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raine Hansberry, poet Audre Lorde and novelist Toni Morrison among black writers he admires. Chester Himes is another one.

"You don't know Chester Himes?" he asked. "It's criminal that you don't know Chester Himes. You know Richard Wright? I think he's not as good a writer as Chester Himes." Himes, a novelist, wrote "Pink Toes," "Blind Man with a Pistol" and "If He Hollers Let Him Go."

But Wilson said he feels connected to all writers, that when he sits down in his chair to write he is William Shakespeare and Alfred Lord Tennyson just the same as if you stand in front of blank canvas you are in a sense Picasso. It's liberating, he said, to know that "as you sit down to write you are everyone. You are confronted with the same problems."

Wilson's themes concern the conflict inherent in building black identity in the century after slavery. In "The Piano Lesson," characters struggle with whether to sell out their heritage (symbolized by a piano) in their attempt to exorcise white oppression. "Fences," set in the 1950s, concerns professional sports as a way to find prosperity. He envisions writing a play set in every decade of this century.

Asked if it concerns him to be writing in a genre that might seem less accessible than poetry or short stories

or novels — after all, relatively few can see Broadway plays — Wilson is optimistic.

"You know the trickle-down theory? I apply that to plays. For example, 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom' played on Broadway; it cost \$22.50 to \$32.50 to get in. Three years later it's played in many theaters. You can see it for \$5, and maybe you get to see your friends in it."

"I don't think many more people have the opportunity to read poetry. There are people who can't afford to buy magazines. I used to have to stand beside the sign that says 'No Reading' and read the poems anyway."

And with that Wilson tells another story, about how he used to support himself with jobs washing dishes and cooking and whatnot. In one job he was "the elevator"; he ran up and down stairs all day delivering clothes to a tailor.

"Once it occurred to me I had the whole world at my fingertips," he said of a job washing dishes. "I had water, heat, pottery, the beginnings of table manners. Not to mention the culinary arts. You can get a book out of the library and read all day about lobsters. You can connect everything in the world in a long series of chains. It's up to you what you make of what it is."

All you need to make literature, he said, is a pen and a pad of paper — and a clean heart.

Inspired in a deli

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright began by writing a love letter

By JANE C. BERRY
Citizen Staff Writer

Playwright August Wilson was sitting in a deli in New Haven, Conn., a while back when a character came into his mind and spoke a line from an unwritten play.

"When I left out of Memphis I said I was gonna buy me a V-8 Ford," this character said to Wilson, who had simply been eating his lunch. "I was gonna drive by Mr. Henry Ford's house and honk the horn. If anybody came to the window, I was gonna wave."

"Then I was going out and buy me a 30 aught six and come on back to Memphis and drive by Mr. Stovall's house and honk the horn. Only this time, I wasn't waving."

Wilson, having had this experience before, knew what he had to do next. The lines were the nut of a play, and his job was to build it around them.

The play, now in progress, is "Two Trains Running." His most recently finished play, "The Piano Lesson," is currently playing at the Yale Repertory Theatre, while the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Fences" is running strong on Broadway.

Preceding those plays were "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" and "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," as well as 20 years worth of poems.

Wilson, who usually lives in St. Paul, Minn., is in Tucson this week for the annual Tucson Writers' Conference, sponsored by the Friends of the Tucson Public Library. It's his third year as a guest instructor at the conference, and he seemed generous with his finished creations as well as his expertise.

"That's the whole play right there," he

BIOGRAPHY

August Wilson was born in 1945 in Pittsburgh, where he grew up in a two-room apartment with his five brothers and sisters. He learned to read when he was 4 but dropped out of high school at 15 to spend most of his time at the public library.

Wilson started out as a poet, but switched to drama in the 1960s and founded a black activist theater company. His plays include "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "Fences" and "The Piano Lesson."

He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for "Fences." He has also won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for "Fences," four Tony awards and a Guggenheim Fellowship for Playwriting.

He lives in St. Paul with his wife, Judy Oliver, and daughter, Sakina Ansari. He is an associate playwright for the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis and a member of New Dramatists in New York.

said of the lines by the character with the .30-06 caliber gun. "The whole play relates to this character. It's organic."

Wilson started out as a poet, and he has told the story in past interviews about how he bought his first typewriter with money his sister paid him for writing her English class term paper. Asked why he wanted to write, however, he tells about his seventh-grade love life.

"Nancy Ireland was this girl in the class that all the boys fell in love with," he said. "They'd write her poems and leave them on her desk. I started writing poems for Nancy Ireland. Ever since then I've known I wanted to be a writer."

Wilson considers himself firmly rooted in the tradition of black American literature, but lists such disparate artists as black painter Romare Bearden and Argentine novelist Jorge Luis Borges among his inspirations. He also lists playwright Lor-

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