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Q & A with Alechia Dow

By Patricia J. Murphy | Aug 07, 2023

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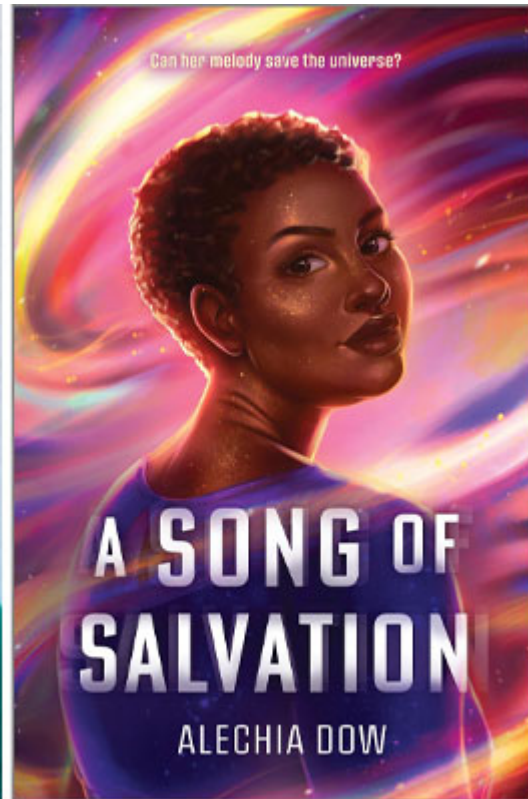
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Like the characters in her science-fiction novels, Alechia Dow harnesses her powers to try to change the world. Dow does this as a former librarian and teacher, a pastry chef, and a YA novelist. Her book titles include The Sound of Stars, The Kindred, and her latest release, A Song of Salvation about a reincarnated God and a space DJ who join forces.

Dow also hosts Bookies and Cookies, an Instagram Live Series where she sits down with fellow authors to help promote

their books—and talk about their favorite cookies. PW spoke with Dow about her various roles, why she's committed to representing diverse characters with mental health issues, and which pastries she'd suggest eating while reading her books.

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Let's start with your work as a librarian, teacher, and a pastry chef. How did you find yourself in these fields—and blend them together?

I always knew that I wanted to be a librarian. I had my first job at 14 years old as a page for the Milford Town Library, in Milford, Mass. Fast forward many years, when I received my bachelor's degree in baking and pastry at Johnson & Wales University [in Providence, R.I.]. Then I went to library school at Simmons University and finished my degree at the University of South Florida.

I started working as a pastry chef at the Bryant Park Hotel and was also teaching cooking classes and running an after-school program for kindergartners at the Epiphany School in Manhattan. Initially, I thought that I'd be teaching basic cooking classes, but I ended up teaching super gourmet classes for these kids and their caregivers!

After a while, I began offering library studies for kids at Epiphany. It was so much fun; I really loved it! Later, I ended up becoming a kindergarten teacher in Germany for English—my partner is from there. And when I moved back to New York City, I became a senior youth services librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library. It's been an adventure!

When did you fold writing into the mix and start cooking up books for young adults?

On top of my love for libraries and baking, I've always been interested in writing, too. In fact, my concentration when I went to school for baking and pastry was in food writing. I wrote for the *Cranston Herald* and became a published food critic. But when I started working as a librarian at the Brooklyn Public Library, I took an online course called "How to Write Your Own Superheroes" and the idea of writing for kids came into view. I gravitated towards writing for young adults because I enjoyed working with them. Soon after, in 2016, I began a writing mentorship where I used everything that I learned to write my first novel, *Sound of Stars*. Once I finished the manuscript, I decided to query agents through one of those online contests. I ended up tweeting my 180-character pitch on a Thursday, had requests to submit the full manuscript, and come Monday, I had three offers of representation! That was in 2018, and my first novel came out in 2020. I realize that was really fast.

Why did you choose to center diverse representation and mental health issues in your stories?

I started thinking about what I would have loved to have seen in stories growing up, what I needed in my life then, and how I wanted to feel when I read books. These things have been central to everything I've written. On top of this, I want to make sure that I'm inclusive with my writing and as diverse as possible. I also want to write as honestly as I can about the things that I've struggled with when I was a teen, and the things that I struggle with now. This is extremely important to me because I feel that there are a lot of teens who haven't seen themselves or mental illness represented in the books they read. They also haven't seen a fat Black protagonist who is the love interest, gets a space adventure, or any of these things before.

