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Toni Ann Johnson
Writer

"In Their Heads and Hearts"

Elyce Strong Mann: You have had quite a career, first as an actress, then as a writer of stage plays, screenplays, and fiction. How did acting inform your writing?

Toni Ann Johnson: I was fourteen when I started studying acting in New York at The Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute and I continued to study there throughout college at NYU (New York University). As an actor I was trained to use aspects of myself to inform my characters and I do that as a writer as well. I become (temporarily!) the people I put on the page. I'm in their heads and hearts learning what they're thinking and feeling. I empathize with them, even the ones who do and say unlikeable things, because I understand the thoughts that lead to their behavior.

Acting also taught me about subtext in dialogue. Actors discern their characters' "objective," meaning they're aware of what a character wants overall and within each scene. This was all great training for the craft of dramatic writing, which is how I began. Playwriting led to screenwriting and screenwriting burnout led to fiction. All writing, for me, began with learning to play characters within a dramatic piece and I still use that. A lot of my writing is done from a character's point of view and in their voice.

ESM: How do you pivot from playwright to screenwriter to fiction writer and essayist?

TAJ: I'd taken screenwriting classes at NYU, but I'd focused on playwriting after school. I started writing screenplays professionally in 1994 after a play I'd written found its way to a Hollywood agent, Dave Wirtshafter, who signed me and launched my screenwriting career. One day, I was a struggling assistant with a play I hoped to get produced, and the next, I had a deal to write a feature script for Disney for more money than I'd ever imagined I could make. I welcomed the opportunity in front of me, did assignments—features and TV movies—for a decade without ever being out of work. It was fantastic financially, but over the course of those ten years, I lost confidence in my voice, ideas, and style. And though the money was good, I stopped enjoying much of the experience. I worked with a few fantastic producers and executives, and I also worked with a slew of horrible ones who were condescending and, worse, clueless about race, which was what I was often hired to write about. The difficult bosses wore me down and I decided it was a waste to continue executing other people's ideas without exploring my own.

I'd written a spec screenplay that didn't quite work, but the characters continued to invade my thoughts. In late 2003, I decided to focus on writing that story as a novel. I bought a tiny house in South Los Angeles, and for the next few years, I lived on money I'd made during my screenwriting career and I wrote my first novel. I got an amazing, Black, New York book agent, Marie Brown, to represent it. She sent my novel to editors at major publishing houses and they all passed. I decided to pursue an MFA in Creative Writing at Antioch University, which helped me to improve my fiction writing. When I came out of the program in late 2008, I revised the book a couple of times, while also working on the short story collection I'd begun while in school. In 2012 my stories began getting accepted to literary journals and then in 2013 I sold my novel, *Remedy For a Broken Angel*, to a small press and it was published in 2014.

Pivoting from one to the other is not nearly as difficult now as it was at first when I didn't know how to write fiction. Now I find it helpful to write something in screenplay format first and use that as an outline for a novel, which I can deepen and expand. I think it's easier to go from a script to a novel than it is to whittle a novel down to a screenplay of just over one hundred pages.

ESM: Can you talk about how you approach the mediums differently—if at all?

TAJ: Yes, screenwriting, for me, is different from a novel or short stories because you can't do much "telling" in a screenplay. By telling, I mean offering the reader information that they're not receiving visually, or via dialogue or in the context of scenes. You can use some voiceover, but for the most part, you must show everything (execute it on screen) or refer to it in dialogue. Also, you have far less time to tell a film-story than you have in a novel.

Screenwriting requires me to think visually, to convey things I want my viewer to see, understand, and feel, without the luxury of explaining details to them. I can't tell them my character has had a terrible day, or life, or a trauma. I have to show it in her behavior, physicality, what she says or implies, or in how other characters behave around her. Or I might show it in the design of her environment—what she has in her space, or how she reacts to a space she's entered. All of these examples must be communicated visually or via sound/dialogue. Screenwriting requires you to speak a visual language. This may not be true for everyone—some writers may focus on the dialogue and minimal screen directions and leave the visual language up to the director. I create the movie in my head and put what I see on the page. I'm thinking of actors' reactions as well as the images—the poetry in the motifs, and the narrative design.

When I write fiction, I tend to think visually on the page as well, because I was trained in visual storytelling. What's a little easier is that I have the freedom to find a way to show and tell at times. I think telling should be used fairly sparingly, but I think it's necessary sometimes. In my opinion, effective telling in fiction is better than showing everything. Too much showing can be tedious and can make a book or story longer than it needs to be.

That said, what can be challenging is creating prose that not only shares information with the reader, but that's also interesting and fun to read. While screenwriting requires a writer to understand visual language, prose requires a writer to find an engaging voice and style.

