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Q & A with Alicia D. Williams

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jan 24, 2022

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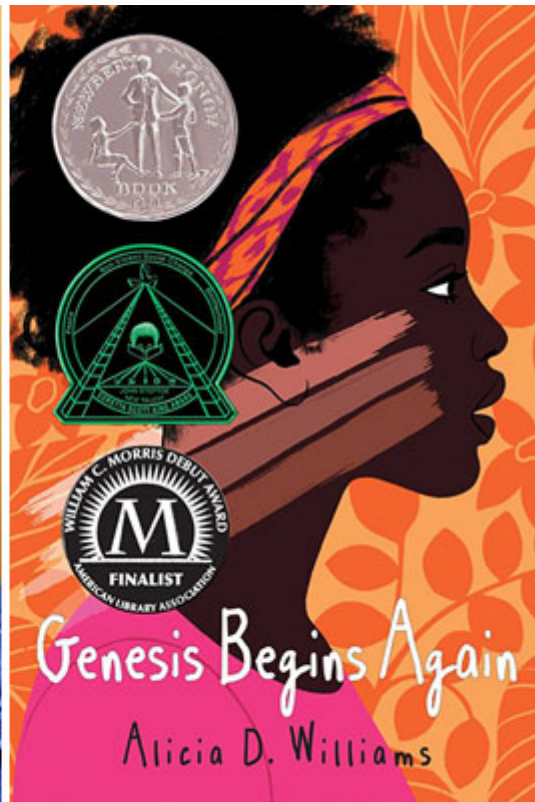
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Like her 13-year-old main character in *Genesis Begins Again*, Alicia D. Williams discovered a list of things two girls didn't like about her back in junior high school. And, also like *Genesis*, Williams didn't let that stop her from being herself or becoming who she wanted to be. Her 2019 debut middle grade novel, *Genesis Begins Again*, was on several best book

lists and garnered such accolades as the YALSA Newbery Honor and Kirkus Prize Honor, the William C. Morris prize finalist and the Coretta Scott King–John Steptoe Award for New Talent. Williams is also the author of picture book

biographies on Zora Neale Hurston and Shirley Chisholm. In addition to being a writer, Williams has used her storytelling and dramatic talents in her roles as a master teaching artist of arts-integration and a teacher across grade levels and subject areas.

PW spoke with Williams about how her early life experiences, the lessons she learned from her students, and the emotional journey she took writing her debut novel helped her tackle its sensitive topics like colorism and addiction, and transform like Genesis.

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You certainly wear many hats as a writer and educator. Can you talk a bit about your master teaching artist role and what that entails?

As a storyteller, a dramatist, and an actress, I was invited to be part of a program in Charlotte, N.C., where they trained artists to go to the schools to teach workshops about the arts. So my roles as a master teaching artist is to teach educators how to integrate the arts into their curriculum, and to offer residencies for kids depending on their teachers' goals.

Unfortunately, many schools don't have money for art or music programs or offer opportunities for their students to meet artists. The master teaching artist program gives schools the opportunity to have both. To start, I teach educators how to integrate the arts to teach science, math, English—whatever their goals are. For example, if the goal is a biography project, I use my art of storytelling to explore biographies with students. We talk about what things they will need to know about their subjects, like what their greatest moments were and their

biggest fears, and how to connect these things to tell their stories. During these residencies, I try to capture the students' attention, to bring out the best in them, and to help them tell their own stories.

In addition to being a master teaching artist, you've also been a classroom teacher and an assistant teacher. What grades and subjects have you taught? And what were some of the best parts and the greatest challenges?

I started my classroom teaching as an assistant teacher while I was in graduate school at Hamline University for my MFA in writing for children and young adults. I was an assistant teacher in fourth grade for one year, in kindergarten for five years, and an interim high school English teacher for six months. After that, I became a lead teacher for sixth and seventh grade history, where I taught ancient and American history.

