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*From the Los Angeles Times*

## **Expo helps black writers break into the market**

**An array of books, mostly self-published, are exhibited at the L.A. event, where prospective authors can reach other African Americans.**

By Margot Roosevelt

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Marilyn Lee, a housewife from Adelanto, survived childhood molestation, an alcoholic mother who accidentally killed her father, and a series of cruel foster parents. This year, she published a memoir: "From Adversities to Miracles: One Woman's Journey from Darkness to Light."

Nyerere Jase, a former gang member from South Los Angeles, served 12 years in prison for bank robbery and wrote a novel in his last year, "Gangsta Jake: The End Result of a Snitch." Now he works in Prison Preventers, a local program to help young people stay out of trouble.

Maria Glover wanted to offer her two young daughters role models. So she found 26 accomplished women of color, one for each letter of the alphabet. The result? An illustrated children's book, written in verse, titled "Who Do I Want to Be?"

No matter that the Random Houses and Simon & Schusters didn't come calling.

The three authors, who exhibited their works Saturday at the third annual Los Angeles Black Book Expo, are self-published. And they are part of an explosive movement, born of the Internet, in which just about anyone can create a book, distribute it through Amazon.com and Barnes&Noble.com, and market it to a niche audience.

"It's like a new Renaissance of African American creativity," said Joyce Sumbi, a retired librarian. Sumbi is vice president of the Los Angeles chapter of the Assn. for the Study of African American Life and History, a group that invites writers to a monthly study club.

At the expo, held at the Ahmanson Senior Center in Exposition Park, 40 black authors showed off their books. They appeared on panels whose topics included "Thriller: Creating a spine-tingling tale. . ." and "Spirituality. . . writing tales for the soul." Spoken-word artists performed, and a children's literary area was hosted by Smiley's Books, a store in Carson.

Three-quarters of the writers were self-published, said Charles Chatmon, the festival's executive director. "Rather than deal with the horrors of mainstream publishing, they prefer to control the finances and the content," said Chatmon, a proofreader for an Irvine biomedical firm who has self-published two poetry books.

"And it's the only way many African Americans can get their works out there."

The works on display ran the literary gamut. Pamela Samuels-Young, raised in Compton and now a corporate lawyer for Toyota Motor Corp., distributed brochures touting herself as "John Grisham with a female twist." She has published two legal thrillers. Barbara Wright Sykes offered her "Overcoming Doubt, Fear and Procrastination" in print and on CD. H. Lewis Smith's "Bury That Sucka!" is a diatribe against the N-word.

"People don't realize how many blacks are writing books, because they see the same ones over and over on TV," said Rosie Milligan. She is a founder of "Black Writers on Tour," an annual event at the Crowne Plaza Hotel at Los Angeles International Airport, which she said attracts more than 5,000 attendees and features 100 writers.

Milligan has also helped 150 authors publish books through her imprint, Milligan books, which operates out of Express Yourself Books, her store on West Manchester Avenue in Los Angeles.

Her writers range from John Carlos, one of the protesting Olympic athletes who raised his fist at the 1968 Summer Games in Mexico City, to a gifted 7-year old, who she said wrote "I Am Not a Problem Child" after he was misdiagnosed with attention deficit disorder.

The book expo attracted scores of prospective authors, such as Marvin Dean, a former lineman for Pacific Gas and Electric Co., who attended a workshop on "How to get your foot in the door -- and stay there."

"I need to know how to get started," he said. "Is there a software program, or do you write by hand?" His book would be a memoir to "inspire underprivileged young people," he said.

As for marketing, panelist Maxine Thompson said, "Crossover is nice, but when you are black, you need to sell to the black market." Still, through Amazon.com's Advantage program, self-published books can reach a broad readership, she added.

A young man stood up to say, "I have two spoken-word books in me, but I don't know what to do."

Thompson, author of "The Ebony Tree" and other historical novels, asked, "Do you have a MySpace page? Do you know how to go on YouTube?" He didn't.

Set up your own website, she advised. Send articles to newspapers and magazines. Perform on Internet radio shows. Go to schools and restaurants: "Be a guerrilla marketer."

And another thing, Thompson added. "You have to want this dream so bad that you don't care what else is happening around you."

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