



BOOK CLUB KIT

WRITING FICTION IS A WAY TO ENSURE MY ANCESTORS' STORIES ARE REMEMBERED

An Essay by Jamila Minnicks

“This one again?” Mama protested falsely, as betrayed by the glint in her eye whenever we asked for the Alphonso story. Her pursed lips suggested that it was almost a bother to tell, but after a little prodding, she began to describe the way my granddaddy, Daddy John, would receive one of her beaus coming to call. Not out on the porch, mind you, but *inside* the house, in the parlor where important guests were received. But sit on that couch, he told them. Her grin took a wickedly northern turn as she described my granddaddy chatting the young man up, asking about his particulars (*Yes, that’s nice*), where he intended to take my mama for the evening (*Sounds alright*), and what time he planned to bring her home (*That’s fine*).

Then, all of a sudden, Daddy John would rise, walk over, and lean in close. So close that the young man would have to lean away from my granddaddy, who, by then, had begun digging in the couch. From where he would ease a small rifle from the underside of the cushions, and the young man’s eyes would become saucers after having been perched atop a long gun during the entire chat with my granddaddy.

“There it is,” Mama mimicked Daddy John as he “found” his strategically placed, unloaded rifle. “Good thing I found it, too. These things can go off at the damnedest times.”

According to my mama, this is how Daddy John greeted all her beaus when they came over. Her cool manner belied the narrative shock of the tale, but she told it for true. And later in life, cousins, aunts, and uncles (mostly) confirmed this, and other accounts about the life my family lived in Demopolis, Alabama.

Though Daddy John and Mama Bea, my grandmama, passed before I was born, they both lived in Mama’s memory and through my family’s stories. Growing up in the Chicago suburbs, Mama taught my siblings and me that Alabama was the place where my great-great-granddaddy Preston helped to found our home church; was where my mama vied with the same girl from first through twelfth grade for class valedictorian; was where Daddy John and his brothers all built one another’s “big white houses on the corner” of the blocks where they each lived—by hand.

Demopolis was where Mama Bea taught my mama to sew; where she told my mama to hold her head high, but not to have her “nose in the clouds”; and where she wrapped my mama in the same affirmation-filled hugs every day before she went to school that my mama left us with until she passed. Mama talked about beaus and classmate rivalries and fig trees and great uncles with their Model Ts and shooting a rifle with such precision they nicknamed her Annie Oakley. My family’s roots are deep in Alabama soil, extending well before Emancipation. And our community was one where people shared to the last nickels and dimes.

Alabama raised my mama to be a woman who bought her children every Black book she could find. Every Christmas of my early years, a Black baby doll appeared for my sister and me under the tree—though these were collector’s items, never to be played with. At twelve, when I decided to become an Air Force pilot, my mama took me to meet living Tuskegee Airmen at the Chicago Air and Water Show, and I sat in the red-tailed plane they had on display. When I decided to become a lawyer, she introduced me to the first Black woman to serve on the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals. My mama taught me to become the woman I am today, and she was raised in Demopolis, Alabama.

While trauma is imprinted on Black DNA as intuition, and certainly informs our steps as we navigate this world, what harms us remains with us but does not define us. Our family was certainly not immune to the realities of anti-Black racism in Alabama or anywhere else. But my family’s stories were more complete and nuanced than any singular Black history narrative. Degradation is not the entirety of our tales.

Which is one of the many reasons I write fiction—as catharsis for the trauma imprinted on my DNA, yes, but also because of the immense responsibility, and honor, to ensure that my ancestors’ stories are documented and remembered.

Since I cannot tell every tale, I hope my work inspires readers to memorialize their own family lore, and to become more curious about the many facets of Black history. Because, as Chinua Achebe relays the West African proverb: “Until the lion has its own historians, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.” I come from people rich in heritage and culture and laughter and love. And resilience.

In the summer of 2020, my goal was to write a short story about a Black family debating the merits of *Brown v. Board of Education* around a holiday table. But less than ten minutes into writing, it was Alice who captured my imagination. I envisioned her sliding food on the table with a grin on her face so familiar to the women in my family—the slight curve of her lips, and the sparkle in her eye that said she knew her mind on the matter, and that everyone else knew it too, so no need to jump into that mess.

This woman with her own opinions and motivations and magic and voice was keeping her mind behind that Alabama smile like so many who came before us. That smile assured me that Alice’s life was a whole story that deserved to be remembered and celebrated. And as I dove deeper into *New Jessup*, my family’s comprehensive telling of our history encouraged me to interview, comb through archives, explore texts, and just allow the Alabama soil to reveal Alice to me.

