

A Q & A with
Whitney Terrell, author of
THE HUNTSMAN

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1) The New York Times Bestseller List recently showed three novels by and about blacks, the first time that's ever happened. Roughly half your novel is written about the coming of age of a young black man, from his point of view. But you're white. Do you foresee resistance from reviewers and readers - black or white - who think you're not qualified to write about the black experience?

This question goes to the heart of what it means to be a writer. It implies that the writer can only write about who he or she is. In a larger sense, I think we all agree that this isn't true. Young writers should not be scolded for writing about old people, nor women for writing from the point of view, say, of men. Or what about a writer in the twentieth century writing about a soldier in the civil war? Or a British sailor in the war of 1812? Writing is about empathy -- imagining yourself in the place of another. Both writers and readers are asked to do this. Stephen Crane, in "The Open Boat" argues that this ability is the lynchpin of civilization. It's the thing that binds man together. I had a teacher, Jim McPherson, who used to say that we will have made progress when white writers can create black characters that are human -- that is to say, they cease to use them as symbols. Russell Banks talks about the same thing in his essay "Who Will Tell the People" when he talks about escaping the "gated communities" of contemporary fiction. In part, I viewed this book as a response to such ideas.

What I really hope is that people will see *The Huntsman* (which is really about half from the point of view of black characters, half from white) as a new step -- a book about race relations that is neither a "black" or "white" novel but both. And thus one where the race of the author isn't really to the point. In the past, it seems like you've had to choose one or the other. This is true even in writers that I greatly admire. In Huck Finn, you never get Jim's thoughts, right? Just Huck's. Jim's private point of view remains outside the realm of knowledge. In Richard Wright, say, or Toni Morrison, the minds of the white characters are generally outside the realm of knowledge. My goal in *The Huntsman* was to let both sides speak and allow the reader to judge on his/her own who they believe.

This approach of having both sides accessible to the reader, black and white, is the one thing I'm most proud of. I'm not going to argue that it's a completely new idea (Look at Banks' *Continental Drift* or McPherson's story "A Loaf of Bread") but you have to work hard to think of examples beyond these. I hope this will change.

2) Specifically, talk about the characters of Booker Short and Clyde Wilkins, the two main black voices in the book. How did you come to imagine these characters lives. Did you approach writing about them differently than you would a white character? Did you do any research? For example, Booker Short grows up on a farm in Oklahoma. How did you write about the experience of a young black man growing up in a largely rural county, given that you're from the city? Do you identify personally with Booker Short, even though his background is much different from yours?

Booker is obviously the book's most important character. If he's not believable or real -- both his make-up and his psychological motivations -- then the novel won't work. To be honest, I worried

more about being able to clearly imagine the specifics of where Booker grew up, his surroundings, the things he did every day, his chores, etc. than worrying about imagining “another race.” The fact is, I make the assumption that every character is of the human race. I expect that they will experience love, bitterness, betrayal, friendship, much in the ways that I have experienced them, or in the way I’ve seen others experience them. The causes might differ. Booker, for instance, is treated like a pariah in the farming town that he grows up in because everyone else is white. I’ve had no experience with that, but I do know what it means to feel lonely, to be ostracized. This is a universal human emotion. And I think the best writing tries always to see past the skin of things to that universal place.

I also think it’s possible to “write what you know” even across racial lines. For instance, the Isaac Bentham character is based on a white farmer that I knew. Part of Isaac’s motivation is, of course, race specific -- his tragic experience in the war. But the outward manifestations of his anger -- the desire for control, the cruelty towards his hands, the way he treats his wife -- are all based on behaviors I observed in real life in this other farmer.

3) Reviewers have alternately called this a literary novel, a thriller, and a mystery. Why the confusion over genre? Did this come as a surprise to you?

Quite frankly yes, it’s been a surprise. From day one, I imagined this as what is now called a “literary novel” -- and which, in my mind, is the only kind of novel. The most direct model was Faulkner’s “Light in August” which uses a murder as a focal point to examine the attitudes of a small town. But many writers that I’ve loved have used crime or elements of “crime fiction” to examine serious issues. I wouldn’t call the *Brothers Karamazov* or *Crime and Punishment* mystery novels, though they both employ police investigations. The same goes for *To Kill a Mockingbird* or, to use a more extreme example, *Lolita*. What about Richard Wright’s *Native Son*?

