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Q & A with Nikki Shannon Smith

By Patricia J. Murphy | Mar 24, 2023

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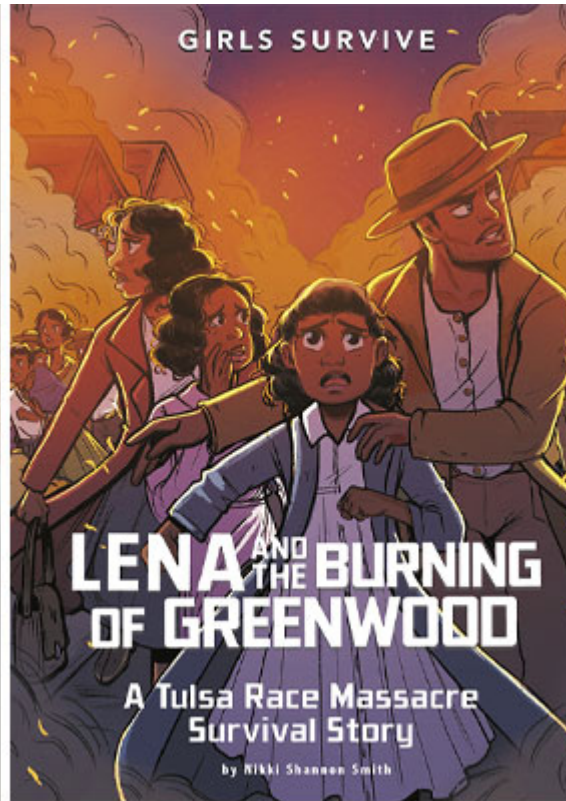
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Nikki Shannon Smith knows the power of words. She is a fourth grade teacher in Davis, Calif., and an author of books for young readers, from board books to middle grade novels. Smith's books include *Lena and the Burning of Greenwood: A Tulsa Race Massacre Survival Story* and *Charlotte Spies for Justice: A Civil War Survival Story*,

both part of Capstone's *Girls Survive* series. In these stories, Smith digs deep to explore hard truths of Black history. In

her books for younger children, *Our Beautiful Colors and Love Is All Around*, Smith celebrates Black experiences. PW spoke with Smith about finding her voice, how her teaching and writing influence each other, and the inspirational words and impassioned question that fuel her writing for children of color, and all children.

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You have taught for nearly 30 years and served as a principal. Can you tell us about these experiences?

I have taught grades K–6 for varying lengths of time, and I had a three-year stint as an elementary school principal. My foray into secondary education was as a summer school principal of a high school. I love teaching and learning which is why I became a teacher. I was encouraged to become a principal by someone I have a great deal of respect for. I thought that I'd try it because I'd always been interested in leveling the playing field and fostering equity in schools. I also thought it would be a great way to affect a positive change on a larger scale, but it didn't really turn out that way. I found that I didn't have the freedom to make changes, my time wasn't spent the way I had imagined, and I missed students, my instruction time—and the laughter. When I'm in the classroom, I laugh every single day. And, as a principal, I wasn't laughing anymore. With my teaching, I feel that I can make a greater impact in my students' lives and help foster relationships. I believe that's how children learn best, and the way we can change

the world.

What would you say are the greatest joys of teaching—and the biggest challenges?

The things I love most are watching children learn, and creating an environment where students can be themselves and learn from one another. As for the biggest challenges, I think it's wanting to do *more*, and not being able to do *everything* that every student needs. That's because there aren't enough hours in the day or adults in the classroom. I'm always trying to figure out why one student doesn't like this or has a problem with that, and wondering why I'm unable to teach or help them do what I know they're capable of doing.

So, when did you see yourself as a writer and set your sights on writing for kids?

It wasn't until I became a wife and mother that I decided that I needed to do something that was creative—and all mine. I realized that I needed to write because I always loved books and writing. I remember raiding my daughter's bookshelves to look for our favorite books. These included a handful from Nikki Grimes's Danitra Brown series, and so I looked at her website. Bless her heart! Nikki had a tab for writers and a checklist to follow! And, since I've always loved lists, I followed all of her steps and honed my craft. And that's when I decided that I needed to be a writer, and a published children's author. Now, I have an agent and a total of 20 published and soon-to-be published books.

