7-1-1980

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Davis and graduate student Charles DeArman
Touching Lives

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

It was one of those magnificent April days, the sky gently caressed with cloud wisps, the dogwoods abloom in their white and pink splendor, the benches on the Howard University campus filled with students engaged in flirtatious repartee, happy to be free, at last, of bulky overcoats and overheated rooms.

As three o'clock approached, some of the students drifted over to the gallery of the College of Fine Arts building where they were joined by a good sampling of students from previous generations. Neither the current students nor their older counterparts had come for the opening of a new exhibit. Not this time. They came, instead, to pay special homage to a special person who had touched all their lives in a special way.

That person was Arthur P. Davis, teacher, scholar and pioneering illuminator of the works of Black writers.

The reason for the homage: Davis' retirement from teaching at the age of 75.

Davis, who retains his title of University Professor, will continue to work at Howard part-time, pursuing his own scholarly projects and serving as consultant to the English department. But this fall, for the first time in a little over half a century, he will not attend classes.

The testimonials rolled on, followed by the presentation of a commemorative album of the writings of past and present students, the reading of poems ("You is a folk tale man") and the singing of songs ("Touch Somebody's Life").

The song seems appropriate," said Annie Perkins, the graduate student who served as mistress of ceremonies, "because you have touched all our lives."

With the exception of Sterling Brown, I think I have sent out into the field of Black literature...more people than any other professor in the country."

The man who touches lives stepped forward. A bespectacled, genial-looking, pale-beige-skinned-man dressed in a dark suit, Arthur P. Davis looked like what he is: a professor. But the professor was momentarily at loss for words. His emotions runneth over. "That last song did it," he said, his voice almost breaking. "This has been one of the happiest times in my life."

Then, that familiar twinkle came into his eyes as his wit quickly recovered itself. "I know some of this talk [about wisdom] is hyperbole. Anyone can be wise [he drewl out the word southern style] if you live long enough. It all comes from hanging in there." Laughter coursed through the room, erasing any residue of sadness.

Wisdom laced with wit: it is the APD trademark.

Characteristically, he clothes his erudition in a folksy manner, frequently professing to be "jes a po' country boy from the South." If so, he is one po' country boy whose achievements would stretch a long way down some dusty southern lane.

Arthur P. Davis has been first and foremost a teacher, starting out at North Carolina College in Durham (1927-28), then at Virginia Union University (1929-44), Hampton Institute (summers 1943-49) and, since 1944, at Howard. While his initial specialty was 18th century English literature, he soon became drawn to what was at one time considered a new and startling field: Afro-American literature.

Davis remembers that day back in 1943 on a visit to the campus when a member of Howard's English department confronted him with a question: "Why are you wasting your time fooling around with 'real literature' when you could be writing about 'real' literature?" The attitude implicit in the question was typical of the times even though Howard's attitude towards the legitimacy of the works of Black writers was far more advanced than that on most campuses. For the university was blessed by the presence of three of the seed-planters of Afro-American literature: Benjamin G. Brawley, Alain LeRoy Locke and Sterling A. Brown. Brown, particularly, in his undergraduate courses, his criticism and his poetry contiguously shared with Howard students the wealth that is Black literature. [See New Directions, Winter 1974, for a profile of this pioneer.]

In 1964, Davis began offering Howard's first graduate level course in the field: English 248-249 ("Literature of the American Negro"). Inaugurated at a time of exploding Black consciousness, it proved to be the right course at the right time. Quickly it became an institution not only because of its popularity, but perhaps more important in the long run, because of its productivity. From the ranks of its students emerged a stream of scholars—
Black and white — who fanned out to spread the word. Bragging like a proud papa, Davis says, "With the exception of Sterling Brown, I think I have sent out into the field of Black literature — both in writing and teaching — more people than any other professor in the country."

English 248-249 was one of those rare courses that actually changed lives. A case in point: Jeanne-Marie Miller, now a Howard administrator and an authority on Black drama. "I took the course the first time it was offered that summer," she recalls, "and I decided then and there that whatever talents I had would be devoted to attempting to enlighten people about Afro-American literature. Dr. Davis was directly responsible for my making a decision to do research in Afro-American drama. I liked the kind of exposure to Black literature he gave and I liked his balanced presentation. He took no stand on the literature but let it unfold itself to you and you would make your own decision about it. It's the same approach I am using today in my course [at Howard] in Afro-American drama. I try to give that same broad view."

