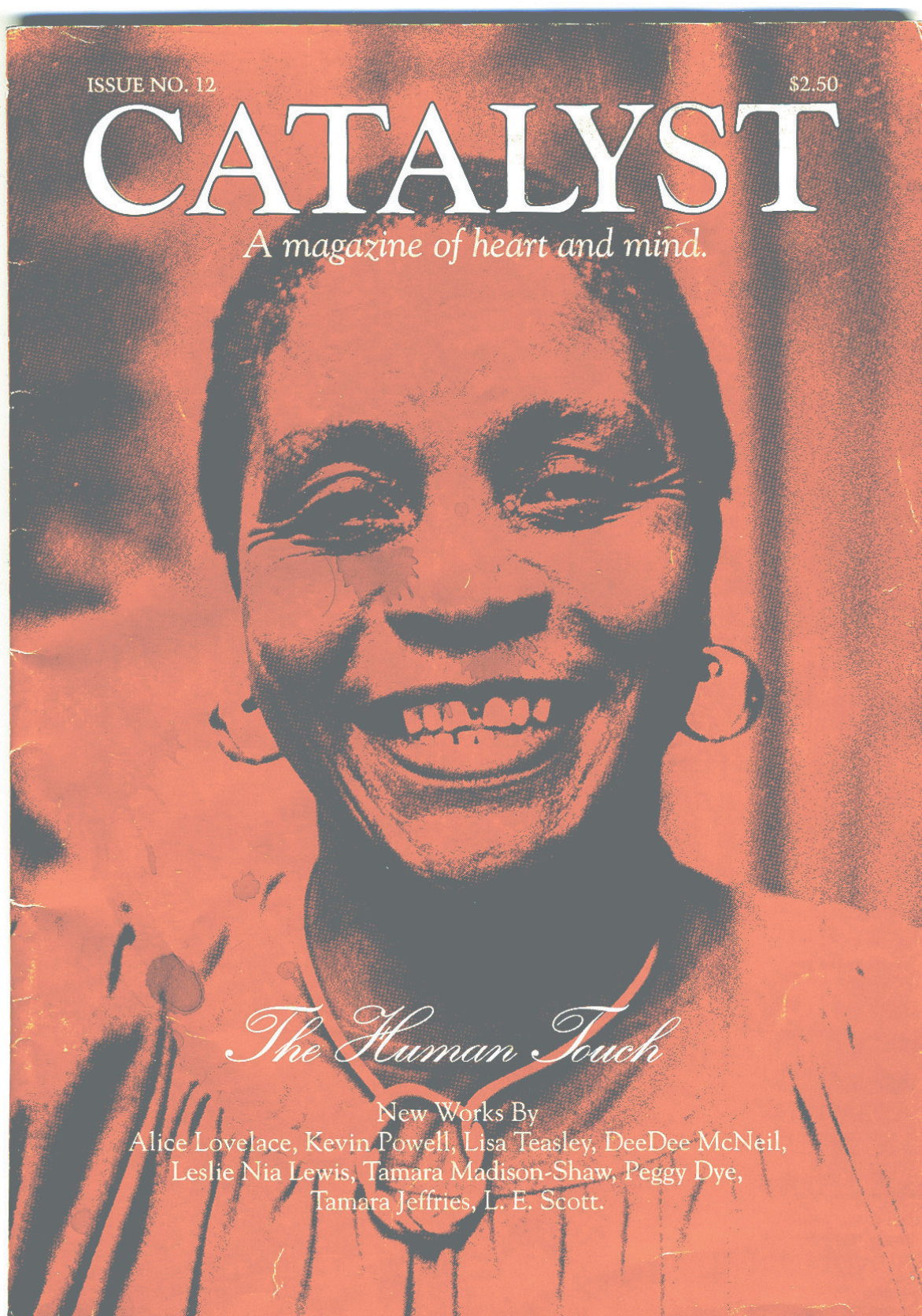


# Articles by Peggy Dye

Peggy Dye (January 4, 1943-December 4, 2007)



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# CATALYST

*A magazine of heart and mind.*

## *The Human Touch*

New Works By

Alice Lovelace, Kevin Powell, Lisa Teasley, DeeDee McNeil,  
Leslie Nia Lewis, Tamara Madison-Shaw, Peggy Dye,  
Tamara Jeffries, L. E. Scott.



# Words For Journey Under Seige

by Peggy Dye



photo: Jim Alexander

The fear came up again, as soon as the white man got on the bus. Oliver looked at me and started to cry.

"Don't let him see you, boy!" I whispered, squeezing Oliver's thin cotton shirtsleeve and feeling the skinny arm hot under it.

"Oiwee!, you hurt me, Peggy Anne," he bawled.

