Run Toward Fear* is special to me because I do see progress in the writing as well as in the cultural and political thought. The opening poem "Fear" sets the pace for the entire book. That is I think that poets as well as all artists should be willing to stand and speak truth to family, friends, enemies, populations, and of course, power. And I end the poetry section with the poem "For the Consideration of Poets" where I continue to call for poetry of resistance, honorable defiance, and educated thought.

Part 3 of the book "A Poet's Handbook" came about as a result of attempting to teach poetry writing at the community and university levels for close to thirty-five years. I felt that the combination of poetry and a writing handbook would be unique and in my estimation, progressive, in that we were able to package two books in one and keep the price within the financial horizons of most people who read and write poetry.

The handbook really speaks for itself. But, I open up with "You may not be able to earn a living exclusively as a poet or writer,

but if you persist, work hard and nurture your talent, it is almost guaranteed you will earn a life." That's how I feel about poetry, music and poetry, and the many struggles of my people and others gave me a life.

SRPR: You have written several non-fiction books which have sold in the millions. What special role, if any, do you imagine your poetry having that your other books do not or cannot have?

Madhubuti: The major difference between prose and poetry, other than the compactness and succinctness of poetry, is that most poems sing. That is they have a musical quality within a defined space that does not, for the most part, require days to read and comprehend.

My prose books have all been geared toward definition, clarification, and volcanic encouragement for Black people to take ownership of their lives and spaces that they / we occupy.

My first book of nonfiction, *From Plan to Planet*, is a collection of essays that had been written in the heat of Black struggle. Most were between 1965 and 1971. The book was published in 1973. The book easily sold over 200,000 copies and is still in print.

My second book of essays, *Enemies: The Clash of Races*, was a book that primarily came out of my many travels to Africa and the many political and cultural struggles and battles of the 1970's.

The other nonfiction books, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single and Dangerous?*, *Claiming Earth: Race, Rage, Rape, Redemption*, and *Tough Notes: A Healing Call for Creating Exceptional Black Men*, are all political and cultural in content. My poetry has over the years also been embodied with political and cultural messages. However, I'm able to say in a few lines and stanzas that would normally take an essay of prose. The value of poetry is that I can read a poem and bring people into its interior and cause them to think before they know they're even thinking. In poetry a tight line, such as "She was rich memory, melody, and best words," says a great deal about Margaret Walker that will hopefully encourage readers to seek out her work. A line like "Art has its own answers and name," will hopefully send the reader on a voyage looking for definitions. My point is that poetry among the best poets forces us to use a different part of our brain.

For an example, the first line from the poem "Gatekeepers" reads: "The seeing is in the listening" which is, I think, a line that forces the reader to read the rest of the poem. Or, as in "The Journey" where I open with "the missed steps are the most frightening," which for the average reader would question which steps are missing and what is frightening about those steps?

Finally, poetry, unlike prose, can give us insight into a personality or subject in very few words, as in the poem "On the Entertainer R. Kelly":

if you have daughters?
how you gointa
protect them
from the somebodies
just like you?

SRPR: So much of your poetry is situated in the local: your work is full of apostrophe, direct address, poems written for particular occasions and to real, and named, people. I am reminded of John Dewey, who said "The local is the only universal, upon that all art builds." Can you talk, please, about why you situate your poetry in the local?

Madhubuti: Poetry is the musical and rhythmic language of a people. Poetry by definition, for the most part, is not literal. The metaphors of poetry are what keep us coming back to the insights of the poet. I come out of the local, underprivileged, and working class communities. I was educated in poor public schools, the United States Army, community college, a working class four-year university, before teaching and graduate work at the University of Iowa. I grew up working, starting close to full-time employment at 10 years of age. The reality of the urban streets and survival at all cost governed my young life and propelled me into an arena that most young people are not ready for. I grew up without a father, and lost my mother at the age of 17. I found Black music at 13 years of age, and Black literature at 14. And without doubt or hesitation, I credit both music and literature, specifically Black Art, for saving my life and giving it greater meaning than living in a mediocre day-to-day existence.

Art brought meaning, substance and greater possibilities to my life. When I began to read, seriously read poetry, and ultimately found Black poetry as a teenager, I knew that there was a purpose to my life. After consuming the works of Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, W.E.B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Frank Marshall Davis, Carl Sandburg, Walt Whitman, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Richard Wright, and others, I realized that literature not only defines, it inspires. And therefore, my writing from the local originated in my living in the local, and reading the works of persons who walked and populated the same streets.

SRPR: You write such strong, pragmatic, and at times incredibly powerfully moving poems. And you have worked, since your first book, *Think Black* (1966), with very strong emotions, such as anger and pride. I wonder if you could talk some about the kind of spiritual and emotional work you are performing with your poetry. What role and importance, that is, does emotion-work and spirit work play in your poetry?

Madhubuti: I, like most Black people, grew up in the Black church, and the spiritual quality of the weekly messages and our emotional connection to these messages allowed us to survive and develop from week to week. This love of self and people is what drives my work, and me and if there's any clear definition of Black people, it is one that must include our connection to the often-indefinable world of the African spirit. I also grew up on the lower east side of Detroit, the west and south sides of Chicago, and the rural and dusty roads of Arkansas. The anger that is manifested in much of my work comes from fighting the debilitating effects of white supremacy and white nationalism on the lives of Black folks. All of my adult life I've been involved in political and cultural struggle of and for Black folks. I have not been able to escape this struggle for one day of my life. At best there have been moments, sometimes hours, in the heat of creation or in the solitude of reading or listening to good music or witnessing the work of our finest visual artists, that I have been able to escape. Most of my work, if not all of it, are driven by a deep and uncompromising love of children. This would include the children of all cultures, even though I primarily work with children of African ancestry. Therefore, my

poems are driven by this love of community and knowing deep down inside that we have the capacity to change the world.

SRPR: Why honestly do you write?

Madhubuti: I write to tell our truth, and in telling that truth develop a poetic paradigm that works for me, and hopefully is large enough to work for others. Also, our language is our name. Black poetry represents our classical language. As a poet, it is part of my responsibility to keep this language, and the ideas incorporated within, fresh, innovative, spiritually encouraging, and realistically optimistic. I as a poet see as a part of my life's work the continued reflection upon the deeds that in effect pigeonhole all people who have not been defined as part of the small-minded, Euro-centric rulership. We poets have been blessed by the hands of the Creator to not only be a witness to a corrupt and selfish rulership, but must be in the forefront of writing and fighting these homeland manipulators who define our condition as colors and fear rather than the creation of sacred space for our children.