Alexs Pate and Stacey Parshall

INTerview With Jewell Parker Rhodes

Jewell Parker Rhodes is Professor of creative writing and American literature and former director of the M. F. A. program at Arizona State University. Her stories have been anthologized in Children of the Night: Best Short Stories by Black Writers and Ancestral House: The Black Short Story in the Americas and Europe. Her short fiction has appeared in Callaloo, Calyx, The Seattle Review, Feminist Studies, and Peregrine, among others. Her work has been nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize. Among her numerous awards are the Yaddo Creative Writing Fellowship, an NEA Fellowship, and two Distinguished Teaching Awards. She has published three novels: Voodoo Dreams, selected for the Barnes and Noble Discovery Series; Magic City, chosen by the Chicago Tribune as one of its favorite books of 1997; and her latest, Douglass’ Women, a historical novel about the women in the life of Frederick Douglass, which has won the Black Caucus of the American Library Association Literary Award, the American Book Award, and the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award.

Jewell Parker Rhodes has also published two books on writing: Free Within Ourselves: Fiction Lessons for Black Authors and The African-American Writers’ Guide to Writing and Publishing Non Fiction.

This public interview with Jewell Parker Rhodes was held in front of a live audience during her visit to the Graduate Liberal Studies Program at Hamline University on April 22, 2003. The two interviewers were Alexs Pate, whose most recent book is West of Rehobeth; and Stacey Parshall, a student in the M. F. A. program at Hamline. Questions at the end were from members of the audience.

Parshall: In an interview you gave about Magic City, you said that one of the reasons you wrote the book was to celebrate the strength of black men and women. Community, you said, is where people can thrive and survive.

Rhodes: Absolutely.

Parshall: Is this theme of community strength and power something you carry into Douglass’ Women? In that story, it seems as if there’s a lack of community, for both Anna, Ottilie, and Frederick. Is it, then, a different definition of community you wish to put across, or is it about the obstacles that they face? Finally, how does this community work as far as the individual strength that Anna, Ottilie, and Frederick do have?
Rhodes: Certainly, community is important in all of my work, but the way that you framed it for *Douglass’ Women*, I hadn’t thought of it that way. I see the two women, Anna and Ottilie, as being a community for Frederick Douglass, a community he doesn’t recognize or value. That community is based on sisterhood among women, even when they are torn asunder from one another, even when one is your husband’s mistress. It exists whether or not they always recognize that it does. I think that’s why Oluwand as a character, a black slave woman who commits suicide, is part of the missing link. I was trying to salvage that sense of women battling patriarchy and being rendered invisible.

Also, though Anna seems a singular heroine, she does draw on the strength of a community through African American folklore. So, though I don’t show her interacting with a large group…

Parshall: It’s been internalized?

Rhodes: Yes. It’s been internalized by what’s been passed down to her by her parents, particularly her mother. Then there’s a community of the spiritual life, and the ancestors. For Anna, spirits always exist and are always alive. That’s why it matters when Ottilie, as a white woman, can see Oluwand the spirit, and when she cannot. When Ottilie’s moving towards self-healing, she can see Oluwand. She can see that other dimension where she’s connected to something else.

Parshall: How would you define individual growth for Anna and Ottilie?

Rhodes: There are ways in which people have contributed to my history, and ways in which I’m contributing to a future history – of spirits, of values, of meaning. I feel very deeply this interconnection of people. You do get a lot of individual strength from that. In the American tradition, you are enabled in many different ways –
emotionally, psychologically, spiritually – by the work of others who are with you in present time, past time, and also, maybe, in future time. Anna has that. She’s not rootless. Even when Anna is vulnerable and doesn’t love herself well enough, that sense of community is a wellspring she can draw upon. She draws upon it most when she becomes a mother, after the birth of her daughter, Rosetta.