In the classroom, Davis proved a master at blending facts, opinions, recitation and old-fashioned story-telling ("Can I tell you an anecdote?") to capture the intent of the writers he presented.

A visitor to some of his classes last spring was treated to some typical A.P.D.isms:

After a student had given an insightful report on poet Robert Hayden: "Hayden weaves several themes to create a harmonious whole. That's good artistry when one can do that."

After a lively discussion on "message" writing: "The line between propaganda and art is often vague. You could look at Dante's "Divine Comedy" as propaganda for Catholicism yet it is undoubtedly a work of art."

After a student had shared one critic's view on Richard Wright's use of "moral distancing": "I never thought of looking at Wright that way. That's what a good critic does. He opens your mind."

And in a more impish vein:

Apropos of nothing in particular: "That's the way I interpretate it? Have you heard anyone say interpretate?" [No answer.] You don't know too many ignorant people then."

Upon introducing a visitor to the class, the daughter of a former student: "I always remember my smart students. Not the dumb ones."

In answer to a question about an upcoming final: "It's not a hard exam. I think I could pass it."

Davis has no special formulas for good teaching, he explained later. One thing he does know, though, is that "You can't fool students. They can detect a phony. They know if you're really interested in them and if you know your subject. So I never tried to appear to know more than I do. I hope I have given my students a feeling that honesty in scholarship is as important as honesty in life."

'...The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs.'

While he had offers in the past to teach at predominantly-white colleges, he always turned them down. "I am not anti-white and a lot of Black nationalism — not all of it — I consider foolishness. I just feel more at home with Negro students. Also, I feel I can do more with them, that I have a better understanding of them."

When asked to compare more recent students with those in the past, he answers readily: "Students in the past were a little more conventional in their study habits and they tended to do more work. But they did not have the imagination present-day students have. In the past, a student might give me a paper on the life of Langston Hughes and discuss his works in general. Today, a student might write a long paper on the imagery in one Langston Hughes poem. It's more challenging teaching contemporary students. Students have grown today and, frankly, in some cases they have grown beyond me."

The classroom has been but one forum for the wit and wisdom of Arthur P. Davis. There is also the A.P.D. of the books.

Isaac Watts: His Life and Works, published in the U.S. in 1943 and in England in 1948, is a study of a leading 18th century English hymn-writer and religious dissenter. Full of reference to now-obscure theological controversies and persona, the book today seems more a curiosity than anything else (especially in that it was penned by a "po' country boy from the South," and a Black one at that.) Yet it enabled Davis to begin honing the critical and writing skills which were to serve him so well later on.

It is through Davis' books and his dozens of articles and book reviews illuminating Black literature that he has made his major mark as a scholar.

With Sterling Brown and the late Ulysses Lee, he edited The Negro Caravan, that pioneering anthology of the works of Black writers. The book, which included short stories, poetry, essays, selections from novels, folk literature, drama and biography, was published at a time [1941] when the literary establishment kept its eyes closed to the legitimacy, indeed, to the existence, of Black literary creativity. Caravan forced open a lot of eyes.

As Julius Lester wrote in the introduction to a new 1970 edition, "Few books acquire the status of legends. But this is one ... it acquired a place in the lives of black intellectuals and those able to acquire a copy congratulated themselves for being the recipient of one of the Lord's few modern miracles. ... It comes as close today as it did in 1941 to being the most important single volume of black writing ever published."

Davis' name is affixed to the covers of two other important anthologies of Black writing, Cavalcade: Negro American Writings from 1760 to the Present (1971), co-edited with Saunders Redding, includes many of the same writers as its distinguished predecessor but extends its time-frame to embrace those writers of the '60's who chose to forge their craft into a tool of the Black revolution (however defined). The New Negro Renaissance: An Anthol-
ogy (1975), co-edited with Michael Peplow (an English 248-249 alumnus), concentrates its focus on that prolific literary period between 1910 and 1940—a period whose spirit was perhaps best captured by Langston Hughes in the following lines: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If the white folks seem pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. Ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs...."

From the Dark Tower, Davis’ critical and biographical study of major Black writers from 1900 to 1960, takes its title from a poem by Countee Cullen, a leading figure of the New Negro Renaissance (and a man Davis personally knew). The book, published by Howard University Press in 1974, remains one of the Press’ best sellers and has been well-received by the critics. Choice, the influential book review magazine, for instance, included it in its list of outstanding academic books for 1974-75.