The white man curled his lip at us as he flopped his wide butt down on the seat opposite. His lips, where they turned under, were purple like Uncle Jim's German shepherd, Jumbo. And the white man, with his unshaven face, pointy ears, and sprawling behind suddenly reminded me of Jumbo.

"Oliver, he looks like a dog, see him!" I whispered, trying to sound light-hearted, but the sour in my stomach was rising as I braced my back against the bus seat. "Just think of him saying those things like an old dog barking. He's just an animal." I raised my head to sniff at the white man the way my mother sniffed at Jumbo when the dog got out of line. Jumbo would whimper when my mother Alice tossed her head a certain way and sniffed down at him as if he were the lowest dog in Evanston, Illinois.

"Dog bites. I'm scared," Oliver said, shaking. "I want to go back home."

"Don't be a scaredy cat. We're going to school."

"Don't want to go over there with all them white kids."

"Hush! You do. You want a good education. Learn the truth and everything. Your mother told mine."

"My mamma don't ride this bus." He wailed.

The other white people glanced at us and shook their heads. Nobody said a word though. Except the white dog across the aisle. He started growling, as he'd been doing for the previous four days. "Nigger, nigger, eeny meeny miny mo, catch a pair of children by the toe, nigger, nigger nigger," he sang softly, just loud enough so we could hear in the front, and the bus driver too.

The first day he'd done this, at the beginning of the week, I went home and told my mother.

"Oh, my lord, I better go down to the bus stop with you, baby," she said.

"Mother, he doesn't get on 'til we cross Wilmette Avenue." That

was a bunch of streets away from our stop and the dividing line between downtown and South Evanston where Central School was. I and Oliver were going to Central School. We had been going for a year, or, actually, I'd been there a year, and Oliver was just starting. I was a first grader. He was in kindergarten.

"You going to go there to learn the truth, not some Negro education," my mother had told me when I cried upon learning the year before that my first day in school would not be with my friends Madelyn and Roland who lived behind us. My first day was going to be what mother called "an adventure," and that meant I was going to take a bus, she said, "all by your big self," across town for one hour, "just like a big person," to Central School.

"What's an adventure?" I said.

"It's finding something new. And learning how to be bigger than what you find," she said.

"Like Cinderella found the pumpkin and it was big and she touched it with the giant Indian wand and it turned into an Indian pony?"

"Cinderella doesn't go like that," my mother said. "Where did you get that story, baby?"

"Mamma." Mamma was my grandmother. She corrected the stories my mother read me at night at bedtime. "No need to learn all the white man's lies. Cinderella was an Indian, and you are some of that, too. And the prince was an African. Can you see that?" Grandmother would rock in her chair on her porch overlooking Dodge Avenue, a main street in



Negro Evanston. "Africans had plenty of power in the old days before slavery."

I listened to the stories of my mother and grandmother and liked them both. But I didn't want any "adventure" if it meant going to Central School.

"We come all the way up here from Mississippi, we did, baby, so we could find a better life before we had you. Your daddy and me—

**"The other  
white people  
glanced at us  
and shook their  
heads."**

we want you to have a better schooling than we had. We don't want you going to Foster School."

Foster was around the corner. All my friends were going there.

At night I heard my parents argue. I stuck my ear to the wall of our adjoining bedrooms and listened to their whispers.

"We didn't come all the way up north to give Peggy Anne anything but the best," my mother told my father.

"The child is too little to be traveling on a public bus across Evanston to some peck-o-woods' school," my father said.

"It's a better school than Foster and she can eat at Nora's for lunch." Nora was my mother's sister—my aunt.

"But Alice, the child will have

to lie about her address to the teachers and lie about living in the district. We just can't send her there and tell the child to lie."

"Why not? I didn't ride a Jim-Crow train to Evanston from Greenwood, Mississippi, and work in white folks kitchens 'til I learned my arithmetic well enough to get myself a job at the counter of Centralia's grocery to have my child go to some old country Negro school where she's going to be taught as bad as we were before we come up here."

"It's against the law to send your child out of the district."

"Pshaw! Spitting on the sidewalk is against the law, too."

"It's not right for the child. She'll be all alone on the bus and with adults traveling an hour each day, every day, each way, to go down there. She's too little."

"She's smart as a whip. We'll just tell her that to get a good schooling she has to keep a secret—her address where she really lives. And pretend she lives with Aunt Nora. She can do it. The child has imagination."

So I had learned the lie of my address and had gone to Central School. For the first three months in kindergarten I was fine.

But the truth leaked out. First, I mixed up my real phone number with my Aunt Nora's. I also got friendly with the white kids in my class. They watched how I took the bus every afternoon after school. Instead of walking back to Aunt Nora's. Then, one day, David Ogleby—who lived a block from Aunt Nora's in this token-integrated, four block piece of South Evanston—David just upped

and said, "Peggy Anne doesn't live here. I see her take the bus every morning. She comes from some other colored place, my mother said, because nobody colored lives near here where you take a bus."

