

AUNT CHLOE

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By Cylantra Dees

Since the debut of her first novel, *Wench*, Dolen Perkins-Valdez has been a fresh voice for Black women readers for whom reading is a process of both learning and healing. Her second novel, *Balm*, confirms the importance of her story-telling powers. As a newly tenured professor at American University, Perkins-Valdez balances writing with training a new generation in the craft of fiction. In this interview with *Aunt Chloe*, she talks about her identity as a writer and the legacy she wants to leave behind.

Who is Dolen Perkins-Valdez? How did you start writing?

I'm Dolen Perkins-Valdez. I'm a fiction writer and assistant professor in the MFA program at American University. I started writing in college because I was a lifelong reader who wanted to see if I could do it. I did not know any living writers at the time.

As a newly tenured professor, how has your firm identity as a writer contributed to your achievements? What advice would you give to aspiring writers about maintaining confidence in the viability of writing?

I would say never give up. If it is true that it takes 10,000 hours to master a craft, then that is especially true for writing. Read a lot. Write a lot. One day, it will come together and you will be able to see your improvement. Find joy in it. Enjoy the process. I love literature. That love has sustained me through all the highs and lows of my career.

What are some books by Black women writers that have been directly inspirational to your success as a writer?

I love Toni Morrison, of course (the queen!), but I'm also inspired by my contemporaries: Naomi Jackson, Nafissa Thompson-Spires, Angela Flournoy, Chinelo Okparanta, and Roxane Gay. I recommend anything these women write.

As a published author, what would you say about the importance of literary publications in reference to social justice advocacy and community healing?

Ooh, excellent question. Literary publications do a lot of important work, and I think supporting them is vital to the arts world and the culture at large. I love how writers are more openly embracing their social justice goals. It took me a long time to admit to myself that my work embraces moral arguments about understanding each other's fundamental humanity.

On your website, you have a letter from the author (yourself), in which you say "If you are a writer, I wish you Godspeed with your pen." Can you say a little bit more about why you chose to include this in your letter and what it means for Black women writers and intellectuals to encourage and challenge our community to create?

It is very important to get to the page and tell our stories. If we do not write them, who will? I have found such love and acceptance among my elder sister writers. Women such as Pearl Cleage, Tina McElroy Ansa, Terry McMillan, Lalita Tademy, and Marita Golden have nurtured my spirit with their advice and wisdom. I would not still be standing if it weren't for these women. That's the truth. I hope I can do the same for other writers.

Read Dolen Perkins-Valdez's short story, "Udessa," in this issue. Check out her website <https://www.dolenperkinsvaldez.com> for more information about her books and artistic dedication.