The volume represents a compendium of the ideas and insights Davis had developed in scores of articles and book reviews, classroom lectures, informal exchanges with fellow teachers, students and friends and in a series of 26 radio talks (Ebony Harvest) produced by American University in 1972-73. It is also a book that readily shows that Davis is one professor who not only knows how to research and to analyze but to write. Two samples:

On what happened when some writers stopped producing "protest" literature: "One must also remember that the protest tradition was no mere surface fad with the Negro writer. It was a part of his self-respect, part of his philosophy of life, part of his inner being. It was almost a religious experience with those of us who came up through the dark days of the twenties and thirties. When a tradition so deeply ingrained is abandoned, it tends to leave a spiritual numbness — a kind of void not easily filled with new interests or motivations."

On Richard Wright, the seminal author of Native Son, etc.: "[Wright] did not believe that black is beautiful. He felt that black life was ugly, brutal, violent, devoid of kindness and love. And he places much of the blame for this bleakness on that great fog of racial oppression that hung over the Negro like a tremendous, compelling natural force, expelling him from the finer things of Western civilization, dehumanizing and brutalizing him physically and spiritually. In one sense this is Wright’s only theme.

There are certain key themes that run through Davis’ own approach to Afro-American literature, themes that have sometimes brought him into conflict with younger colleagues. In a series of interviews in his small, frequently-visited office in a "temporary" building on the Howard campus, and in his comfortable apartment near the university’s Dunbarston campus, he took time out to talk about some of them. At each meeting, the geniality of this manner matched perfectly the geniality of his countenance.

'A Black literary critic can look more understandingly at the works of a Black writer than a white critic....'

"American Negro literature is essentially American literature," observed Davis as he sat in his living room near a bookcase crammed with works of Black authors. "I disagree with the Black Arts Aesthetic. I do not think we are distinct and apart. As Professor [Sterling] Brown used to say, if we are 'different' that difference can too often be translated into 'inferiority.' A good American Negro writer is a good American writer. Period." He then qualified his statement somewhat: "A person writes best about what he knows best. All other things being equal, a Black writer can write better on Black material than a white writer and I emphasize all other things being equal. But there is nothing to keep whites from writing good books on Blacks. One of the best books about Zora Neale Hurston [the New Negro Renaissance writer-folklorist], for instance, was written by a white man. [Robert C. Hemenway.]

Still Davis believes the Black writer does have a special mission. This he defines as "a certain right, a certain obligation, even, to interpret his background and share his attitudes with the world. But this does not mean that every Black writer must do so or that every Black writer must do so all the time. For the Black writer to confine himself to 'Black themes' or 'to make every poem political,' as [Amiri] Baraka once said, is too limiting. It's writing according to line. So many things in a Black man's life have no racial tag."

His views on literary criticism, which he calls "one of our weakest disciplines," are similar. "A Black literary critic can look more understandingly at the works of a Black writer than a white critic, again, all other things being equal. His blackness does give him more insight into and familiarity with the problems of Blacks. But a good Black critic needs no special equipment to criticize the works of Black writers. He would use the same criterion to criticize a book by Saul Bellow as by James Baldwin. A good Black critic should be a good critic. Period."

Davis’ own approach to literary criticism is ostensibly simple: "I look at a work and react to it. If I like it, I find the reasons why. If I dislike it, I do the same. It’s very personal. I do not ground my criticism in a set of isms—whether Marxist, Freudian or those of the Black Aesthetic. I do not tell the work what to tell me."

Among his favorite writers are Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown and Robert Hayden. Among younger writers he admires are Sonia Sanchez ("Something about her appeals to me.") and Ishmael Reed ("a brilliant writer.").

Davis proudly calls himself an "integrationist." "That’s the word I use," he explained. "Some use the term ‘universalist.’ But I’m not sure I know what that means."

He also proudly calls himself "Negro." "I remember being in a meeting at Howard in 1968 and I said something about Howard being a Negro school and someone said, ‘You mean ‘Black?’ And I answered, ‘No, God damn it! I mean Negro! And nobody bothered me again.”
His reasons for using "Negro" are various: "One, because of my age; I'm more accustomed to being called Negro. Secondly, because Negroes aren't black; they are various shades of brown. Thirdly, the work 'Black' gets confused with black as an adjective. If you say, 'Walter White was a blue-eyed blond Black,' you're doing violence to the language."