The whole class had stared at me. Miss Shanklenberg, the pretty blonde teacher, had frowned wrinkles into her long, straight nose 'til it looked like baby Reno's. Baby Reno lived downstairs in the two family apartment house where I lived and he had the most wrinkled face my grandmother said she ever saw in all her 70 years. "He's a raisin—a baby that's a raisin." She'd chuckled and told a story about a grape arbor drying up to become raisin jam in a drought in Mississippi.

But anyhow, the white kids found me out a liar. My mother went down to the school and talked to the principal. Mother told me and my dad everything afterwards. Mother had started a big discussion about the right of colored to a good education, and said Foster School wasn't any good. The principal had frowned then too, like a raisin, Mother said. Then the principal told Mother that no matter about good schools or bad, I was illegal. The only reason Central School might let me stay was grace: I was smart, good and an asset, especially good as a Negro example.

My mother had argued back that the education system in the North was supposed to be better than Mississippi and she and her husband hadn't fought in World War II to get the Japs and the Germans put down to live in any America where black people were



still being put down. And that Foster School wasn't fit to teach dogs and ponies good manners—and my mother knew since she knew better stables in Mississippi. Plus Foster didn't even have a library and Evanston was famous all over the country for its fine schools. Evanston ranked third in the country for school systems in 1950. She wanted me to go to the best schools the town could offer and she would go to court if she had to.

"Court" set the principal sitting up ramrod straight, the way Mother told it. Mother came back to our side of town and got on the phone with my other aunt, Pinky, who had two children plus Aunt Izzie who had Oliver. Word spread that the three sisters were stirring up legal trouble for the white folks and Negro church services rocked with congregations singing "Amazing Grace!" and "Precious Lord, Take My Hand!" The principal and the sisters met some more. The following September Central School opened up to Oliver and agreed that when Aunt Pinky's girls and my two cousins, Mildred and Jean, got to be old enough to—in two years—they could come, plus more black kids who were not relatives were being interviewed when their parents called the school.

So me and Oliver were riding to school on all that history this morning. I'd finished out kindergarten and begun first grade and Oliver had then joined me. Oliver was little, a runt. If I was three and a half feet tall, he was three feet tall, and he was as black as tar. "A disgrace to the family,

the little darkie," said Uncle Larry, the whitest member of the family and what my grandmother called a "no-color skunk." Uncle Larry drank Gordon's Gin from the bottle and smelt of Juniper berries. "Juniper is what they flavor the devil's brew with, child," my grandmother said. "But it don't fool me none. Liquor turns you rotten inside and your soul stinks. Poor skunk Larry." She shook her head. "He talks stupidity out of that bottle."

Oliver was smart and knew his adding and subtracting before he even went to kindergarten. He could add all the way up to 10 and he could draw too. I liked him going with me on the bus. I felt safer.

But we still rode mainly in silence after we left the Negro side of town and hit downtown and the white people got on and watched us and didn't say anything. Evanston white people in 1950 were not wearing sheets or burning crosses, but they sure could stare hard at you if you rode the bus and were alone, and we were in a Chicago suburb, which, after all, meant we were in the most segregated city in North America.

Still, nobody really bothered us, until the wolf got on.

Did I say wolf? I started out by saying "dog," didn't I? By the time I told you all the background, though, the "dog" had turned more howling and wild-eyed like pictures I saw in school of wolves in Alaska. That white man calling us 'nigger,' and baring his purple lips on the front of the bus, well, he was turning fidgety in the bus

and squinting at us by that fourth day. Like a wolf.

The second day my mother had rode with us. As soon as I told her about the man she came down to the stop and grabbed Tom Brown the driver. He was white but everybody knew everybody in town. She said, "Tom! who is that white man making comments at Peggy Anne? We can't have this."

"Mrs. Dye, I'm sorry. He is a stranger in town. Nobody knows him. May be a Jew." Brown hissed this under his breath and raised an eyebrow. "Speaks with an accent."

"So does everybody here. Even the English who started this country." She huffed up. My father had a grandpa who was English trash, so to hear my mother and father laugh about him. He drank as much as Uncle Larry and made moonshine in Georgia and he was mean. But "the English are cold like that, sure are," my grandmother said. "They the meanest people face of the earth. They killed our Indian relatives off, yes they did, and they don't have no soul about nothing. They sell their mother for a piece of land, they would. Don't never trust no English. They DO make good tea, though." She sipped her Earl Grey tea.

