

James Haskins:

Author, Teacher & Social Activist

James S. Haskins (1941-2005) was raised in the segregated African American community of Demopolis, Alabama. Born into a large family, Jim used books as a way to find peace and to develop his imagination. Ironically, he obtained his books from a white woman because as a young negro he was not permitted to enter the library.

Haskins went to Alabama State College in the 1960s where he became involved in the Civil Rights Movement, only to be dismissed for his activism. However, his talent and passion for learning led him to earn a full scholarship to Georgetown University where he earned an undergraduate degree in psychology. Seeking to resolve his “unfinished business in Montgomery”, Haskins returned to Alabama State and earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in history while continuing to participate in civil rights protests. He earned his master’s degree in social psychology at the University of New Mexico.

Haskins continued his early legacy of activism through his writing. His first book germinated from his experiences teaching special education children at a New York City public school. “While I could not do much about their home lives, I worried about my students constantly and wondered what kind of future awaited them.” A social worker gave him a journal and suggested that he chronicle his thoughts about teaching disadvantaged students, resulting in publication of the acclaimed *Diary of a Harlem Schoolteacher* in 1969.



believe his own life to be of any great importance, Haskins dedicated himself to educating humanity about the African American experience. “I like the combination of teaching and writing. There is nothing more exciting than to see a young person’s eyes light up in recognition or understanding.” He was a well-loved English professor, and did not shy away from discussing provocative issues in his children’s literature and composition classes. Haskins delighted in discovering talent and passion for learning in his students and mentored them long after they left his classes, helping them successfully transition into the workplace and the world. As Nikki Giovanni said of Haskins in her recent speech here at the university, “he was just always there.”

Primarily known for his popular books, *Diary of a Harlem Schoolteacher* and *The Cotton Club*, the award winning Haskins wrote over 160 books on diverse topics. Many of his books are non-fiction works for children, and many are biographies of famous African Americans such as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King Jr., and Ella Fitzgerald.

Sources of Quotes:

Haskins, Jim. “James S. Haskins.” *Something About the Author*. Vol. 132. Detroit: Gale, 2002. 91-101.

Giovanni, Nikki. 25th Annual MLK Speaker: Nikki Giovanni, An Evening of Poetry, Love and Enlightenment. Phillips Center for the Performing Arts, University of Florida, Gainesville. 20 January 2011.



Jim Haskins joined the University of Florida faculty in 1977, where he was an inspiration to his students, colleagues and the Gainesville community. He maintained a dignity and quiet intelligence which was noted and respected by all who knew him. An intensely private man who did not

“Looking back on my life and writing career, I realize how many changes I have witnessed. The greatest change, of course, is in the legal rights of African Americans. Racism is hardly history...but the difference between the American society into which I was born and that in which I live and work today is astonishing.” *Jim Haskins, 2002*