Still, in his writing Davis often has alternated "Black" with "Negro" and "Afro-American," "to keep sentences from being monotonous." And he has never tried to foist his preference for "Negro" on others. "If you choose to call yourself 'Black' I'm not going to fight you about it. Just don't make me use the word."

The tiresome business of "Negro" vs. "Black" once more taken care of, Davis returned to the subject of integration — and literature.

"When I started teaching," he recalled, "the standard literature anthologies included no Black authors. The time will come — and it is on its way — when textbooks on American literature will include more and more of the best Negro writers. I hope, too, in the future we shall become so integrated that a course like white people are the enemies of Black people and I hit on that in my work. I am more political. Arthur is more literary. It's more a generational thing." Overall, he lauds Davis for "his meticulousness, his vision, his caring for Black literature." "You can't talk about the beauties of Black literature and then act the opposite. Arthur P. Davis mirrors the literature."

Then, too, Ramona Hyman urges younger readers to put "The Poetry of Black Hate" in perspective. "That's one of the most important things I learned from Dr. Davis," she says, "to put a writer's works in perspective — in terms of his age, class, education, influences...."

Arthur Paul Davis was born on November 21, 1904 in Hampton, Va. His father, Andrew Davis, had been born in slavery and had been held in his mother's arms as she watched the Battle of the Monitor and the Merrimac. One of the earliest graduates of Hampton Institute [class of 1872], Andrew Davis became a master plasterer and contractor whose work...
graced many of the finest homes in the area. At home, he served as a model of proud manhood for his eight children (a ninth died in infancy). Davis wrote of his father in a January 1950 article in the Negro History Bulletin: "Though born in slavery and reared in the South, he had grown up in that period immediately following the Civil War when the South grudgingly and briefly awarded the Negro equality. He never outgrew his early conditioning in freedom; as a result he walked through life as a full man, making few if any concessions to race."

What's more, Andrew Davis knew, from intense personal experience, that whites were neither special nor superior.

'Harlem in the 1920s was a delightful place, particularly so to a youngster reared in a small southern town.'

As a youth he had gone North and for 10 years lived as a white man. Observed Davis about his father in an article in Common Ground (Winter, 1944): "After ten years 'across the line,' he found it was better to be a poor Negro than a poor white; he came back, married my brownskin mother, and never left home or race again. He, of course, used to tell us many anecdotes about his experiences on the other side. With such a background, there was little danger of our growing up within and without the group," he wrote in his valedictory address he urged his classmates to heed the call "to discover our own talents, to respect our own personalities, to develop our own powers, and by so doing to stir up the gifts that are within us that we may give to the world our own best selves."

Davis received a scholarship to study at Columbia College but first spent a year at Howard (where an elder brother was in medical school) in order to earn the language credits he would need to attend the university. Among the few Black students in his high school class at Hampton Institute. In his valedictory address he urged his classmates to heed the call "to discover our own talents, to respect our own personalities, to develop our own powers, and by so doing to stir up the gifts that are within us that we may give to the world our own best selves."

He was to meet Locke again when he attended Columbia. It was a good time to be at Columbia and to live in nearby Harlem for those were the flourishing years of the New Negro [or Harlem] Renaissance. Even though Davis was juggling his studies, part-time jobs (e.g. waiter, elevator operator, settlement house worker), and a budding romance with a young librarian named Clarice Winn, he could not help but get caught up in the fervor of Harlem at that time.

He met writers like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Wallace Thurman. He visited the 139th Street apartment furnished by Alelia Walker, daughter of the pioneering Black cosmetics entrepreneur, as a meeting place for young writers and artists. He joined the Sunday parade up and down The Avenue (7th Avenue near 135th Street) and once saw W.E.B. DuBois dressed in morning coat and striped trousers, and Marcus Garvey, in similar formal attire but with the added touch of a gold-headed walking stick, deliberately snub each other as they passed. He took in Bojangles Robinson at the 135th Street YMCA, heard Fats Waller at the Lafayette Theater, attended funky rent parties where he ate his fill of chitterlings, pig feet and hoppin-john [rice and black-eyed peas].

"Harlem in the 1920's was a delightful place, particularly so to a youngster reared in a small southern town," Davis observed in an article in the Negro American Forum (Fall, 1968). "But this enjoyment [of Harlem] was not the phony exotic primitivism which the white folk came uptown nightly to find in cabarets and other hot spots. Our enjoyment was in part the pride of having a city of our very own—a city of black intellectuals and artists, of peasants just up from the South, of West Indians and Africans, of Negroes of all kinds and classes."

