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Q & A with Alice Faye Duncan

By Patricia J. Murphy | Sep 26, 2022

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As a longtime teaching librarian, Alice Faye Duncan has planted seeds of lifelong learning and the love of reading. As a children's author/poet, she's planting stories that aren't often talked about or addressed in children's picture books. Her books for young readers

include *Opal Lee* and *What It Means to Be Free: The True Story of the Grandmother of Juneteenth* (illustrated by Keturah A. Bobo), *Evicted! The Struggle for the Right to Vote* (illustrated by Charly Palmer), and her forthcoming book, *Yellow Dog Blues* (illustrated by Chris Raschka). PW spoke with Duncan about how her careers as a teaching librarian and children's author are quilted together, why she feels called to write about difficult, painful moments in American history, and what her hopes are for her books and their readers.

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Which came first: writing or becoming a teaching librarian?

It was writing. As a kid, starting in the third grade, I was always writing stories and poetry. Then, when I was in the sixth grade, a poet by the name of Etheridge Knight, who was a student of the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, came to my school, Snowden Elementary School, in Memphis. He read poems and talked about poetry, writing, and books. It wasn't until that moment with a real live writer/poet in front of me, who told me that I could be a poet, too, that I thought to myself, "I'm going to be a writer."

Learning that writing could be a career for me carried me through elementary school, junior high, and high school. But once I got to college, it was time to think about making a living. When I received my undergraduate degree in English, I learned quickly that writing wasn't going to pay the bills. So, with the encouragement of my parents, I went back to school to earn my library science degree to become a librarian.

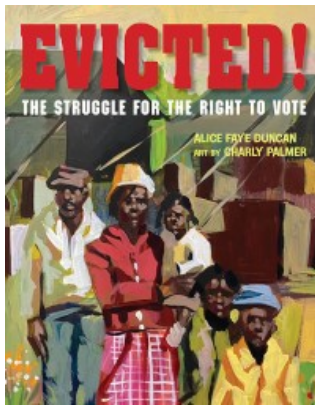
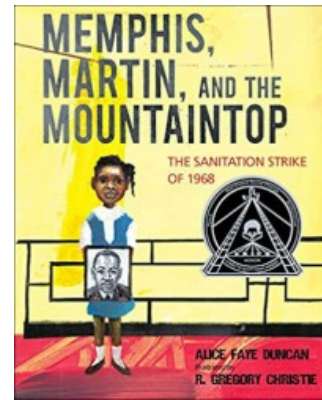
After library school, I worked at a public library, and my dad suggested that I return to school to get my teaching degree—he and my mother were educators—because I wasn't earning what I would as a public school teacher. And, for the last 30 years, I have served students in the city of Memphis.

What did you love the most about being a teaching librarian?

I especially loved interacting with the kids, inspiring their reading lives, and keeping up with what was popular, timely, and relevant in children's literature. I also loved celebrating and inspiring the students who would rather sit in the library and write poems—like Etheridge Knight inspired me. Working in schools influenced my writing and the subjects I chose to write about.

How has your role as teaching librarian influenced your writing?

I was able to study the books, the literature, and the curriculum, and I was able to evaluate resources and identify holes and gaps in the curriculum. For my book *Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop* [on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.], I spent 15 years trying to write it in a collection of personal narrative poems [a mix of free verse and haiku poetry] to fill a gap. Being from Memphis, I was able to conduct interviews with a variety of elders who had helped strategize and organize the sanitation strike, and who had marched with Dr. King, too. I knew that I was writing something that was so necessary, and it kept me going.



Where did your research and writing lead you next? How did they impact your work as a teacher/school librarian?

The two really became one. That's what I most enjoyed about my job because my education role inspired my art—my research and writing—and the art inspired my teaching and library work. So whatever I found myself researching at a particular time, I would incorporate it into my library programming and instruction. This included my book *Evicted: The Struggle for the Right to Vote*. During the three years it took to research and write the manuscript, my library programming was focused on voting rights. I invited sanitation workers and farmers from the 1950s and '60s to our school and they spoke to the students. My program also involved working with the principal to bring people to our school to help parents and students who were of voting age to register to vote. Inevitably, all of my research found its way into my daily instruction! Working this way was exhilarating, life-affirming—and

felt destined, like a calling. And when that season had passed, the Lord was like, "OK, there's now something else for you to do. There's another way to educate and to teach." I came to understand that it was my calling to write and to use my books as inspiration, as enlightenment, and entertainment for young learners. This past year, I retired from teaching to follow this calling and write full-time.