My mother's talk with the bus driver had made me remember all this. I shivered at the thought of the English as my mother and the driver spoke. But then the driver Brown started me shaking even worse by what he told my mother. "Mrs. Dye, we can't tell the man to not say ugly words too much. He has free speech."

"Free speech?"

"Yes. I checked with the



company and there's no law against using the word 'nigger'."

"Humph." My mother tossed her head like she was shaking off Jumbo's stray fleas. "You white people with your words. You keep us out of jobs because we don't speak the right English and then you use those words that I wouldn't call to the devil himself and humiliate my own tongue with. Those words told people to burn up black folks and cut off their tongues and all kinds of terrible things. And you let that cracker speak that violence to my daughter!"

She had trembled and clenched her fist while me and Oliver watched, holding our breaths. My mother had a powerful little fist. She was five-feet-five and her fist was from a little-boned hand. She wasn't a big strapping woman but rather thin and narrow hiped, not at all what you'd expect from a Mississippi woman raised on a farm and meeting Klux Klux Klans in town and carrying her pappa's rifle on the wagon for him when they went in to buy seed and thread and cloth plus sometimes peanut brittle or a piece of cheddar cheese for a treat. My mother had learned to shoot a rifle early because her father told his three daughters and the baby son, "We are in war. We will die before we let the white people take anything from us anytime." He had land and cows and chickens and geese and three tenant farmers. He was a big, tall man, and he liked to tell big stories and play the family's prize treasure—the gramophone.

My mother took after him, except she wasn't big and couldn't carry a blues tune.

"I'll ride the bus with the baby, then," she told my father.

"I'll get my pistol."

"No! You don't come along."

"I'm sick of these people, I'm sick."

"You got to rest, Will. You can't be out in the morning and make the 4 o'clock shift." My father worked in the post office—a "good job" for a black man in 1950. He got it because he had worked hard for the Democrats before the war and in Evanston, to be a Democrat was to be nearly a communist and worth a good job. Evanston was a Republican town. Even the dogs came over on the Mayflower. Evanston was national founding town of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Women's Temperance League, and the City of (White) Churches. Rich, Roosevelt Democrats who snuck from Mayor 'Boss' Daley's Chicago machine to live in the town's big houses on Lake Michigan had patronage jobs they couldn't even give away in Evanston. So Democrats took in colored people. My father was a patronage Democrat. He accepted his post at the post office and thanked the Democrats but he watched them. "They're Dixiecrat crackers too, and Democrats lynch you down in the South, so I watch my back." He'd chew his pipe when he said that. He was also angry about the war. "We didn't win nothing. We still got poor people—some of them those white hillbillies still stinking from the West Virginia outhouses. They are lined up with plenty of 'just-up' Southern colored for food at St. Andrews." St. Andrews was the Episcopal Church my father joined

from love of the rituals and incense which he said calmed his nerves.

He veered between wanting to shoot up the town and "all the crackers" and injustice in it and wanting to go back down South to the woods, because "coming up North got us here in time for the war and not much else and I don't want to really be a part of this place but what can I do?" He had nightmares at night and screamed through the walls where I could hear him. He was running from a creek rat, stuck under 20 pounds of water with the Japs coming after him in the jungles of Ichy Bora, some island off the Japanese coast. He would holler and cry and the next day my mother would tease him at breakfast, trying to cheer him up. She called him the 'Black Frog' and told me, "Your daddy turns into a frog at night and hollers bad dreams, and then he wakes up stronger."

My dad would have rode the bus with me and shot up the town. So mother rode instead to stop the mayhem, and when the dog got on, she told him, "You leave my children alone, or you'll deal with me. I'm a Mississippi Negro who the white people down there didn't kill. I'll do to you exactly what you want to do to me, only I'll do it first, and coming from Mississippi, I know how to do it!"

He had just looked at her, not saying a word. And then got off the bus at the next stop. Me and Oliver were happy the rest of the day.

But then, the following morning, he appeared again, and I was so scared. I told the bus driver Tom Brown, "I'm scared," but Brown said, "Sticks and stones can



break your bones but names can never hurt you." He wasn't going to do anything.

I sat down, and me and Oliver looked at each other, then looked at the dog, and tried to stuff our ears with our fingers, and then to sit up straighter. We moved to the rear of the bus, and then the wolf followed us. That was worse. No Tom Brown near by.

We came back up front.

Now, on the third day, with Oliver crying and me feeling shakier by the minute, I tried to think up something. At first, I thought I'm never going to a white folks' school again. But I liked the kids at Central School, so I discarded the thought and felt the fear some more.

Then I saw in my mind's eye my father's face the morning after a nightmare. He had run from killers. Finally, I saw my father's face all screwed up in anger the day before. My folks had fought wars to get to Evanston, to get me to school.

I wasn't going to quit.