Meanwhile, at Columbia, Davis was making his way in an almost lily-white world. He was one of the few Black students in attendance and that special status seemed to confer on him a special burden. "I felt the whole 'race' rode on my poor weak shoulders, that somehow if I failed, I would be letting down all Negroes," he reminisced in an article published in Obsidian (Winter, 1978). "Many Negroes of my generation assumed that attitude when they attended northern white schools. It helped to make us more competitive."

Competitive Davis was. He majored in philosophy. ("I don't have the least idea why. Philosophy sounded 'big,' "difficult."') and he did well, well enough to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa, an honor which earned him a front-page article in the New York Times as the first Black Phi Beta Kappa at
Columbia. ("It was a false alarm. I was the second.") But when two Times photographers came to take Davis' photo for the story, they took one look at his near-white complexion and put their cameras away. "No dice," one complained. "He looks too much like the others."

Majoring in philosophy might have proved that Davis could handle a "big," "difficult" subject, but he knew philosophy couldn't put bread on his table. ("There was only one Negro school with a philosophy department [Howard] and Alain Locke was in it. So I knew they didn't need me.") So he decided to earn an M.A. in English at Columbia. The topic of his thesis: "Jeremy Collier and the Reformation of the English Stage."

"No, it wasn't considered odd for a Black person to be writing on such a subject," Davis answered in response to the obvious question. "At the time academicians didn't think there were any Black authors worth writing on. Also, there was our own thinking that there were any Black authors worth thinking about. Also, there was our own attitude, 'Give us a chance and we'll do it just as well' as popular articles for such publications as Collier and the Reformation of the English Stage."

"Our attitude was, 'Give us a chance and we'll show you we can do anything you can do—and do it just as well.'"

With similar motivation, Davis chose Isaac Watts as the subject for his Ph.D. dissertation (which was to become his first book). Research on Watts took him to London (financed by fellowships) and brought him into contact with an intellectually stimulating group of African, West Indian and Black American students, among them, Ralph Bunche.

By the time Davis received his Ph.D. in 1947, he was a husband (having married his favorite librarian), a father (to one Arthur Paul Jr.), an English teacher at Virginia Union University and the author of numerous scholarly articles on literature as well as popular articles for such publications as Negro Digest and The Crisis.

In 1947, also, he published his only work of fiction, How John Boscoe Outsung the Devil, a short story which originally appeared in Common Ground and was later included in several anthologies.

The story, inspired by a man Davis knew at Hampton, is a folk tale in the John Henry-Paul Bunyan mold. It tells of John Boscoe with "the sweetest and deepest bass anybody had ever listened to on this earth," who gets so possessed by pride that he challenges the devil to a singing contest. When it looks like "Ol' Satan" will win, John realizes the folly of his overinflated pride and begs forgiveness: "Oh, Lord, I know I been a sinful and a prideful man! I know I been 'side myself with my own biggityness ... And, Lord, that voice you gave me to bring souls to you, I done used to feed my own vanity and pride."

"The Lord, heeding John's plea, fills his voice with new power. John wins the contest and returns home a much-humbled man."

Davis enjoyed writing about John Boscoe and his foolish pride but he didn't pursue fiction. ("I don't really know why.") He did, though, pursue journalism.

'I came here in 1944 during the golden years... Howard was a great place then and it is a great place now.'

While at Virginia Union and at Howard, he wrote a popular column for the Norfolk Journal and Guide called "With a Grain of Salt." In his inaugural column on October 16, 1942, he cited his mission: "In these articles, I can assure you of one thing only: you will find no pompous pronunciamentos concerning economics, politics, or the race problem... And above all you will find no racial opportunism... On the contrary, though right or wrong, though taking the popular or the unpopular approach, I shall 'call 'em as I see 'em'—but always with a generous grain of salt."

In more than 800 weekly columns, he discussed a wide range of concerns, among them: his son's "addiction" to comic books (which he bemoaned until he came across one featuring a heroic Black World War II soldier); Richmond ("a Southern metron old enough to be sensible yet young enough to be appealing"); and Franklin D. Roosevelt's death ("As I listened to the eulogies on the radio, as I talked with men on the street, as I stood uncovered and watched the funeral procession stream silently by, I felt for the first time a part of, a oneness with the soul of America. I was an American mourning with other Americans the loss of a man whose charm, whose 'saving common sense,' whose sublime simplicity, and whose large soul took all of us—black, white, Jew, Catholic, aristocrat, and laborer—and fused us into a spiritual whole.")

