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Anita Creamer: Maya Angelou inspired her, so she seeks to touch others

By Anita Creamer -- Bee Columnist

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When she talks to classes -- as a visiting writer who seeks to pass the love of the written word along to the next generation -- Terry a. O'Neal always mentions meeting Maya Angelou.

"I just want to inspire people," says O'Neal, 33, a poet and novelist who lives in Elk Grove.

Angelou, of course, has inspired generations of readers and writers with her powerful words. But when they met, O'Neal didn't really understand that, because she was only 6.

This was back in Stockton, where O'Neal grew up. For a while, her mother worked at a small African art gallery, and she was in the habit of taking little Terry and her two sisters to work with her -- tucking them behind the counter when customers came in and the store got busy.

One day, O'Neal says, Maya Angelou visited the store for a book signing.

"My mother was so talented," says O'Neal. "She drew, and she could make anything, and she also wrote poetry. I remember she gave one of her poems to Maya Angelou that day.

"I was really too young to appreciate the moment. But I knew who Maya Angelou was, and I knew she was a writer. My mother introduced us to her, and she shook my hand like I was a grown-up.

"That's what I remember of that day. That, and the long line of people stretching out the door, waiting to meet her. The greatness of that moment I did not know. But throughout my life, I've held that memory with me."

Along with Angelou, O'Neal was included not long ago in "Literary Divas: The Top 100 Most Admired African American Women in Literature" (Amber Books, \$16.95, 250 pages) -- a list of women who've left mark on the wider world through their writing.

It's quite an honor for a young woman who's written several books of poetry as well as two novels for young people. O'Neal is currently working on the screenplay of one of her novels, and she has several more writing projects planned.

She married at 18, right out of high school, and attended California State University, Sacramento while juggling school and work and a young family. She has three children, ranging from 8 to 14, as well as a 19-year-old stepdaughter.

So she didn't really discover her love of writing until a dozen years ago, when she was studying at Cosumnes River College.

In the midst of a composition for English class, she says, "I was inspired to write a poem that I included in the paper. When I got it back, the teacher had written, 'Nice poem, but if it's the work of another author, please say so in the content.'

"It was a bittersweet moment. I thought, 'Wow, he likes it.' And I thought, 'He doesn't think my writing's good enough for this to be it.'

"But that motivated me to write my first book. Which took me another eight years."

She was busy, after all.

With that book, "Motion Sickness" (Motion Publishing, \$11.95, 112 pages), she took to the road, visiting bookstores and teaching workshops, always making sure to bring her stack of rejection letters along with her.

Aspiring writers need to see that success is sometimes a matter of hanging in there.

"It's motivational for other people to see," she says. "Successful people get rejected, too."

Despite O'Neal's gradual emergence as a writer, she didn't quit her day job as an office technician with the state, and she still hasn't.

And so a summer afternoon in the O'Neals' airy house in a gated Laguna community. A friend of her 14-year-old is at the door, wanting to visit. Her 8-year-old's teacher is on the phone, explaining an assignment. O'Neal is recently home from her job at the state prison in Folsom. In a few months, she goes on a speaking tour of California schools.

"My focus is young adults and helping inspire and motivate them and educate them," O'Neal says. "I'm trying to make sure it all gets done right. I'm like that, you know. I have to be involved hands on."

About the writer:

- Anita Creamer's column appears Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays in Scene. Reach her at (916) 321-1136 or acreamer@sacbee.com. Back columns: www.sacbee.com/creamer.

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