I think the best parts are getting to know kids and really connecting when I'm teaching, and also when I'm not. It's those in-between times when you slow down and give the kids a mental break where they come talk to you about something, or when we can be silly together—like doing GoNoodle [a website where you can dance with videos or do yoga, etc.] That's when I feel like I've made a genuine connection. We all know that kids need more connections and for people to listen to them; and I get to be one of these connections and people.

I found the biggest challenge to be dealing with the stress that parents put on their children to be perfect. These expectations for perfection increase the anxiety level of my students. The second biggest challenge is how some children no longer seem to enjoy the learning process or exploring new topics or things. They just must want to memorize things so they can get an A.

When I switched to teaching history, there were additional challenges. I was so excited to teach history because I *love* history, I have a degree in African studies, and the school hired me to teach history using narratives. But I joined a team where I discovered some teachers just wanted to use the textbook. I didn't realize that there would be such resistance from parents to bringing in the narratives. It became very stressful.

What happened next?

With this stress and my debut novel coming out, I decided to step back and return to being an assistant teacher for awhile. Because with being a lead teacher, I had all of the lesson planning and grading to, advisees to advise, field trips to go on, and faculty meetings to attend—and it became too much. So, I was lucky enough to be placed as an assistant teacher in the art classroom. This allowed me to get to know many more children and it forced me to be brave doing art—even if it wasn't part of my job. It also allowed me to devote more time to crafting my stories in my off hours. But, it wasn't nearly enough.

An administrator advised me, “Alicia, you can affect the students here in our school within your classroom, or you can affect an entire nation of students.” And, then, he added, “Whatever you decide, I support you in this.” He gave me the freedom to decide and to think about what I needed to do.

Because when I took a job teaching history, especially with the climate of the world today, I felt that my work had just begun. I took the history teaching position to bring in narrative so we could go beyond the textbook's narrow scope. I wanted to help my students delve into history, to ask questions—to ask why— and to discover answers without being told what to think or just memorize, and to develop empathy. By teaching, I wanted to change the world by inspiring children to think for themselves. And, then, I thought about my administrator's words and realized, “Maybe, I can do this with my books and my writing.” And, that's what I'm trying to do.

When did you begin writing *Genesis Begins Again*?

I started the story in graduate school. I didn't know what it was about, and I didn't believe in myself to finish it. It wasn't until a year after my graduation that I said, “Alicia, write the freaking book!” It took seven years, but I finished it.

At first, it was a story about a girl who was struggling with her body image—being heavy and dark, and having kinky hair. I ended up getting rid of her being heavysset, and I focused on colorism which seemed to be the heart of the story. While the story is not autobiographical, I do remember growing up and struggling with being heavysset. As for the colorism, I really think I did this because in college I wrote a paper on it, and it stayed with me. I remembered how I saw it growing up, just like *Genesis*, and it affected me. I didn't purposely set out to write a story about colorism because we as a culture, Black America, don't talk about colorism. We don't air our dirty laundry. That's something that's a big no-no. But, I wrote it. And, to be frank, I was terrified.

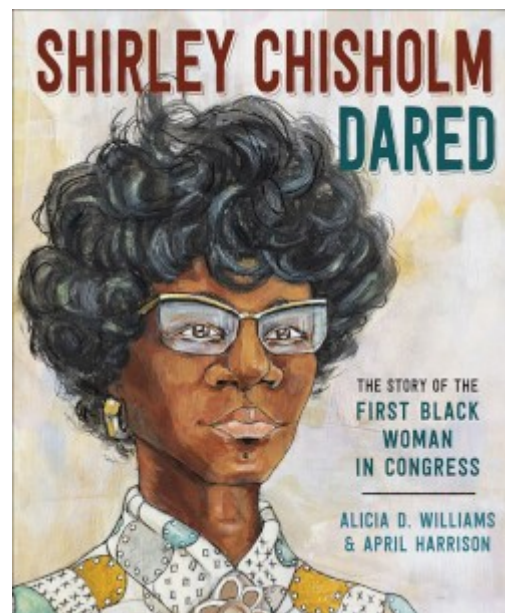
What made you so terrified?

