Maryse Condé, 'Grande Dame' of Francophone literature, dies at 90, ARTDAILY, April 4, 2024

Maryse Condé, a writer from the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, at home in Gordes, France, on Feb. 20, 2023. Condé, whose explorations of race, gender and colonialism across the Francophone world made her a perennial favorite for the Nobel Prize in Literature, died on Tuesday, April 2, 2024, in Apt, a town in southern France. She was 90. (Violette Franchi/The New York Times)

by Clay Risen

NEW YORK, NY.- Maryse Condé, a writer from the French Caribbean island of Guadeloupe whose explorations of race, gender and colonialism across the Francophone world made her a perennial favorite for the Nobel Prize in literature, died Tuesday in Apt, a town in southern France. She was 90.

Her death, at a hospital, was confirmed by her husband, Richard Philcox, who translated many of her works into English.

Condé's work, beginning with her first novel, "Hérémakhonon" (1976), came at a pivotal time, as the notion of French literature, centered on the canonical works of French writers, began to give way to the multifarious notion of Francophone literature, drawing

from all parts of the French-speaking world.

Having lived in Guadeloupe, France, West Africa and the United States, Condé was able to imbue her work with a kaleidoscopic cosmopolitanism; she was equally at home with memoirs, novels set in 18th-century Mali and 17th-century Massachusetts, and even a book of food writing. Her sure-handedness won her acclaim as the “grande dame” of Francophone literature.

She was twice shortlisted for the International Booker Prize, given to novelists writing in languages other than English. After the 2018 Nobel Prize for literature was canceled in the wake of a sexual abuse scandal among the award committee, she received the New Academy Prize, created by a group of Swedish cultural figures as a temporary replacement — the first and last person to receive the award.

Like other writers grappling with the legacy of colonialism, Condé centered her work on broadly political themes, examining the formation of different individual and collective identities. But she stood apart in her adamant nonconformity.

She supported African independence, but she was critical of the leaders who came after it, accusing them of corruption and empty promises. She was proud to call herself a Black writer, but she lashed out at movements like Negritude and Pan-Africanism, which she said replicated white racism by reducing all Black people to a single identity.

Much of her work was historical. Her breakout novel, “Segu” (1984), which sold more than 200,000 copies in France, traces the life of a royal adviser in the Bambara Empire of West Africa, which flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries but collapsed under pressure from European and Islamic forces.

Among her favorite books as a child was “Wuthering Heights,” and in 1995 she offered a retelling of Emily Brontë’s classic tale of obsession and revenge with “Windward Heights,” set in Cuba and Guadeloupe.

She had already done something similar with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel “The Scarlet Letter” and Arthur Miller’s play “The Crucible,” drawing on elements of both works to tell the story of an enslaved woman caught up in the Salem witch trials in “I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem” (1986), which won the Grand Prix Littéraire de la Femme.

Since then she was said to be a frequent contender for the Nobel Prize, though she professed a lack of interest in the results

— or in the trappings of success generally.

“I am drawn to people ready to disobey the law and who refuse to accept orders from anybody — people who, like me, don’t believe in material wealth, for whom money is nothing, owning a home is nothing, a car is nothing,” she said in a 1989 interview with the journal Callaloo. “Those kinds of people tend to be my friends.”

Maryse Boucolon was born on Feb. 11, 1934, in Pointe-à-Pitre, a city in Guadeloupe, an overseas department of France. Her parents were both affluent educators: Her mother, Jeanne Quidal, ran a girls’ school, and her father, Auguste Boucolon, taught school before founding a bank.

The youngest of eight siblings, Maryse grew up protected, and isolated, by her parents’ relative wealth. Her parents did not allow her to attend the island’s ubiquitous street festivals or mix with people they considered beneath them socially, which she said also kept her ignorant of the worst impacts of colonialism and racism.

She began writing at an early age. When she was about 12 she wrote a one-act play as a gift for her mother on her birthday. But her political awakening came more gradually.

As a teenager she read “Black Shack Alley” (1950), a semi-autobiographical novel by Joseph Zobel about a poor Black boy in Martinique, another French Caribbean department. That book revealed to her the sort of experiences that most Black Caribbean people endured under colonialism.

When she was 16, her parents sent her to Paris to complete her education. They had told her the city was the center of reason and justice, but instead she found herself the object of racism and sexism.

She went on to study at the Sorbonne, and to mix with Paris’ Black intellectual circles. In 1959 she met a Guinean actor, Mamadou Condé, and they married a year later. But the relationship soon soured, and in 1960 she moved to Africa to teach.

Over the next 13 years she lived for long stints in Guinea, Ghana and Senegal. The region was in the throes of independence and decolonization, and it attracted thinkers and activists from around the Black diaspora.

As she moved among them, Condé imbibed their heady mix of Marxism and Black Power, and she began to put those ideas into writing, first as a playwright and then, in 1976, in “Hérémakhonon,” which means “Waiting for Happiness” in the West African

language Malinke.

Although she insisted it was not autobiographical, “Hérémakhonon” tells the story of a Black woman from Guadeloupe who lives for a time in Paris before going to Africa in hopes of finding herself — only to realize, in the end, that geography does not hold the key to one’s identity.

By then she had returned to Paris, where in 1975 she received a doctorate in literature from the Sorbonne. Long estranged from her husband, she had begun a relationship with Philcox. She finally divorced Condé in 1981, and she and Philcox married a year later.

Along with her husband, Condé is survived by three daughters from her first marriage, Sylvie, Aïcha and Leïla Condé; five grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

She held a professorship at Columbia University in New York, and she also taught at the University of Virginia and the University of California, Los Angeles.

Condé and Philcox returned to Guadeloupe in 1986 and lived there until a few years ago, when they returned to France so she could be closer to treatment for a neurological disease.

The disease left her unable to see. She wrote her last three books, all published since 2020, by dictating them, chapter by chapter, to her husband.

She was first shortlisted for the International Booker Prize in 2015 for the body of her work. She was shortlisted again in 2023, when she was 89, for her final book, “The Gospel According to the New World,” about a dark-skinned boy in Martinique who may or may not be the son of God.

Although she did not win the prize — it went to Georgi Gospodinov for his book “Time Shelter” — she did achieve the distinction of being the oldest person ever shortlisted for a Booker.

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