

Noted poet, author and educator Dr. Millican laid to rest

Written by Staff Writer

Thursday, 20 December 2012 11:22 -



Sumter, SC – Dr. Arthenia Jackson Bates Millican, the noted poet, author and educator, passed away peacefully on Thursday, December 13, at National Health Care Center in her hometown of Sumter, SC, from complications related to pneumonia. She was 92.

"Arthenia was a pioneer. She lived a full life that bridged the distinctions that often separate the intellectual from the intuitive, the mind from the heart, and the academic from the commonplace concerns of ordinary people," said Rick Jones, co-founder and Executive Director of the AJBM Literary Foundation that was established in 2008 in honor of Dr. Millican.

Professor and award-winning poet Nikky Finney reflects the sentiments of generations of readers, students, peers and all those who respect and admire Dr. Millican with these words: "Our great Black nightingale of poetry is gone. Our esteemed scholar and historian of African American life and culture is now crossing over to the other side. What a long and gracious life she lived. May we who now remain behind continue to teach the next generation about Arthenia Bates Millican, the great irreplaceable one who helped make us who we are."

Dr. Millican was born in 1920 in Sumter, South Carolina and graduated from Lincoln High in 1937. She finished Morris College in Sumter, South Carolina (1941), earned a master's degree from Clark Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia (1948), and earned a Ph.D. from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana (1972). Her doctoral dissertation, "In Quest of an Afro Centric Tradition for Black American Literature," focused on James Weldon Johnson.

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Dr. Millican's first poem was published when she was sixteen years old. A protégé of Langston Hughes, she went on to write numerous books, poems, articles, essays and book reviews over the course of her lifetime. Her prominent books include: *Seeds Beneath the Snow* (Greenwich Book Publishers, 1969 and Howard University Press, 1975) a collection of 12 short stories based on life in the South; *The Deity Nodded* (Harlo Press, 1973) a novel based on a young women's search for truth which leads to a conflict between Islam and Christianity; and *Such Things from the Valley* (self-published, 1977) a second volume of short stories.

Her short works have appeared in the National Poetry Anthology, *Essence* magazine, *Callaloo*, *The College Language Association Journal*, *The Negro Digest*, *Black World*, *Obsidian*, and many other publications. She was a contributing editor for "James Baldwin, A Critical Evaluation," and "Sturdy Black Bridges, A Vision of Black Women in Literature." Her work is often compared with that of Paul Laurence Dunbar, Zora Neale Hurston, Edward Gaines, and Thomas Hardy.

Dr. Millican's teaching career spanned the years 1942 to 1980. She taught at high schools in South Carolina, Virginia and Mississippi. At the college level, she taught at: Morris College (Sumter, South Carolina) where she also served as Chair of the English Department; Mississippi Valley State University (Itta Bena, Mississippi); Southern University (Baton Rouge, Louisiana); and Norfolk State College (Norfolk, Virginia).

On a personal level, she was the leader of her family. In many respects and over many decades, she sacrificed wealth and fame for her family and education.

In a tribute to Dr. Millican, "Voices Beneath the Water," distinguished poet and scholar Dr. Jerry W. Ward, Jr., writes:

"Listen. Be still and listen. Be still and listen and learn something for everyday use. Our ancestors are stern, purposeful and dignified, impatient with foibles, adamant that memory shall be. During her ninety-two years of navigating life on Earth, Arthenia Jackson Bates Millican listened faithfully. She translated the sounds of ancestral text-messages into the gestures that bespeak profound humanity and enviable modesty, into the works that one might argue leave this world somewhat better than when we arrived. She produced seeds beneath the snow, the life-kernels we are obliged to cultivate as proof that we are worthy holding her legacy in our minds, our ears, and our hands. Having given us a model of how to live and make contributions to humanity without pretense, having given us many lessons in altruism or the best habits of the

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heart, she is now speaking with the millions of voices beneath the water. Listen to her. Be still and listen to her. Be still, listen, and learn how best to use the gifts she gave us to do the work that is always there to be done."

Dr. Millican is survived by: a son, Willie Louis Lee, and his wife, Ruby Lee (Clinton, Maryland); a sister, Catherine Alia, and her husband, Alden Alia (Chicago, Illinois); a brother, Edward G. Jackson, and his wife, Margaret Jackson (Washington, DC); four grand-children, six great grand-children, and a host of nieces and nephews.

The funeral was held on Wednesday, December 19, at St. Jude Catholic Church, 611 West Oakland Avenue, Sumter, SC 29151. Details on the memorial service to be held in the coming months will be forthcoming. In lieu of flowers, the family offers the option of donating to the AJBM Literary Foundation in her honor. Please send donations to: AJBM Literary Foundation, P.O. Box 723, Sumter, SC, 29151.