Ottilie had a community as well, but her community was more of an outsider’s. That sounds really strange because Anna, the black woman in 19th century America, was definitely an outsider, but in terms of the love that was passed down, she didn’t feel like one. I think in terms of the Jewish Christian marriage of Ottilie’s parents, having gone through pogroms in Germany and the household being split down the middle in terms of color, what with the mother and Ottilie being Aryan-looking, the father and her sister Ludmilla looking more Jewish. She was confronted directly with a sense of outsiderness. I think, too, the way in which her parents home schooled her, they gave her an education that a 19th century European woman would not normally have had. That, too, made her an outsider. Then, coming to America, she was an outsider once again. She was that foreign lady who was messing around with Frederick Douglass. In some sense, she is an outsider also in her immediate family. Her mother and father, who so loved each other that, even though they loved their children, it was clear that the most significant union was the one between husband and wife. After Ottilie’s mother died at the age of fifty-seven with a tumor in her belly, her father willed himself to die within a year of her death.

In Anna’s family, whether or not somebody died, whoever survived would be there. You know, because the children needed them. I don’t think Ottilie had that. She
lacked strength. That’s why, when she comes across to America, Ottilie witnesses Oluwand committing suicide. Rather than be abused by patriarchal love, Oluwand would rather take charge of her own destiny. This is a connection, a haunting, that is meant to inspire strength in Ottilie.

**Parshall:** Do you think that in the end, before she died, she discovered some of those strengths about herself?

**Rhodes:** No. I think there’s a difference between a suicide in which you give up yourself, and a suicide that’s part of this individual triumph of will. I think Ottilie has given up her entire life. She’s given up her friendships, she’s given up her relationships with her surviving sister, she’s given until there isn’t much left. People like Frederick have just taken and taken. She realizes that while she’s been encouraged to live a utopian idea in which race, class, religion, and gender don’t matter, when push comes to shove, her own parents were married. Even though they were so radical, crossing social barriers and putting up with various prejudices and making a statement about how one should live his or her life, they did a socially conventional thing – they were married. Ottilie never had that, never had the children, and never had the marriage. So when she kills herself, I think it’s that sense that ‘I have not been well loved, and having not been well loved, there must be something wrong with me.’

I don’t think she’s a triumphant spirit at all – she’s a very tragic spirit. Earlier in the novel, she isn’t a victim, she’s making decisions about her life that are based on principles, but then I think the treachery of love catches up with her and she realizes she’s paid too high a price by not loving herself well enough.
**Pate:** I wish you could talk about the political, emotional dichotomies that occur in class and race and religion and gender. They appear in *Magic City* and in *Voodoo Dreams* as well, between Louis and Marie, certainly in *Douglass’ Women* between Ottilie and Anna. What are you trying to get at?

**Rhodes:** I think my work is very political, but I’m not writing from a political space. I’m just writing from a very passionate space. Society gives us these artificial barriers to make divisions between one another. We then get acculturated, trained, mis-educated into believing that these barriers make sense, like “I’m a Jew, you’re Catholic,” or “I’m white, you’re black,” or “I’m male and you’re female.” I think that in terms of living and loving, we have a human heart, we have a human spirit, so if you and I sat down and talked to one another, then, oh wow, we’re going to find an alliance, a coalition, as you might say. We’re going to find a spirit of love – because all humanity, no matter how specifically you render it, against those dimensions of race, class, religion, etc., is still humanity.

The novels become political because they are breaking down barriers. For example, in *Magic City*, a white woman goes to a black family, saying, “I’m sorry that my body was used to send your brother, your son, on the run from a lynching mob. They said he raped me when he didn’t, and I’m coming to talk to you.” When the white woman meets the black sister, they sit down and talk, and find out that, in fact, they are the same. They share the same burdens and struggles and discover they should be friends.

**Pate:** What are your antecedents? Where did you come from, what traditions? What led you there?
Rhodes: I didn’t start to get there until I was in my mid thirties. I was the abandoned child. My mother came back and claimed me when I was in the third grade. Then in the third grade we relocated from Pittsburgh to California, and I left who I saw as my mother, my grandmother. My mother got rid of my dad, literally, within a span of two years. I tried to run away from home because I wanted to live with my dad rather than live with a stranger in the house. Then my mother kicked me out of the house, and I went to live with my dad, and my step-mom wouldn’t talk to me. So, I was just shy of sixteen and on my own.