In my first two novels, *The Sound of Stars* and *The Kindred*, and my newest title, *A Song of Salvation*, there are characters dealing with depression and anxiety. I think that highlighting these mental health issues is a good start because more teens are experiencing these things. The numbers have risen exponentially since the beginning of the pandemic, and there's a real mental health crisis for teens that we need to put a spotlight on. I personally have bipolar disorder. Down the road, I plan to write my first bipolar character, and I'm really excited about this.

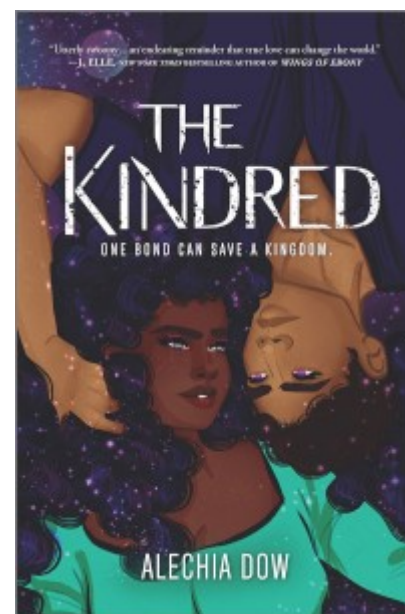
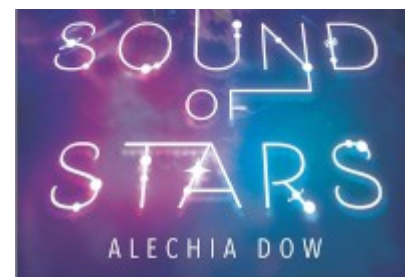


For *A Song of Salvation*, how did you come to the sci-fi genre and the space opera?

I love science fiction! It was the thing that got me into the library. Like I said, I didn't find "my" genre right off, but I fell into *X-Men*, *Star Wars*, and *Star Trek*. After that, I started reading Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, and, of course, Philip K. Dick. I read as much as I could—the classics, and modern things, too. And it all just blossomed from there.

When I wrote my first book, *Sound of the Stars*, I loved writing in this fantastic universe outside of Earth. That's what makes it a space opera. I was lucky to have found that universe when working with my editor, Natashya Wilson, and it all just came together. I decided to write my second novel, *The Kindred*, within the same universe, and I had a blast with that, too. Then I thought, what if I could tie it all together? That is how *A Song of Salvation* came to be.

Even though it's not an actual trilogy, there are similar threads and each of the books has a Black girl at the center of the story. In *A Song of Salvation*, the main character, Zaira, deals with anger that turns into rage. She learns how to use it, move through it, and get to the other side. Zaira is probably the most intense character I've written because she's very angry at how the world has been set up against her. If you're a young Black girl, you feel this constantly. You don't know where to put that anger. You're told by society not to express yourself. But at the same time, you're supposed to help everyone.



Dow combines her love of books and baking in her forthcoming middle grade debut, *Just a Pinch of Magic*, due out in October from Feiwel & Friends.

Your Instagram Live series, *Bookies and Cookies*, helps promote fellow authors by matching their books with cookies. Which pastries would you pair with your three novels?

I came up with this series because it's a fun way to discuss writing and books with authors. And who doesn't enjoy eating a plate of cookies with friends? I also really wanted to give authors who are busy writing and promoting their books another outlet that's less about the books and more about celebrating their accomplishments. So far, it's been great. We come up with a recipe beforehand, each make the cookies—and then discuss the books and eat!

For *A Song of Salvation*, the pastry I'd choose would have to be vibrant—like a spicy chocolate cookie with cayenne pepper and dark chocolate powder. There's magic in that combination—like Zaira. Because *The Kindred* is a love story and a very romantic and comforting book, I'd choose a gentle strawberry and cream, or coconut strawberry doughnut,

In *The Song of the Stars*, Ellie is a huge fan of doughnuts and talks about them a lot. And while I was writing this book, I was thinking about one doughnut that I had at the Doughnut Plant in Brooklyn. It was oatmeal with cinnamon, caramel, and nutmeg with toasted oats and a cinnamon glaze on the outside. It was so delicious! So, I'd suggest something like that when you read this book.

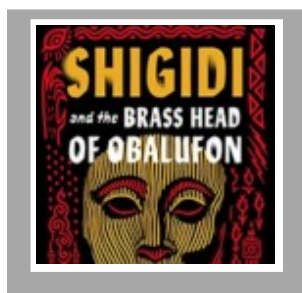
While your readers are reading and eating, what are your hopes for them and your books?

I hope that my books find an audience—and people who really need them. I want them to know that mental health struggles are commonplace; they're not the end of the world, and you can get help for them. It's important to me to help normalize and destigmatize these issues. Lastly, I hope my stories make readers feel happy, loved, and accepted, and that they encourage kids to tell their own stories.

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