

An Article by Peggy Dye

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THE NEW YORK NEWSDAY INTERVIEW WITH CONRAD LYNN and ANN PETRY

'God Don't Want No Coward Soldiers'

Q. Malcolm X said that history is a teacher, that we need to remember the past to know who we are today. As we near the end of Black History Month, what do you remember of Harlem in the '30s and '40s that informs you today?

Lynn. My strongest impressions are before the '40s, [during the] Great Depression, when tenants were evicted. The marshal would put all the furniture on the street. Then the [neighbors] would gather and face the marshal without any arms and make the marshal put the furniture back. That was very shocking to me as a young lawyer. Here the people had taken the law into their own hands, and non-violently. It was clear that there were revolutionary implications, because if the people had been stopped we don't know what would have happened next. But [President] Roosevelt was very intelligent, and [Mayor] LaGuardia was also. They would not do anything to these people.

Petry. One of my memories was the campaign for jobs on 125th Street — "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work." There were almost violent confrontations between the people and the store owners. People wanted jobs. After all, they lived in the area around the stores. There were songs — "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" — and people selling apples, and, of course, the evictions.

Q. How did the Depression affect women in Harlem?

Petry. Same way it affected men — in their inability to get jobs and in the terrible struggle to hold a family together. The fact that you couldn't pay your rent created turmoil.

Lynn. My father and mother had come up from Georgia, where they had witnessed lynchings. My father joined the Little Baptist Church in Rockville Centre, L.I. The main song of the preacher, Rev. Harry, was "God Don't Want No Coward Soldiers in His Band." That was a message to black people, that we are not forever going to be victims. That may be why I became such a radical.

When we came to Harlem we brought that song with us. That's why black people were standing



HARLEM HISTORIANS

Conrad Lynn, 83, is a veteran civil rights lawyer. A new edition of his autobiography, "There Is a Fountain," is due out this summer from Lawrence Hill. Ann Petry, 84, is a writer whose prize-winning 1946 novel, "The Street," has just been reissued by Houghton-Mifflin. Peggy Dye spoke with them for New York Newsday.

out on the street helping those who got evicted back into their houses — because they had decided they were not cowards.

Q. Ann, what made you stick it out in Harlem?

Petry. I come from a long line of "goin'-on women." My Aunt Eloise James was the first woman pharmacist in Connecticut. But more directly, I met George Petry, and we got married and moved to

New York because he lived here. I was in the advertising department of The Amsterdam News. Then Adam [Clayton Powell] Jr. founded a paper called the People's Voice and invited me to be the women's features editor. It was a weekly, and a very good paper.

Meantime, I had been writing short stories and getting rejection slips and reading all the biographies I could get my hands on because I thought somewhere there must be a secret I could find. Then, one of my stories was in the magazine The Crisis and someone at Houghton-Mifflin saw it. I was called to their office and told that I had won an award [and some money]. I was so excited. I went to see a friend on my way home. "Did you go into the publishers like that?" she said, "with that thing on your head?" I was wearing an old green scarf my sister had knit. I told my friend, "The publishers don't care if you come in with a spear and a loincloth!" But that [comment] burst my balloon.

Q. What was it like to be young and beautiful and vulnerable in Harlem in the '30s and '40s?

Petry. I was young, but not beautiful or vulnerable! I have a certain kind of look, and I acted as though I wore armor.

Lynn. There is another factor. Because of her complexion, she looked like a person of education and therefore was not assumed to be in the lower class. I know how the young men acted at that time. We were very sensitive about this matter, about how black women were regarded in the middle class. Downtown, white men, especially lawyers with money, would come to Harlem for Negro women. There was that tension.

Q. Ann, in your novel "The Street" a rich white man aimed to drive the heroine, Lutie, to prostitution. What helped black women defend their integrity?

Petry. I can't think of a thing.

Lynn. In Brooklyn, the young black women would

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Lynn and Petry

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stand on street corners in line and white people would come by. Sometimes they would feel the black women's arms to see how strong they were and then would take them to do housework. I am talking about black women I know, of my generation, who began working this way. One woman [I know who started out like this eventually] became an investment banker.

Q. To what extent was culture — jazz, for instance — a way up and out?

Petry. There were possibilities, but the jazz clubs were for people with money. And the Cotton Club, in Harlem, barred us. Black people couldn't go.

Q. How did you feel about the black musicians who ended up working in the jazz clubs?

Petry. We did not condemn them. We all needed ways to earn a living.

Q. Did anything surprise you when you moved to Harlem?

Petry. I worked in an after-school program at PS 10 on St. Nicholas Avenue. That was the first time I had direct contact with "latch-key" children. They had no place to go after school. Many of them were in foster homes. I remember talking to one little boy, and I said, "Who do you live with?" He said, "I live with a lady." He didn't know her name. I had been brought up in a warm, loving family. My sister and I thought we were treasures. [So] these children were a shock to me.

Q. I saw Josephine Baker the other night on TV in "Princess Tan Tan." Her image was that of a beautiful young woman who was not really civilized. Was this old movie typical of the "Harlem Renaissance"?

Lynn. It was. Josephine was getting an opportunity. I wasn't critical at the time because I didn't go to those pictures. Black people didn't see them.

Q. Black people didn't go to the movies?

Lynn. Most of the time black people wouldn't go downtown. You'd have trouble. Sometimes they would discriminate against you becoming a patron in a downtown theater. Nobody wants to be insulted, so many times we would not go downtown for a play or anything.

Q. Were restaurants open?

Lynn. On 125th Street, Woolworth's had seats at a counter where you could eat, but they didn't serve black people. This is in the heart of Harlem. That's where Powell got his start, you know — when he started that picket line in front of Woolworth's, saying, "Don't patronize where you can't eat!"

Q. What happened?

Lynn. Ha! They had to open the counter. Adam was just naturally a rebel, and he was without fear.

Q. I've heard that Powell was a womanizer.

Lynn. Heh heh, ha ha!

Q. He never approached you, Ann?

Petry. I keep telling you that people didn't. I looked so, what shall I say, domineering.

Lynn. She looked upper-class. She doesn't want me to say that, but she does. Nobody would approach that woman. You understand, in the black community there were class lines, and complexion had an effect.

Q. Were drugs a problem in Harlem in the '30s and '40s?

Petry. Not like they are now. The principal users were people in the arts, the music world, or on the fringes of society. It was mostly recreational.

Q. Where did [Harlem's] crime come from? Was it homegrown or . . .

Lynn. Malcolm [X] is correct that the more sophisticated methods of crime came from downtown. In Harlem there was a saying in the early '30s that only people who were exceedingly daring would go downtown for a bank robbery. It wasn't customary for even the bank robbers to go downtown!

As a [criminal lawyer], I [have seen] terrible moments between black people and white people. In Rockville Centre, in 1933, was the first divorce case I had. I was representing this black woman, and she was getting a divorce from her black husband. The lawyer for the husband was also a black man. On cross-examination, he called my client a nigger. I asked the judge, who was white, to make the lawyer apologize. And he said, "Get on with the case! There's nothing wrong with that, go ahead!" That fixed the moment in my mind, because this is in a court. It was perfectly all right to call a black woman a "nigger." That is where we have come from.