Most of my childhood was spent in enormous pain, with an enormous sense of abandonment. But my grandmother loved me very well and gave me lots of wisdom and advice. I remember when I went to college, realizing that I had a choice. I could live as a robot (I had been literally shedding myself of feelings in order to make it through the day, to survive), or I could live my life with feelings and consequently get emotionally fucked up by things that happen. I chose to have all that feeling in being alive.

After this, I walked into a library and saw a book by a black woman – I’d never read a book by a person of color, didn’t even know people of color wrote books – and it changed my life. When I say I started writing, it’s like the autobiographical tradition, I think, of the slave narrative – I was trying to write myself into being. I was trying to understand myself, although I didn’t know that at first. My college teacher said write what you know, and I said, “no, I want to write from my imagination.”

I got a cookbook from the Time Life series of Creole-Acadian cooking, and it mentioned Bayou Teché, bayou of snakes and a Creole lullaby. I wrote a story of a young woman calling on the power of Queen Laveau and her conjuring grandmother to
end an abusive relationship. By then, I had not read much African American literature, but that was the story I told. From that moment, it was like somebody trying to connect to a spiritual base in order to set herself free. And all kinds of strange miracles happened. I read about Eartha Kitt wanting to play the Voodoo Queen, Marie Laveau, and I went to see Ms. Kitt. I heard on the radio songs about Marie Laveau.

During this time that I was struggling to be a writer, I got word that my grandmother had died on the streets of Pittsburgh. Died with three little ones around her, of a heart attack. So there was that coupling of Grandmother passing on and Marie Laveau coming into my life. I felt very much that there were two black women guiding me. Now, when you go from that to deciding that you want to write a novel about Marie Laveau, that was certainly an amazing thing to do. I mean, I had hardly written a story or two, but I knew I had to write a novel. I believe that because I was openhearted to it, miracles happened for me. It wasn’t until my late-twenties, when I was in Buffalo, New York, looking at my novel when I realized, “I’m writing my life story.” It wasn’t just about Marie Laveau. It was about the mother who left the daughter. The daughter who was tied to the grandmother, and the granddaughter, me, who was still trying to figure out how to say, “I am.”

In the first draft of Voodoo Dreams, Marie Laveau was a victim because, unfortunately, I felt myself a victim. I’d already had a dozen rejections of Voodoo Dreams, and the University of Maryland had not given me tenure. I was told that writing about a black woman was not a universal experience. After the birth of my daughter, I revised the novel, trying to find the passionate, emotional truth of each passage. For each passage, was there more I thought about, more I could say? I really do live my stories,
and somehow, feeling Marie’s power, who comes to the end of the novel saying “Being a woman is just fine,” made me know and feel everything differently. My husband Brad stayed up with me to witness me finishing the novel, and I swear to God, I was transformed. There I was, thirty-some years old, and for the first time, I loved myself as a woman. My sense of self-love, and Marie Laveau’s love, instead of making me separate from community, drew me closer.

What I’ve come to realize is that your greatest civil right is to love yourself and to search for your own identity. And to love yourself well enough so that when you’re not loved well enough by somebody else, you can still keep yourself whole and healthy and survive. Loving yourself, you’re more secure so you can then love others.

**Pate:** Towards the end of *Douglass’ Women* in Anna’s mature voice, as well as in Marie’s voice, but particularly in Anna’s, there is a mighty weight that they carry, and a mighty wisdom that they have, that they’ve acquired. What is it that African American women have to say to black men?

**Rhodes:** Oh, God.

**Pate:** And what is it they have to say to white women? And to the world?

**Rhodes:** *Voodoo Dreams* was very much a praise song to a woman’s journey. And *Magic City* I see as a praise song to men. I worked very hard to praise those men who are righteous. So I don’t see those groups being pitted against one another any more than you see in an individual relationship. But in terms of the totality of the male-female dynamic and the totality of women-to-women dynamic, it’s really about embraceable love. There might be individual cases when a woman says to a man, “Honey, you’re not
good for me,” or when a black woman says to a white woman, as Anna says, “Ottilie, get
out of my house.” But I don’t think that.