Playwriting, for me, is different from both screenwriting and fiction in that the characters and the dialogue tend to be the writer's primary focus.

In fiction, the writer has to create the setting on the page. In screenwriting, the writer is the first to envision what's on the screen. In playwriting, the writer may think of all those things, but the set design, costumes, sound and lighting design, etc. are the contributions made by other artists who specialize in those elements. The theme, language, and the characters that populate the stage and make the story work are what the playwright creates most fully.

The visual is not insignificant in plays. A play can be successful with a complex set design, or with a rudimentary one, or even one that's wholly imagined. Stage plays sometimes invite the audience to participate in imagining the setting.

The words and their meaning are the stars of the play along with the actors. My favorite playwrights, August Wilson and Tennessee Williams, often wrote lyrical, rhythmic, emotional dialogue. It's poetry. It's music. That style of dialogue often works in plays in a way that can be less effective in screenplays. Sometimes a beautifully written play can feel too wordy on screen, or too static if it takes place on one set.

In a screenplay, if you can show in an image what you might have said in dialogue, the image is often the stronger choice for the screen.

ESM: Are there any themes that you seem to explore repeatedly in your writing?

TAJ: Absolutely. I often write about the complexities of classism, colorism, racism, and race relations. I also write about childhood trauma, traumatic wounds, and narcissistic parents. Writing about race was a conscious choice. I grew up with a lot of stress and confusion about race, colorism, and about where I fit into the culture as a Black, but so-called "ethnically ambiguous," person. I chose to write about racial identity. Childhood trauma and narcissism emerged in my writing without me intending to focus on that. It's where the work took me because trauma and narcissism were part of my personal experience. I wrote about a narcissistic mother (in my first novel) before I understood that that's what I was writing about.

ESM: Let's talk a little about your linked short story collection *Light Skin Gone to Waste*. Did you set out to write a linked collection?

TAJ: I did. At first there was only one long story in three parts. It was triggered by something that happened on the set of *Ruby Bridges*, a TV movie I wrote back in the 90s. It involved two child actors: six-year-old Chaz Monet, playing Ruby, and another six-year-old, Jeffrey Spotto,

playing a kid at her school named Jimmy. Little Jeffrey had to say: “My mother told me I can’t play with you because you’re a nigger.” He wouldn’t do it. He told Euzhan Palcy, the director, “I can’t say that. That’s mean!” She explained that it was acting, and that Chaz would understand that he was saying it for the movie, not for real. Finally, he said it, but as soon as Euzhan called cut, he burst into tears, threw himself into Chaz’s lap, hugged her and said, “I’m sorry! I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean it!” And Chaz said, “It’s okay, because it’s just pretend.”

That little boy’s sweet apology moved me so deeply. It took me back to my childhood when people called me the N-word. I have no memory of anyone ever saying they were sorry. That’s when I started thinking about the first story I wrote. But this was at the height of my screenwriting career and while I thought about the story it was years before I actually wrote a draft.

ESM: How was the collection born and how long was the process?

TAJ: After the first draft of my novel didn’t sell, and I went to graduate school in 2006, I was introduced to a couple of linked story collections, *Drown* and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight In Heaven*. I began the stories. A short version of the existing collection was my thesis project, but a full draft took many years to complete.

In 2012, my first short story was published. It became the last piece in the collection. After that, a story or two would get published once or twice a year or every other year. I think I had ten or eleven stories in the series published in literary journals. Many of those stories didn’t make it into the collection. The book wasn’t finished until 2021, fifteen years after I started. By that time it had swelled into a 500-page “novel” (per the advice of an agent) and it was twice the length of what will be published as *Light Skin Gone to Waste*.

The agent went out with the long version and it didn’t sell. The main complaint from editors was that it didn’t have the narrative arc of a novel. I didn’t disagree, but I hadn’t conceived it to function as a novel. The stories were inspired by specific memories and I saw it as episodes in my family’s life braided together—multiple stories, not a novel with a single arc.

I pulled the longer book apart and put it back together without the stories and perspectives I’d been asked to add. The elided stories were from Maddie’s half-sister’s point of view, a story from her grandmother’s point of view, and a novella that included sections with all the main characters’ points of view. I loved those stories and worked hard on them, but when I put the collection back together in order to submit it to The Flannery O’Connor Award, there was a 75,000 word-count limit. I had to cut quite a lot. I was left with my original concept of the book, which prioritized “Maddie” and her parents’ point of view. That version won the award.

ESM: What is the inspiration behind the stories?

TAJ: My experience growing up Black and middle class in a nearly all-White, mostly working-class town and the psychological effect that it had on me. And my experience living with two complicated parents (with psychological damage of their own) who should not have married, and probably shouldn't have been parents.