It is through her lens that we see *New Jessup* in its fuller context—its triumphs and struggles outside the traditional narratives of oppression and degradation. *Moonrise Over New Jessup* is the story of how Alice found her way, made her home, made mistakes. And thrived. And just like my mama, Alice demands that I tell it all for true.

TEN QUESTIONS FOR JAMILA MINNICKS

1. How long did it take you to write *Moonrise Over New Jessup*?

The first draft of *Moonrise Over New Jessup* took two months. I had completed my NaNoWriMo [National Novel Writing Month] 2019 novel—which remains safely tucked inside a now-retired laptop—and then spent a month or so writing shorter fiction. In early June 2020, I had planned to return to the NaNoWriMo project, but a scene rooted in my imagination and demanded to be written: a family debating the merits of *Brown v. Board of Education* around a holiday dinner table. So I started writing *Moonrise Over New Jessup* as another short story, since my short fiction usually begins with an all-consuming idea.

The scene and dialogue came quickly, but before long the vision of Alice gliding around the periphery of the table—sliding the turkey onto the cloth, dishing collards onto plates—captured my attention for what she wasn't saying. Instead, a wry, knowing smile gently twisted the corners of her lips as she listened and moved. The Alabama spice behind her smile is second nature to the women in my family, so Alice's look assured me that she knew her own mind about the issue, and that the folks fussing at the table knew her mind about things too. That's when I knew her story was the story, and the novel came quickly after that.

In early August 2020, I learned that the PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction was accepting manuscripts. *New Jessup* was a piece of my heart—I loved Alice and the people around her, and was proud to memorialize what life was like in some Black towns and settlements here in the United States. But I had not written *New Jessup* with publishing success in mind. I am a huge fan of Barbara Kingsolver's work, and thought the prize presented a great opportunity to center Alice in a midcentury Alabama narrative while also highlighting the historical diversity of lives lived in real Black towns and settlements. So I revised the draft two more times and submitted an hour or so before the midnight deadline.

Barbara Kingsolver telephoned in February 2021 with news that I had won the PEN/Bellwether Prize! I thought a friend was teasing me at first, but it was indeed Barbara Kingsolver. She endows this incredible award, which also guarantees a publishing contract with Algonquin Books.

2. What was the most challenging thing about writing the book?

That I always had more creative energy than time when writing *New Jessup*. In 2020, I was working as an attorney. My early mornings were devoted to creative writing so that my first thoughts of the day were reflective and nourishing. Immersion in *New Jessup* provided an outlet for my creativity, fortified my spirit, and amplified my voice; particularly since legal writing is technical and rigid, and my work environment was disagreeable. The back and forth between my creative space and my legal job was hard, but the writing was my joy.

3. Where, when, and how often do you write?

I write daily, beginning at 4:00 AM. Of course, there are times when I've been under the weather or out too late to make that hour productive, but since I started *Moonrise Over New Jessup*, there have been only a handful of days that I've slept in. At that hour, my dream world and my waking world are one world. Sometimes I awake without a clear writing direction for the morning. When that happens, I write the thoughts and impressions coming to me from this liminal place—where language is malleable and it feels like I am in closer communion with my ancestors. Some of my best work has come from that practice, so even though I am no longer practicing law, 4:00 AM is still my favorite hour to get up and write.

4. What are you reading right now?

I usually read, and reread, several books at the same time, and recently finished a great selection that included Dionne Irving's *The Islands*; Laura Warrell's *Sweet, Soft, Plenty Rhythm*; Toni Morrison's *Mouth Full of Blood: Essays, Speeches, Meditations*; Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; Chantal James's *None but the Righteous*; Cleyvis Natera's *Neruda on the Park*; Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*; and Jason Mott's *The Returned*. It will take me some time to build up another round of books, but so far I am into Barbara Kingsolver's *Demon Copperhead*, Clint Smith's *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*, Carlo Rovelli's *The Order of Time*, and *Black Folk Could Fly: Selected Writings* by Randall Kenan.

5. Which author or authors have been influential for you, in your writing of this book in particular or as a writer in general?

This is a long list! From Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Deesha Philyaw, Robert Jones Jr., Gayl Jones, Ralph Ellison, Maurice Carlos Ruffin, Nate Marshall, Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Margaret Wilkerson Sexton, Imani Perry, Zora Neale Hurston, Chinua Achebe—the list feels like it could go on—I learned to write about my people with bravery, honesty, and care. Like Morrison, I hope everyone picks up my stories. But these authors prioritize, and immortalize, Black people and our history in their work. I am humbled and honored to be part of that tradition.

