

RIP Dr. Reginald Martin: Poet, Fiction Writer, Essayist, and Mentor

by C. Liegh McInnis

Along with holding five degrees, including a PhD in English, and being an author of nine books, Dr. Reginald Martin was one of the most important people in my life, helping me to become a writer as well as showing what it means to love African people in a way that allows one to celebrate while challenging them to be the people that they were designed to be, the creators and caretakers of civilization. The line of important men and male mentors in my life is as follows: My Pops, my uncles, JSU Professor Dr. Ivory Phillips, Attorney Hal Dockins, Tougaloo Professor, poet, and editor Dr. Jerry W. Ward, writer/editor Ahmos Zu-Bolton, University of Memphis Professor, poet, novelist, and editor Dr. Reginald Martin, University of Missouri Professor and poet Dr. Julius Thompson, poet, playwright, short story writer, and essayist Kalamu ya Salaam, and poet, playwright, and essayist Charlie Braxton. Of these men, Ward, Zu-Bolton, Martin, Thompson, Salaam, and Braxton are the pieces of fabric that form the quilt of my creative productivity. They are not the only pieces, but they are some of the most essential pieces. It was through Doc Ward that I came to know, personally, all of them except Braxton. (Though Braxton was a JSU graduate, I was introduced to him through a writer I met while serving in the Mississippi National Guard, Jimmy Kimbrell.) I first sought to meet Doc Ward once I learned that he taught at Tougaloo College. I wanted to show him some of my work and get his feedback. After informing me that most of what I was writing was crap but that there was enough that could be salvaged from my own self-indulgence to be crafted into decent work, he then recommended/demanded that I contact some living writers of age and reason to help me along my journey. Doc Martin was one of them.

By the time I met Doc Martin, he had already published close to two hundred articles, poems, and short stories and lectured all over the world, discussing topics as wide-ranging as African-American Literature, the economics of publishing, various aspects of American popular culture, and the correlation between prison recidivism and illiteracy. Along with that, he was the author of several books, including *Ishmael Reed and the New Black Aesthetic Critics*, *Southern Secrets*, *Dysfunction Junction*, and *Everybody Knows What Time It Is*, and he was the editor of the best-selling anthologies, *Erotique Noire* and *Dark Eros*, and a follow-up anthology, *A Deeper Shade of Sex*. Additionally, by the age of thirty-five he was the youngest person to become full professor at the University of Memphis. I would like to tell you about my first meeting with Doc Martin, but I can't because, while I didn't meet him until I was twenty-six, I can't remember not ever knowing him. He was that kind of man. He wasn't a mentor who made a mentee feel as if one would always be in his shadow. He was a mentor who made his mentees believe that they could do much more than he could do. (When his novel, *Everybody Knows What Time It Is*, was produced as a play, he tried to convince me to play the lead. But, not even Doc Martin could convince me to act.) Yet, Doc Martin, like the others that I have listed, was everything a mentor could be. I think the first time I corresponded with Doc Martin was when I mailed (not emailed but actually put a letter in an envelope and sent it via the US Postal Office) to ask him to participate in the JSU Black Writers Conference. It had to be 1997, and in those days I was coordinating the Black Writers Conference in the fall and the Afrocentrism Conference in the spring. Doc Martin responded immediately, stating that "any young writer who knows the importance of imagery and Prince is someone I don't mind helping." Damn, he knew about my Prince book! But even more, he, Doc Ward, Salaam, and Zu-Bolton would regularly come to

JSU, free of charge, just because they believed in the importance of those conferences. I didn't have any money, but, somehow, for four years from 1997 – 2001 we were able to have artists and scholars from several different states come to JSU and, really, just hang, chill, and present their current work. The events were more like gatherings than formal conferences, and at the center of it all were Ward, Martin, Zu-Bolton, and Salaam. As I'm remembering it now, I can't even believe I had the nerve to organize them, that they happened, and that I still have contacts from folks who participated.

Each year Doc Martin was giving me new ideas and new topics for the conferences as well as pushing me to publish and present in places that I never considered. But, more than that, he regularly opened his home to my wife, Monica, and me, in the same way that Doc Ward would have writers at his crib in North Jackson. Between them and my Pops, that's where I had the inspiration for our home to be a place where local writers could come and hang periodically throughout the year, especially as the spot to hang after the conference presentations. (This is when I was living in West Jackson in the JSU community.) Doc Martin would be right there, in the middle of us all, telling the best stories and listening to young writers, giving advice, making us believe that we could do anything. It was Doc Martin who introduced me to barbeque pizza when he would have me come to the University of Memphis and read my poetry or lecture on Prince or creative writing. It was Doc Martin who, like Doc Ward, would call and later email and tell me where I would be presenting a paper somewhere in the country at a conference that I didn't even know existed. It was Doc Martin who would have me come to Memphis just to hang with his friends where those old man shit talking sessions always evolved into life lessons that I carry with me today. There are not many men who rival my Pops in intellect, integrity, courage, and style, and the men I've mentioned in this post are some of the very few with Doc Martin at the top of the list. I'm sure I should be telling y'all more about Doc Martin's scholarly and creative accomplishments, like how his novel, *Everybody Knows What Time It Is*, was optioned by Eddie Murphy's production company even though a film was never made. Or, maybe I should tell y'all that his two collections of poetry, *Southern Secrets* and *Dysfunction Junction*, blend the narrative form with imagery so well that one understands that poetry is an act of self-exploration and self-reflection through which the uniqueness of the individual becomes the symbolic ethos of the collective. Or, maybe I should tell y'all that this man, like the others mentioned, had no fear of white supremacy and no desire to limit African genius so that insecure white folks could be made to feel less threatened. Or, maybe I should tell y'all that a man this accomplished dedicated his time to teaching reading and writing at a local prison in Memphis. And, I can't even begin to tell y'all how funny he was, insanely funny because a mind like his could always see through the bs of white schizophrenia and black self-hatred in a way that revealed the foolishness of both. Or, maybe I should tell y'all that everything he wrote—poetry, fiction, and essay—was a love letter to the South written in the ink of Blues. Or, maybe I should tell y'all that Doc Martin, along with Doc Ward, Doc Thompson, Zu-Bolton, Salaam, and Braxton, all made it their mission to see *Black Magnolias* be successful. This is why I always stated that *Black Magnolias* didn't belong to Monica and me; it was the community's journal, and we were merely the caretakers. But, I'll end by telling y'all that, above all, Doc Martin was my friend in the way that a student matures to become respected by the teacher as coworker. When Zu-Bolton made his transition, my wife cried because of how he gave so much to her husband. The same is true of Doc Martin. When I told Monica of Doc Martin's passing, there was a deep, long silence, a clearing of her throat, and, then, she said quietly, "That man loved

you like a son.” He did. And, I felt and knew it. Now, he is in the place where spirits go when they become too big for their bodies. And, those of us who knew him are left with the beauty and power of the man woven within our fabric.