

BCC snags Roots author for lecture

By Lori Alessi

You probably know more about this man's genealogy than you do your own family history. He's Alex Haley, writer of *Roots*, that now famous anthology of one black man's heritage.

Sitting in a small conference room at Mount Olive Baptist Church in Fort Lauderdale last Thursday, Haley "entertained" a group of reporters. While nibbling on some tiny tea sandwiches and a couple of chocolate chip cookies, which we assumed to be his lunch, Haley thoughtfully fielded questions on a wide range of subjects.

On pride Haley told one black reporter in the group that thirty years ago she would have been a maid. "In the 1950s blacks were ashamed of themselves. Since then, and I'm proud to say *Roots* helped, blacks have developed pride in themselves."

On God and religion, Haley contends that no matter what you practice (or in some cases don't practice) it's the "religious impulse within each of us that keeps us moral." The existence of religion is "the greatest leavening force among us. It keeps reminding us by its very presence of our moral responsibilities," he said.

On politics, Haley professes to be apolitical. "I wouldn't want to endorse any candidates because I'm

afraid people might want to follow me and I don't know enough about it."

When asked about role models and heroes, Haley agreed that though the occupation of heroes today are broader, there should be more areas coveted than just sports. "We desperately need comparable obsessions with scientists, writers and not just sports models."

"I like very much being a writer who is internationally known," Haley said. "I like being a role model as a writer because so few think of it as a profession."

What's his favorite thing about the South? "Food," he said while still munching on those tiny sandwiches. "Never had better mustard greens and catfish in my life as in Natchitoches, Louisiana."

Not making everyone in the room happy, he compared the South with the North. "When I think of the South I think the people have better manners. It's a more pleasant place to live culturally. Life is slower, more comfortable, people more considerate." When asked if he included Florida in that analogy he smiled slowly, "Well, some states in the South don't feel Florida is as advanced as them."

How does he handle the wealth that *Roots* wrought? Very well. Sure I'm wealthy. But I don't have a problem handling it," he laughed. "I



Alex Haley

only worried about money when I didn't have any of it. But remember, you can only eat one steak at a time and sleep in one bed at a time."

The notoriety is something else. "My only problem is being besieged by people. Some are very demanding."

Haley admitted to having cried while writing parts of *Roots*. Though there were some painful and emotional experiences for him during his authorship, he told of tragedies that exist today.

He recently received a letter from his mailbags from 1977 — the mail quantity is so huge that 1977's is still being opened. The letter was from a teacher at a school outside of Los Angeles where Haley

lives. It asked him to appear at the school.

Haley decided to speak to the girl's school and when he arrived he learned that the class consisted of 300 unwed mothers ranging in ages from 12 to 17. The question of how a young girl today could let "such a thing happen" was answered and summarized by one young black girl. "That's how you be pop'lar," she said.

Haley may have given us a glimpse of the subject of his next work. "I've been thinking of doing a satirical piece on the tragedy of a Southerner returning to the South after two years 'up North'. I believe it's the people who went North and were disenchanted who became the seed of the ghetto."

Haley, who spent 12 years researching his *Roots* and won a special Pulitzer Prize

in 1977 for his book, a kick-off speaker for Broward Community College lecture series family, which began week. *Roots* was a basis for the record-breaking television series engrossed nearly 130 viewers.