Five of your books are part of the Girls Survive series, and two of them fictionalize difficult moments in Black history. Can you tell us about your most recent book in the series, *Lena and the Burning of Greenwood*? How difficult was it to write?

The Girls Survive series is a multi-author middle grade collection of over 20 titles. The books are short, illustrated fiction with a goal to make historical fiction exciting and accessible. Lena's story has been the hardest book emotionally for me to write. Capstone was really interested in the topic, and was committed not to shy away from the truth. When they first invited me to write the book, I asked for some time to think about it. I wanted to really reflect on whether or not I had the emotional bandwidth to see it through. While I did my thinking, I discovered that there really weren't any children's books out there about it at the time. (*Unspeakable* by Carole Boston Weatherford and the late Caldecott Honor winner Floyd



Cooper had just come out when I was in the process of starting the book.) So I said “yes” on January 4, 2021, and two days later the events of January 6 happened. It wasn’t lost on me that I was researching an event where out of hatred people attacked a town; and as I worked, I saw this happen again on TV. As part of my research and soul searching, I asked lots of questions and learned about the people of Tulsa, Ok. I discovered a quotation from Ernestine Alpha Gibbs, a survivor of the Tulsa Race Massacre, while I was watching a documentary. Gibbs said, “Maybe, if we talk about it enough, it’ll never be again.” When I heard this, I felt like she was speaking right to me. So I decided to write the book.



Your latest picture book and board book celebrate the Black experience. Can you discuss these books and what led you to write them?

My picture book *Our Beautiful Colors* and *Love Is All Around* [part of the Brown Baby Parade board book series] both came out on December 6, 2022. I was writing these books at the same time I was writing Lena’s story in the midst of the pandemic. I was also at home teaching virtually, feeling scared and isolated, worrying about my family, and trying to stay healthy. My family and I were in four corners of our house trying to keep our emotional *and* internet bandwidth. And when we turned on the TV, it was Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd. I was constantly in tears; I had to turn off the TV. So when I went back to work and sat at my writing desk, which faces out a window, all I could do was to look out at the tall trees and cry. And I asked out loud, “What about the babies?” If I can’t process this, then what is happening to our kids? What do the kids think? It was then that I decided to do something to make sure all the brown and Black babies knew that they were loved. So I took a piece of paper and this little story, *Our Beautiful Colors*, came out.



Upon completing this story, I was asked if I’d be open to writing more of these kinds of books with different aspects of the Black experience. Of course, I said, “yes” because this is exactly what I want to put out in the world and to be available for kids. I’d like to help counteract the images that have been plastered all over the media, because that is not who we are. I want our Black and brown children to see themselves in a positive light. To see the joy, the happiness. We are not George

Floyd with a knee on the neck. So that is how that these younger books were born. They are my love letters to Black and brown babies.

How do your writing and teaching influence each other?

I believe they go hand in hand. My teaching allows me to understand where kids are developmentally, how their minds work, process information, express their thoughts, and learn. I must put myself in their shoes and think like them. This helps me teach successfully and also helps me create my characters. On the other hand, my writing influences my teaching by making me a more empathetic writing teacher. I often share with my students some of my books’ drafts. I do this so they can see all the markups and the track changes, and that no one is perfect... or gets it right the first time.

What is your ultimate hope for your writing, your books, and your readers?

It’s important to me that that I write what I know with authenticity, respect, and love. My readers deserve this. Through my books, I want to show readers the different aspects of Blackness and the many allies who care about human beings of all colors, who want the world to be a better place to live in, and who have the difficult and important conversations with their children to do this. Ultimately, I hope to open a door for these conversations to happen for all children.

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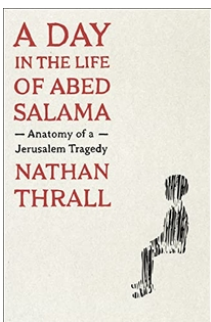
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