Barbara Kingsolver's characters invite readers into the deepest regions of the human psyche, and Claire Messud's work is a study of the smoldering page after page. Heidi W. Durrow's thought-provoking work demands your attention and sparks important conversations, and Gabriel García Márquez's breathless prose is in a class of its own. There are many others whom I love—because, at the end of the day, a large swath of inspiration only helps writers develop their own style.

6. What have you learned about the publishing industry that you wish you'd known before you published this book?

I knew very little about the industry before winning the PEN/Bellwether Prize. This was a blessing because I learned that separating the art of writing from ideas of publishing success best serves my creative purpose. I am infinitely grateful to Barbara Kingsolver and the PEN/Bellwether jury for appreciating and selecting *New Jessup* for the prize, and grateful for the extraordinarily caring way Algonquin has introduced the world to Alice and her folks. It has been an experience watching the publishing machinery at work—engaging with editorial, design, marketing, and publicity professionals—and I have a great deal of respect for all the people involved in the process of making my book.

But ideas about major publishing success did not influence my writing in *Moonrise Over New Jessup*; nor is it a consideration for any of my other work. I realize now that established writers, agents, and editors routinely counsel emerging writers about the importance of separation between the art and their expectations in business. This sentiment is regularly repeated in trade publications and blogs that I read, and by industry veterans at writers' conferences. But I had never heard this advice before writing *New Jessup*. My approach to historical fiction is to write from a place of honesty, creativity, compassion, and intelligence to avoid creating historical distortion, and I always believed that if I wrote with purpose and integrity, my work would find its true readers.

Before the PEN/Bellwether Prize, my most audacious goal for *Moonrise Over New Jessup* was to self-publish the novel and ride it around Alabama, distributing it to family from the trunk of my car. I am immensely grateful for all the effort going into widening my audience. The opportunity to introduce the world to Alice, and her unique role in Black history, is a blessing separate and apart from the creative work.

7. What is one thing that surprised you during the writing of *Moonrise Over New Jessup*?

The complete immersion into *New Jessup* during the writing and editing process. My mama's people are Alabama for at least four generations. There are nods to inside jokes and anecdotes about ancestors passed down through the generations throughout the book. Writing about New Jessup, Alabama—the people, the conversations, the fellowship—provided a bridge to elders and ancestors who lifted me, carried me, and reminded me that I never walk alone.

8. If you could go back in time and talk to the earlier you, before you wrote *Moonrise Over New Jessup*, what would you say?

That there is more than one way in the world to have a voice. I chose law school with dreams of becoming a Supreme Court practitioner, fighting eloquently for civil rights with every brilliant keystroke and utterance before the storied tribunal. That never happened. Being an advocate for my community is part of my DNA, and I spent my career with an eye toward how

the work I was involved in impacted Black people. I worked in a lot of spaces where I was the only Black person and tried to use my voice to raise perspectives that were not being considered. Maybe some people heard me, maybe not; but when communities you care about remain routinely underserved, despite your best efforts, you realize that your voice may be better suited elsewhere. So I sought elsewhere with my writing.

9. What forms of work, other than writing, did you have to do to complete this book?

There were a number of things I had to do to find, and maintain, my creative center and focus. My mama spoke with pride about growing up in Alabama—giving a much fuller picture of her life than I found in my high school textbooks, or in much of canonical literature—so that love for the soil has always been with me. I fellowshipped with family and longtime friends—sometimes to get a new take on Mama’s stories, to learn new stories, and always to be surrounded by love. My family strengthens me and keeps me grounded.

This book was also an opportunity to meet new “family”: my dear Montgomery “aunties,” some of the extraordinarily dedicated mayors and community leaders in the Historic Black Towns and Settlements Alliance, African American studies scholars, and elders with a treasure trove of memories about places that inspired *New Jessup*. My research about Black towns and settlements has taken me to archives large and small, historic one-room schoolhouses, Black towns and settlements north and south—both living and in memory—front rooms and front porches, May Day celebrations and founders’ day festivities, and banquets and Sunday suppers. Research was integral to bringing *New Jessup* to life, and I also read a lot, listened to podcasts, and even watched YouTube videos for real-time glimpses of what life was like in these communities.