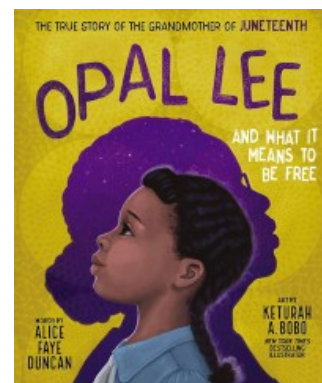
Can you tell us more about your focus on difficult and painful subjects for young children? What are your hopes for your books and readers?

For the last 10 years, I've been writing about history—I write books that are based on what has happened and is happening. Children need to know about these things, so they won't happen again. I am writing books about American history—the history that we have all inherited—to help children decide what kind of world they want to live in—what kind of world they would like to create.

In addition, I write about role models that readers can follow: people of courage like in my book *Opal Lee and What It Means to Be Free: The True Story of the Grandmother of Juneteenth*. I know that stories of bravery can inspire children. Hopefully, my readers will see that when Opal Lee helped make Juneteenth a national holiday that she was a committee of *one*. She started marching and campaigning on her own in 2016. Sure, some folks joined her as she continued on the way. But she didn't wait for a whole band of people to come on board before she decided to march for what was important to her. She knew that if you wait for the band, you won't be able to do anything.

Can you tell us about your upcoming book *Yellow Dog Blues*?

Yellow Dog Blues is what I'd call a blues fable. It's filling a gap about the blues and the view of Mississippi. Oftentimes, people might think of Mississippi as a place of darkness, injustice, and racism. And, while they wouldn't be entirely incorrect, there's also another side of the coin that we cannot deny or ignore—its cultural relevance to America and its music. American music stands on the shoulders of Mississippi. It's there that the Delta blues began, which gave us the Chicago electric blues. It's not just a place of darkness, of ugliness, but a place of beauty, importance, and culture, too.



Where did the idea for this love song to Mississippi and the blues come about? How did you compose it, and how did Caldecott Medalist Chris Raschka join the band?

The idea came to me around 2014 when I received a National Endowment teachers' grant to study civil rights and American blues music in Cleveland, Miss. When I completed the program, I'd thought that I was going to write a book about the Boll Weevil blues, and the Boll Weevil epidemic, but that didn't happen. Another idea that came to me was *Yellow Dog Blues*, a story about a dog running away from home, and a little boy who owns the dog and follows it up what is called the Blues Trail or the Blues Highway, which is Highway 61. I wrote it and rewrote it several times. In 2016, when there was such a racial divide, I decided to write a book that was an expression of racial reconciliation. I thought that I could write this book and join forces with a white illustrator and we could do something intentional about it. I reached out to Chris Raschka through Richard Michelson because I knew Chris had done *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop*, and other picture books that I love. When we connected, I explained why I wanted him to illustrate it. Next, he read it and did a storyboard for the manuscript. Then, we shopped it around at a few publishing houses [before landing at Eerdmans].

The good Lord touched Chris with inspiration to come up with something that I have never seen done in picture books before. It's new, it's fresh, and it matches the spirit of the text as well as the tone of the story. That's because when you're talking about rural Mississippi, you're talking about a place that is filled with practical, homemade things. The people are homegrown, the music is homegrown, everything is homemade. So, as our readers will soon see, this story with my text and Chris's illustrations, looks and feels truly like a quilted and musical experience!

***Yellow Dog Blues* by Alice Faye Duncan, illus. by Chris Raschka. Eerdmans, \$18.99 Sept. 27 ISBN 978-0-8028-5553-4**

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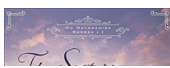
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