Pate: But Anna does try to say, “This is what you missed,” or she doesn’t say it,
but she’s thinking it.

Rhodes: Yes, and that’s because Anna makes that journey of self-love. Anna is
being – being and loving herself well enough. When she invites Ottilie to have that cup
of tea, she is, in fact, saying to her, “Love yourself better! He doesn’t love both of us.”
When she does it, she laughs, and Ottilie gets offended. But Anna’s not laughing at
Ottilie, she’s laughing because it’s “Oh goodness gracious, you’re agitated, I’m not.
You’re white. I’m black. All these differences, but we both got hung on the same cross.”
You know what I mean, that recognition of sisterhood. One of the things I want to make
clear – I’m not writing strong black women characters as in the myth of the black woman
superhero, not at all.

Pate: I agree.

Rhodes: And I’ve been taken to task for that. Because Anna is a mess through
half of this novel. Marie Laveau is a mess! Being wonderful is to be vulnerable, frail.
Life is about mistakes, doing all the things you’d normally do as an imperfect human
being. When you screw up, you pick yourself up to go on to the next day. It doesn’t help
me to have a strong black woman mother figure, because they aren’t all that strong – they
break down and cry. I think Anna would say, and all my black women would say to all
the white women, “Hey you, you my sister.” And vice versa. All women, if they could
find the space where they could be alone together, would find sisterhood apparent. The
shame is that sometimes society keeps women apart.
Pate: I just want to say, as a black man, reading these books, there comes a point when I am overwhelmed with this sense of impact that Anna, in particular, had on me, that I can’t put into context. There’s something powerful that she offers. I’m trying to figure out what is the message, and how to decode that ball of emotion that I feel, this sense of empathy. Almost like, I think about Ntozake Shange in *Colored Girls*, you know that moment when the baby goes flying out the window.

Rhodes: Oh, that’s awful.

Pate: But as a man you realize, “uh oh, there’s some truth that I have to face.” And so I’m sort of asking, in Marie’s case, what did John miss about her? What was she trying to say to him? And then, what was Anna trying to say to Douglass?

Rhodes: Some of the things you said connect back to Janie and *Their Eyes Are Watching God*, that whole question, why does Tea Cake have to die? To show that Janie can take care of herself just fine. But when Janie throws out her fishnets and calls on her soul to come and sing, I really do think that women and men are all these infinite horizons, infinite territories, and landscapes to know. Our condition of life is that humans are never static, or boring, or uninteresting. And if you are, it’s clearly the viewer’s fault, not your fault as a living, breathing creature. When Anna says, “Douglass missed me,” she means “ME” at the deepest, rooted sense, “he missed me. And I am not responsible for making him see me.” There’s another line, “love unlocks a woman’s heart.” Well, it unlocks a man’s, too; the key is to let it. Life is about giving yourself permission to feel, permission to love.

Sometimes the two men in *Douglass’ Women* and *Voodoo Dreams* get caught up in the world and in how the world sees them. They construct their sense of self with what
is already a false paradigm, so they become vulnerable. I can understand how racism made John’s world very small, so that the only territory he had to conquer, and he had to say “conquer,” was through the body of a woman, Marie Laveau. If the world had been made larger, for him to redeem himself, he might not have been that corruptive self at all. So it’s really, again, the dignity of the individual.

**Parshall:** I’m curious, as the writer, how much of you is in each of those characters?

**Rhodes:** All of me. In the men, too. I love all of my characters. That’s why I’m not writing from a political agenda – I’m writing from empathy and love for all my characters, and I’m trying to shed light on the human condition. But all these characters are me, you know. I resent that I only have one lifetime. So I don’t write necessarily to get published or to have books out in the world. I write for those years that I spend with the characters in my books. Years that I’m living another life and lives, so it really is always, what would it have felt like to have been Marie? What would it have felt like to have been Douglass? And Ottilie and Anna?