But how to stop this wolf? He loomed over us, snarling and spitting. "Nigger, nigger, nigger!" The other white people on the bus didn't say a word. They acted like they didn't hear.

"You're going to school to get an education, the best," said Mother. I heard her voice now.

"What good's an education if the child don't know who she is?" My grandmother's voice shot into my head. I closed my eyes and saw my mother and grandmother on grandmother's porch while I sat there, trying not to be noticed and chased off to play, while I listened

hard like to the radio. "These white people will teach her to hate herself," said my grandmother.

"Well, she has to have learning

**"Then the principal told mother that no matter about good schools or bad, I was illegal."**

as good as theirs. She has to have the stories and the words and the world they have," said Mother "No—Alice! She has to have our stories and see the world our way and not theirs but ours—where we are somebody." My grandmother raised her voice.

Now, desperate, in this desperate moment with Oliver crying and me feeling the pain of his fear, and with the wolf barking his low, dirty words at us, and seeing no help to cut off the animal's mouth, I suddenly heard my grandmother's voice: "Once upon time there was a big ugly white man who looked like a wolf but was a mangy, old, hound dog under his wolf clothes." The words came out of my mouth, "and he used to eat rats and flies off the garbage cans in the alley and pick his snotty nose. One day he saw Cinderella and Oliver, and they

were carrying a magic wand but it was a tomahawk," the voice continued. Only it was my voice now and the story was coming out grandmother's way—spilling out. Oliver looked up at me, at first in disbelief. Then he quieted down and I watched his face and his big eyes inspired the words to keep flowing, and I continued the story of Cinderella told new. Cinderella slayed the hounddog with the tomahawk and took over the castle which was a stone tee-pee colored all the colors of the rainbow. The prince sailed in there on the Mississippi River which ran under the drawbridge from all the way around the world to Africa and back through France and England and everywhere people from Africa had sent folks to start the human race. Cinderella was African-American and Indian and my grandmother's story and my father's and ours. When I was telling the story, time fell away, the bus fell away, and the world we were in fell away. Oliver and I were transported. The wolf turned red and green and purple. He barked while we watched him from our seats. The white people who were passengers watched. And Tom Brown the bus driver watched through his rear-view mirror. We were all still on the bus and nothing had changed but the way I was seeing had changed, and I saw the possibility to change everything if I could see even more. I roared the words out into the dark violence, words and story to change our journey under siege. □



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 greer 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

—Continued on page 96



# Lynn and Petry

— Continued from page 93

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.



## Algebra as Civil Rights: An Interview with Bob Moses

Peggy Dye

*Bob Moses, a popular political organizer and teacher admired for his quiet, self-effacing style, grew up in Harlem and graduated from Hamilton College. Inspired by the example of black students involved in southern sit-ins, he left graduate school at Harvard to work full time with SCLC. Encouraged by local NAACP leader Amzie Moore, he set up the first SNCC voter registration drive, a campaign that led to Freedom Summer (see chapters 107 and 108) and the founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (see chapter 109), which challenged the state's all-white delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention. He is the founder of the Algebra Project, a national program to teach math and computer literacy in the inner city.*

*Peggy Dye is a New York-based freelance writer who frequently writes on city planning and preservation issues. A series of her articles in the Village Voice and Newsday about the Audubon Ballroom, the Harlem landmark where the Transport Workers Union was founded and Malcolm X was later assassinated, led to a movement that resulted in the partial preservation of the site. She is currently completing a novel about the 1970s New York City fiscal crisis.*

*An earlier version of the following selection, "Algebra: The Civil Rights Issue for the 90s," appeared in Newsday, 25 August 1994. Copyright © 1994 Peggy Dye. Published here with permission of the author.*

*For more information, write The Algebra Project, 99 Bishop Richard Allen Drive, Cambridge, MA 02139, or call 617/491-0200.*

**Q:** You're famous as the Freedom Summer leader who bused college students to the Mississippi Delta to register black voters in 1964. Today, you called math literacy the civil rights issue of the '90s. What's the connection?

**Moses:** It's a question of shifting technology. We lived in the '60s with technology that was industrially based. In the '90s, we're in a computer-based technology. That's brought about a profound shift in the literacy requirements for citizenship.

In the 1960s the requirements focused around reading and writing literacy. When we went into Mississippi in the Delta, many of the sharecroppers couldn't



read or write. We taught them to do that, and tied it to our [voter registration] campaign. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party came out of this.

You need literacy to get freedom. You need your freedom, too—in various degrees—to become literate. But the 1990s have brought in a requirement for quantitative literacy. Computers mean you need people not to crunch numbers—computers do that. You need people to interpret. That gives rise to a school system in which critical thinking about quantitative information is required.

