FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Biography

Herbert Woodward Martin: And the African-American Tradition in Poetry
Ronald Primeau
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While eating dinner with Herbert Woodward Martin, the author was surprised to see the renowned poet squirreling away packets of restaurant sugar. Certainly the bard of Dayton made enough money to buy his own sweetener! In the ensuing conversation, Primeau learned something that a generation of Depression-era families knew as a gospel truth—one wastes nothing and saves everything.

Primeau, a biographer and Central Michigan University professor, has built a career of interpreting the work of writers who are close to the Earth and defining the experiences that made them. Among his works is a well-received biography of Edgar Lee Masters, the nineteenth-century writer who described the Midwestern angst of his era in Spoon River Anthology.

Martin, a black man married to a white woman, is a gospel singer who has performed in opera, and a poet who has written and acted in plays. His life is a mélange of elements as diverse as the contents of a magpie's lair. That olio is the substance of the poet's work, leading him to develop a contrapuntal style that Primeau assesses as seminal. In this biography, Primeau presents examples of Martin's style of juxtaposing apparently contradictory images and experiences to form a whole as rich as his life.

Ironically, it was an experience Martin initially refused to mine—the revenant of another poet—that turned his career into gold and helped make him an internationally known figure.

"For as long as Martin could remember, the life and works of Paul Laurence Dunbar hovered over his own life and works," writes Primeau. "When he was a young boy growing up in Birmingham, Martin's physical resemblance to Dunbar was often noted. In school, when he was asked to read Dunbar's poems, he grew annoyed with the comparisons."

In 1970 Martin accepted an offer to join the staff of the University of Dayton. As he literally walked in the footsteps of Dunbar in that poet's native city, he began learning more about the man. In 1972 he organized a Dunbar festival, bringing to Dayton the most glittering

names in contemporary African-American poetry. It's a credit to Martin, as Primeau describes, that he transcended his initial antipathy toward Dunbar and became a champion of the man's work. He resuscitated the nineteenth-century black poet whose work had been derided as servile and Uncle Tom-ish, and grew famous as his interpreter.

Primeau uses well the biographer's tools as he describes this turning point in his subject's life. He focuses his lens first on Martin, but also broadens the perspective to encompass the context of the poet's life. Hence the story about the sugar packets.

Martin amply proves that one man's leavings is another poet's gold.

James Abraham