With Ottilie, she killed me. I just couldn’t do it anymore. I wanted to say to her, “how can you be so proud of yourself, so arrogant, while you’re doing this thing that I consider to be so wrong? How can you do that? Then, how can you end your life this way? You’re so smart, you’re so educated, you should be doing better.” But she went against all of my biases and prejudices of what smart, educated women are supposed to do. She was dumb because she hadn’t learned to love herself.

**Pate:** But you loved her, too.
Rhodes: I had to learn how to love her. I had to learn how to understand. There is no armor against cruelty if you don’t love yourself well enough.

Pate: In Voodoo Dreams, Marie says something like “fireflies blink, blink like crazed lanterns in the sky.” That was such beautiful language. Can you talk about how such a description occurs in your process?

Rhodes: That comes from that year when I was nineteen years old, hadn’t really written anything, and I stayed up all night, and that line came out of me in a burst of energy.

Pate: Do you think about making up words as you write?

Rhodes: No, I don’t. Maybe on an unconscious level. Sometimes what you’ll find, in all the novels, are lines that are technically not right, but passionately right. Therefore, they work. Then sometimes there are lines, and I think that’s one of them, where the passion and the craft come together perfectly.

I used to write really lean, almost Hemingway-esque, and that was one of the things about Voodoo Dreams, it had all this lush description. I was the kind of reader, who if I found description in a book, I skipped over it. Marie Laveau made me learn how to write description and imagery. When I was writing Magic City – Joe on a train, how long the train’s been gone – my sense was that Joe’s running all the time – gotta get on a train and get out of town – and there you can’t have lush sentences, so it’s that original speak that I used to have. The imagery I learned how to write in Voodoo Dreams, I was able to retain. So even though Magic City is a leaner book, it still has lots of layers.

Pate: Dialect played such a big part in Voodoo Dreams and in Douglass’ Women, in particular. How does dialect work in that way?
Rhodes: I don’t try phonetically to do anything correctly, I just do it based on how I hear it, the aural sense of it. Anna’s voice came to me right away. Ottilie is very clipped. I remember with Joe Samuels, it took me six months to get his voice, and I couldn’t write anything until I got it. So it’s not that I’m trying to write dialect per say. It’s that I’m trying to find a voice that suits these characters, or that is these characters, and that makes it also acceptable to an audience.

Douglass’ Women was rejected by over a dozen publishers because of Anna’s dialect. If you look at that dialect and compare it to Janie’s in Their Eyes Are Watching God, or almost anything out there, it’s pretty mild. Douglass’ Women almost didn’t sell because it had dialect, but I just thought it had to have the tone and color of this particular black woman in this particular year.

Pate: Charles Johnson says that when you try to make characters out of real people, you lose something in the translation. I don’t know if I agree with that. He goes on to talk about imagining reality, that the character you want to write about can’t do the work in the novel you need that character to do if you just take that character from real life.

Rhodes: I agree with him. All of my characters come from my own imagination. Having said that, as I journey in writing them, I discover that they are in fact, all about me. You have to love your characters well enough to put them at risk and in danger. If I started the reverse, real to imagined, there would be a tendency to protect them. That’s why, even though I’ve written about real people, I never talk to those real people, or talk to the real people that might have known those real people. I don’t want to talk to Joe’s family, if any are still alive. I don’t want to talk to descendants of Frederick Douglass. I
don’t want to hear their sense of reality, but, rather, allow myself to find what’s real, first, in my imagination. Interestingly enough, I think the mother in *Voodoo Dreams*, who leaves the children, is my mother. There’s a Mrs. Wright in *Magic City*, a grandmother in *Voodoo Dreams*. These characters are linked to my grandmother. Maybe a bit of Anna, too, is based on what I saw and witnessed in my grandmother. The Sheriff in *Magic City*, the good man, is drawn from pieces of my father.

**Pate:** So this is how you achieve organic quality to the characters you imagine?

**Rhodes:** Maybe, yes. When I’m writing them, I’m not consciously trying to take pieces of people that I really know, but when they’re all done and I distance myself from them, all of a sudden I see pieces of me, or pieces of people I know. It’s very organic, because I think it really is about me still in my life’s journey.