I need to live life to make art—to eat and dance and laugh and travel and feel things. Exercise is a must—I usually combine a long walk with a barre or yoga class or weight training. My coffee pot has a timer, so when set overnight, the aroma urges me from underneath the blankets in the morning. And music! I couldn’t have written this book without my playlist, and I can just about remember the songs that drove each scene in the book. *Moonrise Over New Jessup* is a story about our lives, and music has been a salve, a joy, a message, a haunt, a celebration in Black life since before we even landed on this soil.

10. What’s the best piece of writing advice you’ve ever received?

To write your story because no one else can write it. Writers approach the same person or event or era of historical significance through their own unique lens. When we lean into where our hearts guide us, the words on the page reflect our style. It is important to understand craft rules and to read widely, because we see how others follow, and break, those rules. But ultimately our work should reflect our own vision and our own voice.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why do you think Marion and Safiyah Young kept Alice and Rosie out of the fields during the school year, when the majority of Rensler's Black children were removed from school to work and help their families financially?
2. Why does Alice sob when she realizes that she's ended up in a thriving, all-Black community? What did you think of the way she is embraced into the town by the Browns, Miss Vivian, and Mr. Marvin?
3. Though Alice and her friends and family refer to New Jessup as a town, it was never formally incorporated as a municipality after the 1903 riot. Technically, this would make it a Black settlement. Why was it important to Raymond and the rest of the members of the New Jessup NNAS to incorporate New Jessup as its own city?
4. More often than not, the people of New Jessup say they are trying to maintain "separation" or "independence" from the other side of the woods, as opposed to saying "segregation" or "desegregation" or "integration." How does their language reflect their mindset about New Jessup?
5. When Patience tries to enlist Alice into the NNAS, she says, "The deep voices always overrule you." When Alice rebuts that Patience has one of the deepest "woman voices" she's ever heard, Patience replies, "*Woman* voices." What does she mean by that? Why do you think their relationship ends the way it does? Conversely, why do Alice and Dot develop such a fast, and intense, sisterhood?
6. White citizens' councils were organized in many localities after the Supreme Court issued the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which desegregated public schools. These councils were generally created to fight desegregation and perpetuate anti-Black laws and conduct, and they were generally comprised of "local white men of distinction" such as the judges, police, and business owners of Jessup. Why do you think they asked Pop, Cap, and Mr. Marvin to join their meetings? Why did Pop, Cap, and Mr. Marvin withhold information from the council and handle any organizing around New Jessup themselves? Would this happen in the Black community today? Why or why not?
7. What did you take away from Alice's talk about white Jesus and redemption for all unrighteousness?
8. Why did Raymond want Alice to stop working outside the home? And why do you think he ultimately forced the issue? What was your reaction when he had her fired?
9. How does Alice get along with Percy? With Simeon? How do these relationships evolve throughout the book? What do you think Alice, Percy, and Simeon wanted for New Jessup?

10. Alice’s story starts with the moon rising and setting, stitching eternity together, night by night. What does the moon symbolize throughout the story?
11. What went through your mind when the phone rang about the towing calls? Why does Alice call Chase Fitzhugh “nobody’s Negro”?
12. Alice mentions wanting to vote, but she is unwilling to “wear out her shoe leather” just to cast a ballot for the same candidates that are always on the ballot. What does she mean by this?
13. Do the women of New Jessup fit your definition of the “strong Black woman”? Why or why not?
14. Why does Raymond consider the theft of his sister Regina’s shoes the worst part of the altercation at the Montgomery bus station?
15. Why do you think Miss Catherine kept such a large garden, particularly when it was mostly flowers? Do you think Alice was eager to continue working in the garden after growing up on a farm? Why or why not?
16. Our elders were young once, but too often we can only imagine them as our elders. In 2023, Alice would have turned eighty-eight years old, but the book documents her life from the age of five in 1940 to twenty-six in 1961. What were your favorite things to learn about Alice’s life? What do you imagine or know of what your elders’ lives were like as young people?
17. What do you think happened to Rosie?

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JAMILA MINNICKS’s debut novel, *Moonrise Over New Jessup*, won the 2021 PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction. Her short fiction and essays have been published in *The Sun*, *CRAFT*, *Catapult*, *Blackbird*, the *Write Launch*, and elsewhere, and her piece *Politics of Distraction* was nominated for the Pushcart Prize. Minnicks’s work has been supported by the Sewanee Writers’ Conference and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. A graduate of the University of Michigan, Howard University School of Law, and Georgetown University Law Center, she lives in Washington, DC.