

‘Sister-friend’ of Angelou, Baldwin and Morrison champions their books

At 90, Eleanor Traylor isn't done fighting for Black literature. Not even close.



By [Keith L. Alexander](#)

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Eleanor Traylor has a schedule that rivals those of most Washington dignitaries.

On a Sunday afternoon in October, Traylor was speaking on the life of actress Hattie McDaniel during a ceremony at Howard University marking the return of the Black actress's historic 1940 Oscar, which had long been missing from the school. After a horde of guests jostled to take photos with her, Traylor slipped out the back door and into the driver's seat of her cobalt-blue Mercedes.

An onlooker marveled, “Dr. Traylor, you *still* drive?”

“Of course I still drive. I'm not dead yet,” she snapped, putting her car in reverse.

Traylor, who turned 90 this month, bristles at the notion that age should slow her down. The former head of Howard's humanities and English departments, Traylor is among the last of a close-knit generation of African American writers that included James Baldwin, Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison. As many of her old friends' published works have faced book bans, Traylor has become one of the most prominent voices countering that effort.

In the days following the McDaniel ceremony, Traylor hosted a private reception at her Dupont Circle home attended by Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson and BET Networks Chair Debra L. Lee. She had a fitting with a private designer for a new gown that Traylor had modeled after the one Lady Gaga wore at President Biden's 2021 inauguration. She was a panelist at Martin Luther King Library, where an award-winning documentary on Angelou's life was shown. A week later, she was a guest speaker for a program honoring Inez Smith

Reid, a retired judge of the D.C. Court of Appeals. Then Traylor was on a flight to Paris to spend Thanksgiving with friends.

She keeps her schedule packed to celebrate her legendary friends, while also finding time to orate on what she calls one of the biggest challenges facing the United States today: the censorship and banning of books. Many of the books that have been pulled from school and library shelves across the country were penned by her closest friends.

As a child, Traylor watched live news reels of Adolf Hitler storming through Europe and was a friend and neighbor of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights and Black arts movements. Now, she says, she has had enough.

“The language of banning the books, even the thought of it, betrays the birth narrative of this nation,” she said. “It’s treasonous. You can’t ban thought. And that’s what books are. You can’t ban speech.”

She added, “I feel that the democracy of this land is challenged in a way that it has not been challenged before, even though the struggle has been continuous all my life.”

‘Never seen anyone like her’

Traylor’s presence cuts through any room she enters. With her bright dresses that span the rainbow, her arsenal of matching bedazzled eyeglasses, her oversize jewelry and her feathered boas, she always makes a statement before she even opens her mouth. “Darling, a lady is not completely dressed unless she has a boa around her shoulders,” she said.

When MacArthur “genius grant” winner and New York Times best-selling writer Ta-Nehisi Coates was a student at Howard University in the mid-1990s, he remembers seeing Traylor buzzing through the buildings. Her reputation as a demanding teacher, literary critic and essayist was known across campus.

“I was scared of her,” Coates said with a laugh. “I didn’t talk to her when I was a student and did everything I could to avoid her.”

Coates recalled hearing from Traylor after he published his debut novel, “The Water Dancer,” in 2019. She publicly praised the work of historical fiction and now refers to Coates as one of her “babies.”

“To have someone I regarded as so severe, to have actually written a work of fiction that she was really fond of was the highest of the heights for me,” he said, adding, “The fact that she is still out here, fighting, is a statement of her commitment and her deep commitment to literature as a whole. It’s beautiful to see her fighting. We need more fighters like her.”

Inside her four-story home, Traylor’s 12-foot-high built-in shelves are full of books; so are her windowsills and side tables. Her collection of novels, works of history, anthologies and essays could rival most public libraries in the nation’s capital. Authors range from her friend LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) to Margaret Walker, William Shakespeare, Vincent Harding, Mark Twain and James Joyce.

“My darling,” Traylor said, stretching her hands toward the books, “these are the voices of this diverse nation in which we live, the beautiful, strong voices which built this country through thought and prose. These are the voices that have inspired generations for centuries. They must live.”

Traylor enunciates and projects her voice like a Royal Academy of Arts thespian. Famed dancer, actress, choreographer and director Debbie Allen said Traylor could have been one of the nation’s top actresses had she not become a literary critic.

When Allen was a student at Howard in the late 1960s, Traylor taught the history of theater and literature. “I had never seen anyone like her. I had never had a professor that pulled me in the way she did,” Allen said. “She would wear these fabulous outfits, leggings, a short dress, boots and a turquoise hat.”

Allen continued: “Honey, she would put us on notice. ‘Debbie, what *wassss* Shakespeare talking about?’ That energy that she had. You couldn’t wait until the next class to see what she was going to wear. And you had better had your homework done.”

When Allen directed the TV series “A Different World” in the late ’80s and early 1990s, Traylor served as the inspiration for the over-the-top, recurring character Dean Dorothy Dandridge Davenport, played by Jenifer Lewis. Allen also consulted with Traylor and tapped her historical expertise when she co-produced the 1997 film “Amistad” with Steven Spielberg.