**Pate:** One of the difficulties in dealing with historical characters and historical situations is achieving that degree of organicness, of naturalness that flows from you. As opposed to looking at biographies and interviews, and compositing characters.

**Rhodes:** It helps that I’m just writing what happens in my imagination that turns out to be historical. The history really does include me and my family and my background when I’m all done. (Laughter.)

**Pate:** Where does the idea of home fit into your work?

**Rhodes:** What my characters end up finding is that home is what they carry with them. It is very much more connected yet singular, because all the families are essentially dysfunctional, as my family was. Can you imagine being a black man in Oklahoma in the 1920s and being a teenager? To me it seemed like such an awful, awful place. And when they tried to lynch Joe and he escapes and is on his way to the Pacific
Ocean, because in the Pacific Ocean they didn’t carry slaves, only in the Atlantic, so you can’t go back to the Atlantic ever and you can’t go back to Africa because you’re not African, you’re African American, and that’s part of the legacy of a cultural transformation that we see Frederick Douglass and all the other characters get caught up in. At one point Joe says, “I gotta get off this train.” He can’t go home, back to deep Greenwood, although he’s going back to a physical place. People say, “How can he do that? They’re just going to kill him.” And it’s because home, and the meetings involved in the community and the connectedness to landscape, have been internalized, so that if you can carry home with you no matter where you go, you’ll be safe.

Some people know they have to live here or live there, or be there. I have not found my landscape.

Pate: Does that mean you don’t know home?

Rhodes: No. It means that home becomes very much an interior space within me. Home gets connected back to my community, people I know, people I love, such as my family. When I go away, I take home with me because of all my memories of my daughter and son, and of my grandmother. All those things go with me no matter where I am. They nurture me when I get scared or when people oppress me or try to bring me down. I can heal myself because I have home.

Pate: What happens when home is bombed?

Rhodes: Home is bombed, and Joe – he knew who he was, a Greenwood man – so even though Greenwood is not there, he’s still home, and he’s got to get off the train and be there. Because he’s being there for the network of people. That’s what amazes
me. When it’s destroyed, or taken away, home is not the material, it’s that immaterial world.

**Parshall:** In *Magic City*, Joe was so attached to Houdini and to what Houdini could do, which I know is more than just the illusion, but about magic. I thought, too, in *Douglass’ Women*, that the bones had a magical quality. Can you speak about that?

**Rhodes:** That came from writing *Voodoo Dreams* and realizing I was writing about my family. My grandmother was a conjure family. I repressed all of this. In a college history of science class, I remember a professor telling me that the only thing important in civilization was invented by Westerners, and knowing in my heart that that couldn’t possibly be true, but not knowing why. Then I finally started remembering what had happened during my childhood. My grandmother was a Methodist minister’s wife, who believed in spiritual signs: if you scratched a wall, somebody would die, or if you had hair in a comb, you had to burn it because if you didn’t, a bird might get it for its nest, and then your hair would fall out. Grandmother believed there was this other world out there. She actually knew the trick of calling back the dead.

I remember as a little girl, watching my grandmother sleep walk. She got out of bed and put on her clothes. As she was about to go out the door, she picked up the telephone and said, “Yes? Yes, Yes?” She put the phone down and started out the door again. Then the telephone rang; it was someone telling us an aunt had died. There were the rest of us in our pjs and there was my grandmother, ready to go. She had gotten a call from the dead spirit.
When my grandmother died, I felt as though she was still living for me. I feel that she still is, to this day, living for me. In the African American tradition, every good-bye ain’t gone.

**Question:** Can you talk about the process of finding Douglass’ voice?

**Rhodes:** A lot of the material from the novel comes from essays and speeches he delivered, so that was a good model. When he was talking to the women, particularly as the angry young man becoming more of a bourgeois, conventional person, I kept imagining a very conventional husband who wants to keep standards and values and is worried about keeping up with appearances. At either stage of his life, Douglass doesn’t say a great deal, and the long passages are actually passages from his speeches.

I think I’ve taught the narrative of Frederick Douglass for so long, too, that I knew him pretty well – his sense of Aristotelian rhetoric, his sense of structure. So it wasn’t difficult at all.

