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'Bartlett's Familiar Black Quotations' a comprehensive collection of voices

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DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
SPECIAL TO THE COURIER

"Some view our sable race with scornful eye, 'Their color is a diabolical die,'" Phillis Wheatley proclaimed in the eighteenth century. "Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain, May be refin'd , and join th' angelic train."

Wheatley's poem, "On Being Brought from Africa to America," is one of 5,000 selections in Bartlett's Familiar Black Quotations, the most comprehensive collection of its kind in existence.

Edited by Retha Powers, the assistant director of the Publishing Certificate Program at City College of New York, the volume, as Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. indicates in the forward, preserves and perpetuates not only "familiar" quotations but those that should be familiar to anyone interested in African-American history and culture.

Lots of lyrics

Although it reaches across the continents, Bartlett's Familiar Black Quotations is dominated by the voices of men and women from the United States in the 20th century.

It contains a large, and perhaps disproportionate, amount of material from American entertainers, especially song titles and lyrics.

Not surprisingly, the principal (though by no means the only) topic in the book is race.

Most of the individuals included by Powers agree that their destiny is tied to that of the United States.

"We love our country, dearly love her" Martin R. Delany declared, "but she don't love us, she despises us, and bids us begone." "Having borne the burden and heat of the day," Hubert Harrison added, "the negro "intends to receive the wages due him here for that work."

Unapologetically Black

Most important, Bartlett's Familiar Black Quotations bears witness to the varied ways in which African-Americans struggled with the impact – and import – of racial identity. "I am not tragically colored," Zora Neale Hurston insisted.

"I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature has somehow given them a lowdown dirty deal... No, I do not weep at the world – I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife." Elijah Muhammed, of course, expressed a different view.

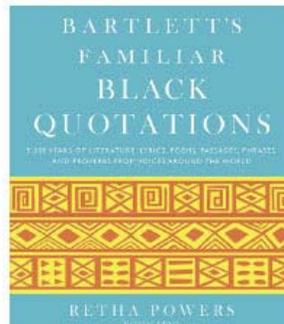
"Black man, you are created black," he wrote. "Black man, stop trying to be white."

Professor Gates rebels at the notion that he "can't be part of other groups" and "that race must be the most important thing about me." But he also "wants to be black, to know black, to luxuriate in whatever I might be calling blackness at any particular time."

Therefore, Gates embraces "a humanity that is neither colorless nor reducible to color.

Bach and James Brown; sushi and fried catfish."

Humorous takes



REVIEW

"Bartlett's Familiar Black Quotations: 5,000 Years of Literature, Lyrics, Poems, Passages, Phrases, and Proverbs From Voices Around the World." Retha Powers, General Editor. Little, Brown and Company. 764 pages. \$40.

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Happily, Powers includes some humorous takes on race – and on life in general.

When a White waitress told him that her restaurant did not serve colored people, Dick Gregory replied, “That’s all right. I don’t eat colored people. Bring me a whole fried chicken.

Moms Mabley advised children crossing the street to “Damn the lights. Watch the cars. The lights ain’t never killed nobody.”

Quotes by King, Obama

Bartlett’s Familiar Black Quotations is sure to leave readers better informed.

Many of them, no doubt, will be inclined as well to repeat the prayer of the old Black preacher, often quoted by Dr. King: “Lord we ain’t what we want to be; we ain’t what we ought to be; we ain’t what we gonna be, but thank God, we ain’t what we was.”

And, along with President Obama, to celebrate the ordinary men and women who, when the promise that set this country apart was in jeopardy, “found the courage to keep it alive.”

Dr. Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University. He wrote this review for the Florida Courier.

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