“I don’t know anyone like her at any age. A 24-year-old, 30- or 40-year-old — I don’t know anyone like her. I want to keep her as close as I can,” Allen said. “Eleanor Traylor’s mind is beyond any computer that could ever catch up. When you’re using that brain the way she does, it’s not going to fail you.”

‘She’s lived without fear’

Born Eleanor Elizabeth Williams in 1933 in Thomasville, Ga., Traylor moved north with her parents to Atlanta as a toddler. She grew up on Auburn Avenue, a few blocks from King and his family’s Ebenezer Baptist Church, where his father pastored. Traylor grew up attending church and neighborhood events with King and his young siblings, and was later a bridesmaid in the wedding of Christine King, the civil rights leader’s older sister.

She majored in English at Spelman College and then obtained her master’s degree from Atlanta University. “I wanted to be a teacher because I had good teachers,” she said. “All the glorious people in my life were teachers. They were dressed and spoke beautifully and were so caring.”

After graduation, Traylor spent a year studying history and art in Germany on an academic fellowship. In 1956, she married Melvin Traylor, an engineering and architecture student at Howard. She relocated to Washington and began teaching English composition at Howard while her husband attended classes. The two divorced years later, and Traylor remained in Washington.

While at Howard in the early 1970s, she shared an office with an English teacher, Chloe Anthony “Toni” Wofford, who later would be known to the world as Toni Morrison. Traylor remembers watching Morrison writing her first novel, “The Bluest Eye,” on a yellow legal pad. She and Morrison, she said, became best “sister-friends.”

Around the same time, Traylor met Angelou at poetry readings she attended with Morrison. Traylor and Angelou bonded over poetry, American history, theater and English literature.

Angelou's grandson, Colin Johnson, 47, doesn't remember a time when his "Auntie Eleanor" was not in his life. "She was one of those 'aunties' that has been in my corner since day one. She was part of my grandmother's tribe," he said.

Johnson said he is not surprised that Traylor continues to fight against book banning.

"She's lived without fear," he said. "Or if she had fear, she didn't show it. She was a Black woman, flying off to Germany and Paris at a time when Black people, especially Black women, did not do that."

He added, "Anyone who is not scared to put feathers and rhinestones on is not afraid of anything."

Johnson described Traylor as the last of his grandmother's "first-round crew" of best friends from the early 1970s.

She's now "the last one standing and fighting. And as long as her voice is working, I would expect her to be on the front lines of this fight," he said. "That is her place to be."

Censorship is 'more pronounced now'

After a nearly a decade teaching at Howard, Traylor left the school and attended Catholic University, where she earned her doctorate in English. She went on to teach English at Georgetown University and Montgomery College in Rockville, Md. She briefly relocated to New York to teach at Cornell University and Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Then, in 1990, she returned to Washington to teach English and then chair Howard's humanities department. She later served as chair of the university's English department for more than a decade. She retired in 2014.

“She has this ability to communicate with gravitas without announcing it,” said Dana A. Williams, a professor of African American literature at Howard and dean of the university’s graduate school. “She could tell you everything from ‘The Epic of Gilgamesh’ to KRS-One.”

Williams credits Traylor with helping to establish African American literature as a field of study. “Dr. Traylor was in that cohort of people who said this has to be a distinct study and hire faculty and write dissertations, and that this is distinct from American literature,” she said.

Traylor said a fear of new and different narratives — of Black Americans, immigrants and LGBTQ people — has stoked the book-banning push among people determined to “erase” those stories from American culture. The irony, she said, is that America — and especially Hollywood — has profited from those very narratives, even if the stories were sometimes exaggerated or distorted.

“With all due respect to the late great Norman Lear and to the beloved Tyler Perry — in fact, to the entire popular cultural Black enterprise which enriches the nation’s treasury by billions of dollars — Black consciousness as a birth narrative has less to do with popular cultural mannerism as it does with the DNA of a democratic government, the birth narrative in which Black Americans were born,” she said, adding, “All of our efforts, the civil rights movement, the Black empowerment movement, the Black Lives Matter movement, the Freedom Movement in America, have been championed by Black America. It’s not a commercial oddity, and it exists on a deeper level than J.J.’s ‘Dyn-o-mite!’ and Madea and Florence on ‘The Jeffersons.’”

On a recent Sunday, Traylor stopped by one of her favorite neighborhood restaurants, Annie’s, just off Dupont Circle, for a brunch of pancakes, bacon and a shot of Frangelico with her coffee. The host greeted Traylor with a big, familiar smile and a “Hello, Ms. Eleanor.” Minutes later, patrons walked over to her, leaned down and offered hugs. “Hello, my darling — hello,” she beamed to a string of six or seven admirers.

Back in her kitchen, Traylor had a pot of neckbones boiling, which she seasoned with pepper, garlic and sugar, to which she planned to add lima beans for soup.

The walls throughout her home are painted yellow and orange, and each covered with original art chronicling her international travels. Bright colors, she said, are “strengthening.”

She reminded visitors that book banning is not new in this country.

“There has always been censorship, but it’s more pronounced now,” she said, and it requires a real fight to counter it.

“This democracy is not perfect, but its ideal is exceptional,” she said, “and must be fought for and earned.”

Monika Mathur contributed to this report.