**Parshall:** It’s when they meet that it’s very special. That’s the Douglass you would never know.

**Rhodes:** That’s Freddy. That voice came out of my sense of the kind of man Anna could have loved. That whole Sampson and Delilah thing helped me a lot with that. Do you remember those old Hollywood movies, and the guy who played Sampson – Victor Mature? He had a sense of pent-up energy and of repression, and yet, dignity foreshadowing what would come.

**Question:** Yesterday you talked about that point when you put aside your research and trust your imagination. I wonder if you can talk about a point in *Douglass*’
Women when you deliberately strayed from the facts to serve your fiction, and why you made that decision?

**Rhodes:** When Ottilie made the voyage to America, she was actually twenty-eight years old. I have her making the voyage as a twenty-one-year-old, meeting a black woman who’s been abused in a cabin for over a month. That’s entirely fictional. I really like the scene very much when Oluwand dives into the sea, and Ottilie has to bear witness to it. I think that came from the trigger of the Bones People for Anna, and the Bones People comes from a trigger of African American literature, but in particular, Toni Morrison’s epigraph to *Beloved*, and also August Wilson in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, the Bones People coming up out of the sea.

Another significant departure is that all the material about Anna’s childhood is imagined. I know she was involved in war, I know she came from a large family, but I imagined the universe she existed in. Freddy and Anna making a baby after the clan burned down their home, was all imagined.

**Question:** You talked earlier about the many setbacks you’ve had as a writer. I think for many students here who are learning the craft of writing, and want very much to be writers, it’s helpful to know what kept you going.

**Rhodes:** That’s a daily struggle, isn’t it? Again, I think it does go back to that high that I get from feeling these characters. Feeling their hearts and minds is a personal high. I feel more alive when I’m doing it. Still, many times I have had to pick myself up off the floor. Nobody published *Voodoo Dreams* for three years. Then I got an offer from St. Martin’s, which was very low, $4,000, and my agent got it up to five. But I’m thankful that the editor did, in fact, purchase the book. Eventually, I stopped worrying
about publishing, and I kept hold of my sense that I had grown up, had set a goal for myself, almost like running a marathon, that I had aimed really, really high, and it took me ten years to do the best that I could do. And I think that feeling of setting high goals for yourself, even though you might not completely achieve them, that strength of “I did that,” “I can do anything,” also carried me.

When *Magic City* came along, St. Martin’s Press did not take well to it. They thought the characters were unlikable, and that I’d written myself into a corner. I remember we were going to take the children to Chicago for Christmas. I was a crying wreck because I thought, I did one good book, aren’t I going to do another? So I went back and re-read *Magic City*. What happens with maturity is that you can look at something and affirm that it’s good. Maybe not perfect, but good. And then, you know, I did get *Magic City* published. (I was actually paid a great deal of money). I went on a twelve-city book tour, and by the time I got back home the hardcover had already been remaindered.

I really thought when I sent *Douglass’ Women* out, I would have no trouble getting published. It was my fifth book; I’d done good work. All my books are in print – I’m very blessed by that. So I was really taken back when *Douglass’ Women* didn’t sell well. I was offered such a low offer, the only and first offer. My agent asked me to consider seriously whether I wanted to accept this offer because it was so low, but I said, sure, because they’re still paying me for what I’m going to do anyway. The stories come from the passion I have. I feel more alive when I’m writing. I know now that the world will do with your work what it will. If you have done with your work what you need to do, you’re the better for it.
**Pate:** I think your work makes a significant contribution. Generally it’s not the best-selling books that survive. It’s the work that strives to do something, and I think your work does.

**Rhodes:** Thank you so much. I really wanted to write something that would last. I thought that when the world rejected you, that meant you weren’t a good writer. That’s such a big lie. You get rejected for all kinds of reasons that have nothing to do with whether you’re a good writer or not. But when you’re starting out, and you’re getting all the rejections, you don’t know that. You just hurt and you ache. So I always remind myself, I only need one yes. I got that one yes for *Douglass’ Women*. So, too, with *Voodoo Dreams*, that one yes.