If we don't know how to do that, there won't be any work for us. In this first district for the Algebra Project in New York, [Assemblyman] Roger Green told me there's 80 percent unemployment. So there's an issue for young people. They have no jobs and they don't think they can demand jobs because they don't have any of the tools they need.

**Q:** How did you start the Algebra Project?

**Moses:** I got a MacArthur Fellowship in 1982 for my civil rights work and I used that to start the project. Maisha, my daughter, was ready to go into algebra in public school in Cambridge, Mass. But the school didn't give a course in it. I was going to tutor her. I've taught mathematics and my Ph.D. is in the philosophy of math. But Maisha didn't want two "maths"—one at school and one at home. The MacArthur freed me to go into school with her. I gave her and three other students a small tutorial every day.

The next year I looked at the politics of math—who was taking algebra? You had the middle-class and upper-middle-class whites doing algebra, and the minorities and poor whites below grade level. It took another couple of years, but by 1987, Cambridge let us offer the Algebra Project to *all* seventh graders in the public system.

**Q:** How does the Algebra Project work?

**Moses:** It stands the usual approach to mathematics on its head. Usually, children begin with symbols in a textbook. They are asked to understand symbols and then to apply them to their world. This doesn't keep most students interested.

In the Algebra Project, we start with the world that children live in. We take some experience, like a subway trip, which the children learn to mathematize, through a protocol of drawing, writing and discussion. They learn to create their own symbols and in the same process, they experience themselves working together in class. They gain a sense of self, and they define their world. That's powerful.

We learned this method in the Delta. We were faced with the issue of empowering sharecroppers who were illiterate, which is what is said about school children today. In the Delta, we discovered that as sharecroppers participated, they gained their own voice, discussing events in daily life that were important to them and devising action plans to do something. Out of this process rose political movement and leadership. Fannie Lou Hamer, for instance, came out of this.

**Q:** What about white kids? Is the project open to them?

**Moses:** If there are white kids in the schools, they are in it, too. But in the South, most have fled the system, and more and more in the North, too. There's one



area in Eastern Kentucky in the mountains that is all white. But throughout the country, our focus is the same as when we organized around the right to vote. We focus on the sharecroppers, on people at the bottom. They are the people who can most quickly leverage the most change for everybody.

**Q:** Do New York City kids need a different kind of approach?

**Moses:** The way we work the project is to have a local group form and take charge. We don't try to implement from afar. Our first invitation here came from Dr. Lester Young when he was an assistant commissioner of state education last year. He asked us if we would consider bringing the project into the city. We said that you must have people from both the community and the school sitting together at the table.

He agreed. A group began to form—a core of about a dozen parents, educators and activists. In the meantime, Lester Young became superintendent for District 13 and the New York Algebra Project decided to pilot the project in this district. We've been holding meetings with parents and the community since last winter and out of that process two schools—Satellite West and P.S. 258—were selected.

The pilot will have 130 sixth graders, their math teachers and parents. We are currently finishing a two-week training of teachers plus some parents, activists, young adult students and a school-board member.

This is a side of organizing that isn't really understood as well as the mobilizing tradition. People know about big campaigns—marches on Washington, for instance. But I come out of a different organizing tradition. We build by bringing a whole community—teachers and parents and kids—together. Organizing is local.

Here, the Algebra Project classrooms will also be open to visitors. It's part of the culture of the project. You want students to feel comfortable being visible and explaining to visitors something they are making.

**Q:** All this energy comes into a city school system that many say crushes creativity. Is that how you see the system?

**Moses:** Let's look at it globally. Like all the school systems in major cities, this one is under enormous pressure. Integration has not worked. You have school systems that are public but predominantly minority. Black people have a larger voice in politics but the economic base of the city has eroded, along with the educational base. Then you have technology. How should the school systems be in this age when you have the new technology? You don't have answers. You don't necessarily even have all the questions.

New York City is in the middle of this. The Algebra Project is saying that whatever the transition is going to be, we know that math literacy has to be in place. You have to put a floor under all students. This is the citizenship question.

**Q:** What is the citizenship question?

**Moses:** The young people are being faced with the same charges as the sharecroppers—that they don't care about education, that the reason they're not getting education is their fault, that their social conditions are too horrendous, that they've given over to apathy and are dropping out.