Through his column, Davis caught the eye of many of the nation's Black intellectuals. One of them was Sterling Brown, who in 1937 had conceived the idea of The Negro Caravan and later invited Davis and Ulysses Lee, then a student, to come on board as co-editors.

Working on The Negro Caravan crystallized Davis' interest in Afro-American literature. "I felt here was a genuine field, a relatively new field and there were only a few people working in it, Sterling, one or two others. I somehow sensed that this [Afro-American literature] was an important segment of American literature. Secondly, I liked the literature. It's been a revelation, a constant discovery."

Despite his pale complexion and despite his insistence on calling himself "Negro," Davis says no one has ever challenged him for adopting Afro-American literature as his field. Nor has his commitment to Black folk, in general, ever been challenged. Not even in the tumultuous '60s. "I think it's because everything about me is so typically Negro—the way I talk, my sense of humor. Everything but my color."

Not surprisingly, Davis has no regrets about shifting his scholarly gaze from the writing of 18th century England to that of Black Americans through the years. Nor does he have any regrets about staying at Howard so long.

"I came here in 1944 during the golden age of Howard," he told those assembled at that commemorative program last spring. "Howard was a great place then and it is a great place now. It is a seminal American university... I know a lot of
people who retire and they have so many
gripes. I've served under three presidents,
four vice presidents for academic affairs,
two graduate deans and six chairmen of
the English department and I don't have a
gripe of any kind. Nobody shortchanged
me. Nobody done me in."

"I've gotten almost sentimental about
Howard," he had confessed earlier. "And,
frankly, Howard has been very good to me
— bringing me back for seven years after
retirement on full salary, asking me back
part-time . . . ."

Davis says he supports the idea of com-
pulsory retirement, in general. "There's got
to be a way to get rid of no good teachers
and to enable younger faculty members to
have a chance to advance. But there
should be enough play in the rule that ex-
ceptions can be made. Some scholars are
doing their best work at 65." [Davis, for
instance, has three books plus numerous
important articles to his credit since that
age.]

He is now finishing up an autobiography
he has been working on over the last few
years. ("I'm not satisfied with it yet. It lacks a
certain something.") He also plans to work
on a history of Afro-American literature
based on the wealth of frequently-
overlooked material in M.A. theses pro-
duced by graduates of Howard's English
department. He will continue to serve on
the Commission of Management and Op-
erations of Howard University Press, and
on the Policy Advisory Board of the Institute
for the Arts and the Humanities. And, as
usual, he will keep out a welcome mat for
the many past and present Howard stu-
dents and teachers who flock to him for
scholarly advice or to just sit around and
shoo the breeze.

"I have a little bit of sadness about not
teaching anymore," Davis admitted, "but I
also know old people have a tendency to
stay on too long."

There is sadness in other corners of his
life, as well. Two years ago, shortly before a
50th wedding anniversary, Clarice Davis
died. By all accounts, they had what today
often seems a rarity: a very happy mar-
rriage. Says Davis, his voice softening with
affection, "Clarice was the kind of woman
everyone liked. Everywhere she went — in
the library system, the neighborhood,
wherever — she made friends. The word for
her was 'gentle.'" There are other painful
absences in his life, too: all but one of his
sisters and brothers; friends; colleagues;
former students . . .

But there are also joys: family (his son,
now an assistant principal at a D.C. junior
high school; his teacher daughter-in-law;
his especially beloved 16-year-old grand-
daughter to whom he dedicated From the
Dark Tower; and all the others in the larger
Davis clan whose numbers include a
nephew and niece who are making their
own marks on Black literature — the Yale
scholar-administrator Charles Davis and
the poet Thulani Davis); his enduring love
for good books and for good conversation;
his ongoing scholarly projects; and, of
course, his students. For, he says, "My stu-
dents have been my lifeblood."

It's been a nourishment that has flowed
both ways. As Gregory Rigsby observed at

that commemorative program, "There are
those professors who allow you to take and
those who give. They give so much of
themselves that you become a part of their
very sphere. That distinguishing feature —
the giving of self — is what marks Dr. Davis
above all else."