ESM: You grew up in Monroe, New York, which is the central setting in your short story collection. Talk a little about Monroe, both how it was growing up and how it served as a setting for your short stories.

TAJ: Monroe was a physically beautiful town filled with trees, lakes, hills, and quaint old houses. There were lovely churches, a picturesque waterfall, parks, and ponds with ducks. The fall, with its changing leaves, was (and still is) stunning. Kids played outside in neighborhoods. In the winter there was ice skating and sledding. It could be characterized as an idyllic place to grow up — if you were white. There were very few Black people in the town when my parents moved there before I was born. The Black families that were there had long histories in Monroe and the children of those families had each other. It was solitary and isolating for me. I did play with the little girls from one Black family and I loved them. But our parents weren't friends and as we got older we didn't socialize the way we did as young girls.

I had White friends. And there were many White people who were welcoming and kind. Unfortunately, the ones who were not welcoming or kind left a lasting impression. Neighborhood bullies threw rocks at me. I was regularly called the N-word. I was singled out, ridiculed for my hair, body, and color. And I was relegated to what felt like a lower social status, though my family was actually well off and my father was a highly educated professional. I spent most of my life in Monroe longing to live elsewhere.

ESM: Is what you wrote completely true to your recollection or did you take creative license?

TAJ: It's both true to my recollection and I took creative license. I changed names, occupations, where people lived, what they did. I combined characters and neighborhoods and I altered the make-up of families.

ESM: Some of the characters in these stories are so deeply and beautifully flawed and complicated, hated and loved at the same time. Who was your favorite character to write?

TAJ: Suzie, the cousin, and Velma, the mother, were both particularly fun to write. Suzie's rhythmic way of speaking, influenced by very early hip hop, was a pleasure and her outsider's perspective on Maddie's life was helpful to the collection. Velma's sharp tongue, as well as lack of awareness about how over the top she is, and the way she justifies her egregious behavior is amusing. She's got deep wounds and insecurities that she's suppressed and can't acknowledge authentically. I think she's funny, but also sad. She covers her sadness with hostility.

ESM: How do you humanize characters who have such unpleasant qualities?

TAJ: When I write from their perspective, I feel my way through their bad behavior as they experience it. I look for the good they see in their actions. And if there isn't anything "good," I look for the logic they see in the bad things they're doing. I take into account the ways they've been wounded; for example, Velma was abandoned by her birth parents, and Phil lost his father young and was raised by a mother who seemed to love his brown-skinned brother, but not Phil. These experiences taught them life was unkind. I put myself in their emotional space. They don't see themselves as unpleasant. Sometimes they see their behavior as the choice they make to help them survive or to help them to be happy in an unhappy situation. They don't see themselves as being unfair. They see their behavior as a reaction to something being done to them.

ESM: Who are some of your favorite writers? How have they influenced you?

TAJ: I mentioned August Wilson. His themes showed me what stories could do on stage, and I think his work inspired me to express my own thoughts on race, class, and culture. James Baldwin is another favorite. I've read all his novels multiple times, and I started reading him in my teens. My earliest study of fiction was his work and I absorbed it even before I attempted writing fiction myself. I love Toni Morrison. Like Baldwin, she was a genius and because she existed Black women writers have had a role model we could be forever proud of. Ntosake Shange is another writer I adored when I was young. In acting school I, like most Black actresses back in the day, performed some of Shange's poems from *For Colored Girls…* Her courage and her voice provided an early example of different types of Black women lovingly created from a Black woman's perspective. I was obsessed with Gabriel García Marquez for years, and I once tried and failed, thankfully, to write something in the style of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. I wanted his influence to appear in my work before I realized that my work had to reflect who I was and where I came from. Ultimately, I have to write like me. Charles White, the African-American visual artist, used to ask his art students: Where do you come from? Why are you creating the art you're creating? How do you know who you are? These questions have had an effect on my process as a writer. They're certainly at play in *Light Skin Gone to Waste*, which is about me and where I come from. Writing this book has been an education in who I am.

Toni Ann Johnson won the 2021 Flannery O'Connor Award for short fiction with her linked story collection *Light Skin Gone to Waste* (University of Georgia Press, October 2022). Johnson is an NAACP Image Award nominee for Outstanding Literary Work for her debut novel, *Remedy For a Broken Angel* (Nortia Press, 2014). A novella, *Homegoing,* won Accents Publishing's inaugural novella contest in 2020 and was published in May 2021. Johnson recently won the *Missouri Review*'s Miller Audio Prize for prose with her short story "Time Travel." She currently teaches fiction and screenwriting at Antioch University Los Angeles.