It's because colorism is such a sensitive subject. I was afraid of backlash—people saying, “How dare you talk about this!” And I was terrified to give any bullies fuel. Some people told me that it was too much for a middle grade reader to handle, and I had a Black college professor in graduate school who advised me not to write it. Honestly, I didn't choose to write this book; this story chose me. Some books choose you—and you have to write them.

And, then you won the Newbery Honor, and the Coretta Scott King-John Steptoe New Talent Award! How did all of this make you feel then?

My first reaction was disbelief. The imposter syndrome immediately set in. I thought to myself, “What did they see in my story?”

Getting validation from the Newbery Committee for my writing meant a great deal to me; and for the Coretta Scott King Committee to choose me for its Coretta Scott King-John Steptoe New Talent Award verified to me that I could write about colorism, that I did a good thing—that I had written a story that is needed, and that it's time to talk about this now. I don't even know how the universe allowed this to happen. I am still speechless and feel honored to have won these awards, and to see the stickers on my book.



What have your readers' reactions been, and what have they meant to you?

I hear from adults and children of all colors saying that Genesis's story has connected with them—and not just about its colorism theme. I've also heard from adults who were children of alcoholics, and children who have dealt with poverty, bullying, and homelessness. They have all been truly touched by the story. I think this says that kids *can* handle these topics in books because they're dealing with these things in their own lives. And, this means the world to me.

I cannot tell you how many nights I cried at my computer writing—and going deeper—because they tell you, "Don't rescue your character, put them in even more trouble." And, the more that I did this, the more vulnerable I became. And I remembered the trauma that I've experienced with colorism. So, having people react to my book this way means to me that everything I've gone through in my entire life was meant for somebody else—and that what I needed to say about it can help them.

In *Genesis Begins Again* and your two picture book biographies you represent strong Black female characters and public figures. Can you talk about how important this representation is to you?

Being a Black writer, I feel a responsibility to share what I'm dealing with. Most of all, I'm dealing with being Black, loving myself, and finding a way for my spirit to work some things out. Like Genesis, I'm coming to terms with who I am, and hopefully helping my readers come to terms with who they are, too.

For my picture book biographies, I've chosen to write about Black women who have defied labels, and who have gone through some difficult things and survived. I want to let my readers know they can go through these things and that they will be okay. I write stories to empower kids.

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How do you think teaching kids has influenced and empowered your writing—especially your debut novel?

I think all of my teaching helped deepen my stories. The student connections I spoke about earlier helped me the most. The conversations that I had with students about things that really concerned them helped me broaden my story, and also validated what I was thinking and writing about.

Many of my advisees were especially concerned about friends and having difficulty making them. Through the years, I have seen how some kids choose friends based upon popularity. [Instead], I wanted to show a friendship based on loyalty in my story. I also had students who had family members dealing with drug and alcohol addictions so I wanted to give Genesis's father who suffers from mental health issues and alcoholism issues greater depth, and not reinforce any stereotypes about him. I do not want any of these things to be message-oriented, but to be universal.

Ultimately, my teaching has made me understand that some kids only see the top

layer of things. So, with my characters if I can go deeper, maybe, kids can do this and look at and see things more deeply, too.

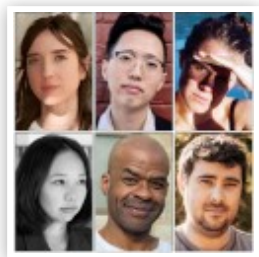
What is your ultimate hope for your readers?

I hope that my readers will read my books and come back to them time and time again. And, when they do, I want them to feel empowered every time they read them. I want my books to stay on the shelves.

What's next for you?

I am currently writing another novel and have other picture books in the pipeline already. The novel explores the anxiety and the feelings that I felt during 2020. It's the same anxiety and feelings that I think kids were dealing with, too. I'm also going to focus on my writing full-time. My plan is to give myself this year and trust that something is going to come out of me that will reach as many kids as I can.

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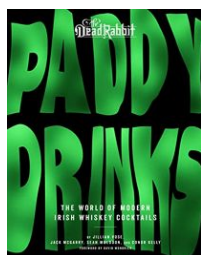
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