The Algebra Project has to work on that constituency and its demanding what it needs. We want to help this generation find their voice in the larger society. ■



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## NONFICTION


**KHE SANH. Siege in the Clouds: An Oral History.** By Eric Hammel. (Crown, \$24.95.) The voices of about 100 American servicemen, mostly Marines, take the reader of "Khe Sanh" straight into the trenches and foxholes of one of the worst sieges in the history of the American armed forces. In the lush Vietnamese highlands, 6,000 Marines battled an estimated 40,000 soldiers from the North Vietnamese Army for 77 days in the first three months of 1968. North Vietnamese shelling pinned the Marines into trenches full of jungle rats, blood, rotting socks and fear. The Marines also heard American B-52's bomb the enemy jungle into a moonscape; more tonnage of explosives fell on Khe Sanh than on Hiroshima. Ultimately, the Americans got out, but controversy stayed. Was Khe Sanh a victory? After all, the Americans wiped out two North Vietnamese divisions. Or was Khe Sanh a ruse by the North Vietnamese Army to draw the Americans away from cities targeted for the simultaneous Tet offensive? Eric Hammel, a military historian of Guadalcanal and other battles, recounts the controversy in the words of the embattled men who lived it, from a general's gung-ho view to disillusionment in other officers and men. It is a mark of Mr. Hammel's skill that he has pieced together often conflicting fragments and yet he makes a whole. "Khe Sanh" holds you in battle for 500 pages, pressing home the horrible ambiguity of war: that men driven to grubbing in trenches, not seeing anything but the few feet of red dust ahead or an exploding body beside them, still managed — in continuing to keep diaries and write letters home, and in their willingness to talk — to see their place in the larger scheme of things.

PEGGY DYE



●  
**GERONIMO!: American Paratroopers in World War II.**

**By William B. Breuer. (St. Martin's, \$29.95.)** William B. Breuer celebrates in "Geronimo!" the heroics of America's first airborne battalions, the paratroopers — the men who parachuted from aircraft, often behind enemy lines, in the major campaigns of World War II. They became targets on the way down and also risked death from a faulty chute or other technical bumbles; once on the ground, they often faced suicide missions. Mr. Breuer — the author of 16 war books, who was himself a

 member of a mortar platoon attached to paratroop units in Europe — interviewed 400 servicemen to tell the story of every World War II campaign involving paratroopers. The action ranges over North Africa, the South Pacific, Europe and even the mountains of Oregon, where black paratroopers, denied combat jumps in Europe, fought forest fires. Humor is interspersed with violence: in Anzio, Italy, paratroopers captured 190 Ger-

man soldiers "in bed in their underwear." Mr. Breuer brings to life how the soldiers survived. How the human will prevails — against overwhelming enemies, tactical and mechanical failure, terror and finally death — is the story Mr. Breuer tells. Behind the action and the carnage, life itself, in the great paradox of war, always wins.

PEGGY DYE

February 18, 1990



## MAKING CONNECTIONS

City Lore and Poets House thank New York City writer Peggy Dye for sharing the marvelous connections she makes between the *People's Poetry Gathering* and her own life experiences. Over 150 poets and 5000 people from around the country took part in a three-day event in April 1999 that shone a spotlight on this nation's and the world's literary and folk poetry traditions, paying special attention to poetry's oral roots. Audiences reveled to readings by poets Robert Bly and Galway Kinnel; music by Ani DiFranco and U. Utah Phillips; performances by African jalis, hobos, cowboys, and *décimistas* from Colombia, Mexico and Puerto Rico who improvise poetry to music. City Lore and Poets House believe the biannual *Gathering* will inspire people to make links, identify new affinities, appreciate the world's diverse poetics, and participate actively in the popular traditions of poetic expression.

Join us for a virtual *Gathering* at [www.peoplespoetry.org](http://www.peoplespoetry.org) that begins September 2000, and for the 2nd People's Poetry Gathering at Cooper Union and other sites in downtown Manhattan March 30 – April 1, 2001.

The *People's Poetry Gathering* thanks its funders: the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, The Rockefeller Foundation, Meet the Composer, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, the City of New York Department of Cultural Affairs, The Chase Manhattan Foundation, The Greenwall Foundation, The New York Times Company Foundation, the Ruth Mott Fund, The Scherman Foundation, and The Fund for Folk Culture Conferences and Gatherings Program underwritten by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Martha Cooper



Raymond Patterson

Sun going down,  
I sure won't see this day again  
Sun going down,  
I won't see this day again  
When I started out,  
I didn't think this day would  
end.

— Raymond Patterson



## Uncle James' Blues

by Peggy Dye

2000 — 2001  
Volume 8

I came on a damp Sunday, a perfect night for the blues session of the first international *People's Poetry Gathering* ("Anybody can sing and holler," "bluesician" Raymond Patterson told, "it takes a special pain to sing the blues.") As I closed my eyes to listen to Cephas and Wiggins sing the blues, I could hear the stories — I would call them blues stories that I heard off the front porch in Evanston, Illinois, in the 1950s. ("Children cry when they lose their candy, babies cry when they wet themselves," Patterson continued, "Young folks cry any time it's handy — blues come up from deeper wells.") When I opened my eyes, I could see my uncle James with his white straw hat like John Cephas, and the plaid band around it. I saw my uncle with his pecan-colored face and flowered shirt and flat Mississippi drawl. My uncle from the country was suddenly part of culture and of big-city culture, of "governing culture."

