

ALICE DUNBAR-NELSON

b. July 19, 1875

d. September 18, 1935

AUTHOR & ACTIVIST

*“Unwittingly, you’ve made me dream /
Of violets, and my soul’s forgotten gleam”*

Alice Dunbar-Nelson was a racially-mixed bisexual poet and author whose career spanned multiple literary genres and culminated during the Harlem Renaissance. She was also a lifelong educator and activist who fought for women’s suffrage and equality for Black Americans.

**Hers is one of
only two African-
American women’s
journals published in
the 20th century.**

Dunbar-Nelson (née Alice Ruth Moore) was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, 10 years after her enslaved mother gained freedom. Her father, who was rumored to have been a white merchant, left when she was young.

An exceptional student, Dunbar-Nelson graduated from high school at age 14. She attended Straight College (now Dillard University) and received her teaching certificate in 1892. She later attended Cornell University and the University of Pennsylvania.

Initially, Dunbar-Nelson taught in the Louisiana public school system and worked on her writing. In 1895 she published her first book, a collection of stories and poems titled

“Violets and Other Tales.” Soon after, she moved to Boston to pursue a literary career. Her work for the Boston Monthly Review captured the heart of a fellow writer, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and they began a two-year correspondence.

During this period, Dunbar-Nelson relocated to Harlem where she cofounded and taught at the White Rose Mission, a “home for Black girls and women.” In 1898 she married Paul Dunbar in New York, and they settled in Washington, D.C.

In 1899 her second book, “The Goodness of St. Rocque and Others,” about Creole life, launched Dunbar-Nelson’s career-long exploration and critique of American culture and racial oppression. She wrote novels, stories, essays, poems, and reviews and kept a diary.

Dunbar-Nelson’s husband physically and emotionally abused her. She divorced him in 1902 and moved to Wilmington, Delaware, where she taught at various high schools and colleges. She created the Wilmington Advocate, a newspaper promoting racial uplift. She quietly married and divorced a second time and explored relationships with women, including Edwina Kruse, a high school principal, and Fay Jackson Robinson, a journalist and activist.

In 1916 Dunbar-Nelson married the journalist Robert J. Nelson. His activism further ignited her own. Among other pursuits, she served on the Delaware Republican Committee and championed civil rights and women’s suffrage.

During the Harlem Renaissance—the golden age of African-American art and expression in 1920s and ’30s—Dunbar-Nelson lectured and wrote prolifically. Her work inspired influential writers of the era.

Dunbar-Nelson died from a heart condition. Fifty years later, W.W. Norton & Co. published her journal, “Give Us Each Day.” It is one of only two African-American women’s journals published in the 20th century.

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