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Women Make History: Stories We Should Have Learned in School



*"The acceptance of
our present condition is
the only form of extremism which
discredits us before our children."*

Lorraine Hansberry
To Be Young, Gifted & Black

Lorraine Hansberry: Young, Gifted, Black & Gay

Throughout her short life, [Lorraine Hansberry](#) battled a trifecta of legalized discrimination based on race, gender, and sexual orientation, but in 1959, at only twenty-nine, she created a pivotal opening for Black America. Hansberry became the first African American woman to have a play staged on Broadway. A groundbreaking work, [A Raisin in the Sun](#) was also the [first](#) directed by an African American. It won the [New York Drama Critics Award for Best Play](#) and bestowed another first on Hansberry: the youngest American playwright and first African American to win the prestigious award. Although her sexual orientation was a carefully guarded secret for legal reasons, Hansberry identified as a lesbian.

An Activist in the Making: [Born](#) in 1930 to an activist family on Chicago's segregated South Side, Hansberry was the youngest of three children. Her father was a businessman and real estate developer who rented and sold homes to African American families. He and Hansberry's mother were active in the early civil rights movement. When Black luminaries visited Chicago, including [W. E. B. Du Bois](#), [Paul Robeson](#), [Langston Hughes](#), [Duke Ellington](#), and [Jesse Owens](#), they stopped at the Hansberry home.

When Hansberry was eight, her parents [challenged](#) Chicago's restrictive housing laws by moving into an all-white community. In response, a mob formed, encircled the house, and one person threw a brick through a window. It barely missed Hansberry. She later [said](#) that her mother patrolled "the house all night with a loaded German luger."

When the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the existing housing codes, the family had to move. But they didn't give up. Instead, they filed a lawsuit that went to the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1940, they [won](#) their case. The ruling became instrumental in abolishing housing discrimination nationwide. These early experiences played a significant role in her work and fueled her passion for social justice.

Finding Her Voice: In 1948, eighteen-year-old Hansberry graduated from high school and enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, a mostly white institution, to study art. At a time when "separate but equal" was the law, her future dorm mates had to approve her as a resident in advance. There she became interested in theater, politics, and the global anti-colonial movement. After two years, she left to study painting in Chicago and in Mexico, before moving to New York in 1950.



Hansberry, 3rd row, at U Wisconsin

There, she attended the [New School](#), but within a year, she took a job to write for [Paul Robeson's](#) left-wing newspaper, [Freedom](#). Her work connected her with Black cultural and political giants. Among others, she befriended [James Baldwin](#) and jazz singer [Nina Simone](#). It also gave her a front-row seat to the McCarthy witch hunts of the 1950s.

It was a time of intense political repression based on a fear of communist infiltration in the U.S. Known as the [McCarthy era](#), several of Hansberry's mentors, including Robeson, were accused of being communists. Many were blacklisted and lost their jobs. Hansberry escaped being a target because she was relatively unknown, but the experience strengthened her political resolve.

While joining a protest in New York, she met her future husband, [Robert B. Nemiroff](#), a white, Jewish writer, composer, and producer. Although interracial marriage was illegal in many states, they wed in 1953. Several Black leaders, including Malcolm X, publicly derided Hansberry for the marriage.

Three years later, Nemiroff earned enough money for Hansberry to quit her job and devote herself to her own work. The result was *A Raisin in the Sun*, a reference to Langston Hughes' poem [Harlem, A Dream Deferred](#). Her inspiration came from the challenges she had witnessed facing ordinary working-class African Americans.

Defying expectations and initial resistance, *A Raisin in the Sun* ran for nineteen months to sold-out houses. It won Best Play in 1959 and was nominated for four Tony Awards. Importantly, it brought Black Americans to the theater and gave white audiences a glimpse into the struggles they faced. The play became a cultural touchstone that opened doors for Black artists. In 1961, it was adapted into a critically acclaimed film starring Sidney Poitier. Hansberry wrote the screenplay. Snubbed at the Oscars, the movie won awards at the Golden Globes, the Baftas, and the Cannes Film Festival.

Bringing Multiple Issues to the Stage: Hansberry's second play, [The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window](#), opened in 1964. Again, she addressed controversial themes including racism, sexism, antisemitism, and homosexuality. It ran for 101 shows and was the last play by Hansberry produced during her lifetime.

Also in 1964, after nine years of marriage, Hansberry and her husband divorced, but remained close friends. Private correspondence confirms that secretly she identified as a lesbian. While some fault her secrecy, homosexuality was criminally [illegal](#), punishable by jail time and fines, and the cultural shaming ruined many lives and careers.

A Growing Legacy: Another closely guarded secret was her diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. In January 1965, Hansberry [died](#) from the disease. She was thirty-four. More than 700 mourners attended her funeral in Harlem.

Posthumously, her former husband completed her unfinished works and fiercely guarded her legacy. Nemiroff produced her play [Les Blancs](#), which debuted in 1970. He also staged two works that were unfinished when she died, [The Drinking Gourd](#) and [What Use Are Flowers?](#) He adapted Hansberry's letters and journals into the play [To Be Young, Gifted and Black](#), which ran off-Broadway and was published as a memoir.

Although her life was short, Hansberry fearlessly broke barriers. She transformed the theater into a space that welcomed Black audiences and experiences. Today, her legacy continues to inspire generations of African American artists. Her plays have seen several revivals, and in recent years, books and documentaries about her life have been produced.



Associated Press, 1959



Playbill for 2004 Revival, Smithsonian

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

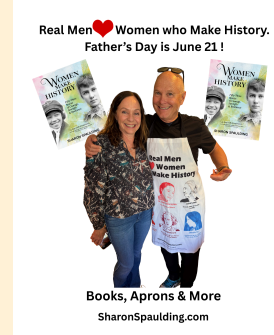
Ask yourself: If the laws were against me on every front as they were for Lorraine Hansberry, what would keep me from being demoralized and resigned? Would I fight back? If so, how?

Ask a friend: Have you ever lost all hope, but persevered anyway? What happened?

Our WMH Tribe is Growing! It's thrilling to experience our expanding community and see how deeply [Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience](#) is resonating. **Stay tuned!** Updates on new events and gatherings across the country are coming soon.

Father's Day is June 21! The book is a great gift for **all** the men in your life, not just fathers! Available at Indie Bookstores, [Barnes & Noble](#), [Amazon](#), [Kindle](#), [BookShop](#), and on my website.

Fun merch like aprons, book bags, and mugs is also available at SharonSpaulding.com. Snap a photo like Linda and Alan Jensen, and I'll share it in the next issue, or post it on social media and tag me!



I'm passionate about all things Mary Ware Dennett, a pivotal and unsung leader of the early reproductive rights movements, and other remarkable women who were swept aside by history or had their achievements wrongly attributed to men. My book, [*Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience*](#), highlights a few of these inspiring stories.

I'm also at work on a novel about her Dennett's extraordinary life.

My essays about Dennett have been published in [*Ms. Magazine*](#), [*Smithsonian*](#), [*New Hampshire Magazine*](#), and others.

If you need a speaker, reach out. If you would like to join me at an event, check the website for upcoming gatherings in your city: www.SharonSpaulding.com.

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