I am a Vassar graduate and learned at Vassar to read William Blake. We did not read the blues at Vassar. Now, after Poets House and City Lore's *Poetry Gathering*, I want to bring my uncle's words and rhymes to Blake and who knows — to Goethe too. My uncle could have quite a talk on the front porch with Goethe. Or, better, with that man who had the blues before Goethe — Hamlet.

Yes, indeed. My uncle James could have sat down and talked with the prince about the slings of fate and outrageous fortune and about getting a rotten deal from one's own uncle and mother — how mean people can be. My uncle could also tell Hamlet how to have a good time while you're having a bad one. The blues teaches you.

My uncle sang the blues. I began to learn myself, too, from what happened one Sunday after church when my uncle James was driving us in his new car for a ride. In the early 1950s a new car was such a novelty that people went for rides the way some of us now go to the movies. My uncle James was driving us around Skokie, which is next door to Evanston, and the suburb where we lived outside Chicago. My uncle James was showing me places I hadn't seen — a stray corn field, plus a canal and blocks of new ranch houses along with a store that served cooked Polish sausages better than even the \$2 hot dogs at Arlington Race Track. We were in the new world in Skokie. The car was purring, and me and my uncle were purring too.

Then the police car pulled us over. "Boy, what you doing in this area?" The big headed cop stuck his face through James' window.

"Just driving my niece on a ride sir," my uncle said, soft as rain. My uncle had a big voice and weighed 200 pounds. But he talked soft as spring rain now.

"A ride? My, my, my. Well, you better ride yourself back to your own place. Aren't no colored living over here. You got no business here. You out of your neighborhood, boy. No place for you here. Understand, boy?" People in Chicago lived segregated. Our neighborhood was black. Skokie was white. The cop peered at me. His dark eyes were as hard as the black crystal beads my grandmother bought from the Hungarian bead lady who sold jewelry at Doc's pharmacy. I flinched at how the cop's eyes glittered and at how my big uncle didn't talk back.



"Sometimes," my uncle said as we drove away, "you have to keep quiet, because the other man has a gun and you don't. The police always have a gun. They don't like us any better than the sheriff did down home. So I talk soft," said my uncle when I asked him how come he spoke to the police as if he were in church.

I didn't like the answer. Felt my uncle — who made good money in construction — shrink before me. Felt the wide canal and the wide spaces with its green fields shrink. My uncle's new, black Chevrolet shrunk too. I felt cold inside my stomach.

Yet my uncle, driving slowly home, watching his mirror — I guessed he was checking for the police — started to sing, "Without a song the day would never end, without a song a man ain't got a friend." That was his favorite song. It is a blues song.

I felt a little better listening to my uncle's sad song. But when we got to James' house with its big front porch and giant oak tree shading the front, he hurried past my mother Alice and his own wife Gladys and my grandmother Ada and Aunt Pinky. The women were eating cake and coffee and highballs after Sunday dinner and watching people go by. Uncle James hurried into the house. Everybody stopped talking. His wife Gladys jumped up to go inside after James. But he stepped back out fast with bourbon in his glass and ginger ale for me with a sprig of mint. Before I could ask where my cousins Jean and Lee were my uncle burst into the story of the police stopping us.

My aunts and grandmother listened, butting in, from time to time, to tell how they had been run out of places or knew people who had, and about ways they had learned to get where they wanted to go, by hook or by crook. Between the choruses my Uncle went to put a blues record on the Victrola in the living room. He opened the window to the veranda and "Without A Song" flowed out. My mother Alice, meantime, told me to come get a hug and not to be afraid. "This is what can happen when you try to go somewhere in the world, baby. Trouble. That's why I'm telling you to go to school." I liked school. But I liked better my Uncle James' back yard, stealing plums and cherries from along the alleys in my neighborhood, and visiting my mother at her job running the cash register at Jack the Greek's grocery. "You go to school, Peggy Anne, to learn what is needed. We can use learning to get a change. The police you saw don't own the world." I didn't see the connection, fully. But I knew that my mother was saying learning had something to do with getting the freedom to drive where you wanted to go.

The *People's Poetry Gathering* stirred up all those memories. "The blues is about life," said John Cephas in his straw hat. "And the telling of it." The lowly, the slaves and the ex-slaves speak the same language of feeling as princes. Therein lies the human bond. We are all story makers — even Hamlet got the blues. We share the same emotions across the class divide. And sometime, our blues songs and our stories may yet show the way to end, even, that wide chasm. ♦

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