What I think has caught reviewers off guard is the fact that the novel does in fact employ a plot -- as do almost many of the “literary” authors I’ve always admired. Books in the mystery genre usually focus on the viewpoint of a single investigator, or cop, and in the compilation of “clues” to solve the crime. But in *The Huntsman*, the murder is only a device. The point isn’t guessing who did it -- I think most readers can figure that out in the first sixty pages. The point is how the community reacts to this violent act, and how the act itself serves to bring to the fore the buried prejudices of the city’s residents. The murder just serves as a flashpoint that allows me to tell the intertwined stories of the characters involved -- stories that include a 150 page flashback of Booker’s childhood. In the end, the novel is less concerned with solving Clarissa Sayers’s death than with solving the question of how blacks and whites have come to view their own histories differently. The immediate crime is far less important than the relationship between Booker and his grandfather, or Mercury Chapman’s memories of his WWII past.

4) Why did you pick the topic of racial segregation as a subject for a Kansas City novel? How do the issues addressed in your book apply to the nation as a whole?

I think than many of our major cities -- and Kansas City is really just a template for this problem -- face a new form of segregation. The old battles over legalized segregation are over and won. The Jim Crow laws are a generation in the past. But many cities are still strongly divided between black and white neighborhoods. Busing hasn’t changed this. Government programs haven’t changed this. The question is why, after Dr. King, after *Brown V. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights act -- after so much work done by people of good will -- is an integrated society still a dream for so many cities?

To me, this is the central question of the book. All of the characters (except Lilly Washington who, as a cook, is clinging to the old method of interaction between black and white in KC -- that of employee and employer) live completely segregated lives. They've reached this impasse in different ways and for different reasons, and again, part of the book's role is in my opinion to explore, in specific terms, why people come to make this decision. Booker lives separate because his grandfather insists on it. Mercury Chapman lives only among whites because it's easier that way -- and because he fears the resentment of his black acquaintances. If you want an overall reason, I think blacks and whites live in separate worlds because they distrust each other. And I think they distrust each other because they have failed, for several generations, to communicate about their own history. A black man who lives at 63rd and Paseo and a white man who lives at 63rd and Belinder in Kansas City -- neighborhoods about ten minutes apart by car, if that -- will have radically different opinions about the state of their city, its past, and their role in its racial history. There may be some common ground between them, but they will never, in a lifetime of sharing the city, sit in the same room to discuss it. And the white man is likely to assume that the black man hates and fears him and vice versa. In the end, this sort of division is bad for the city as a whole and everyone who lives there, white or black. It's bad for downtown -- where people are forced to mix. It leads to the growth of racially segregated suburbs. It's a terrible situation, and one that in my mind can only be cured by communication. In the end of the Huntsman, that's what Booker and Mercury do -- they hash out what really happened during the war. But short of getting the entire population involved in a murder investigation, I don't know how to gets whites and blacks in this city -- or any city -- to sit down and talk. My hope is that maybe this book will accomplish some of that.

- 5) I understand you started writing *The Huntsman* while you were living in New York. Why did you choose to return to Kansas City? Is it possible to be a successful fiction writer in Kansas City? How has this move helped/hurt your career?**

I think the midwest is an increasingly interesting place to be an artist. I recently saw a magazine article that estimated that fifty million people live in the "greater midwest" -- that's a considerable home audience. The visual arts scene has exploded in the past decade in Kansas City -- as it has in Indianapolis, Milwaukee and St. Louis. And I think people on the coasts are beginning to figure out that there's some cool stuff happening out here. To give a New York metaphor, I view places like Kansas City to be like Red Hook or Greenpoint -- it's a cheap, largely overlooked world where you can afford to live and make art. And the characters and issues you have to work with are universal.

- 6) You've written journalism for both *The Kansas City Star* and the *New York Observer*. What's the relationship between fiction and journalism in your work? What kinds of stories did you cover?**

Journalism taught me to ask questions and be curious about the world around me. The opening scene in the novel, where Clarissa Sayers's body is recovered from the river, was originally inspired by a story I read by a fellow reporter. The story brilliantly discussed how the residents of this one small town downstream from Kansas City were constantly finding dead bodies that washed down to their doorsteps from the city. The metaphoric possibilities of this image are wonderful. They inspired several scenes in the book. But you don't get the metaphor without the reporting -- without getting out of your house and asking questions, as the reporter who wrote that story did. I think too many fiction writers miss out on the getting out of the house part.

- 7) There are plenty of connections in your book to the real Kansas City -- street names, country clubs, even a paper called the *Star*. Do you also draw your characters from real life? Do you expect any criticism from Kansas Citians who feel that they are portrayed in a negative light in the book?**

I have several family members whom I think you could fairly describe as ardent civic boosters of Kansas City. I love them. One said to me, "Well, it doesn't make the city look very good if women are found dead in the river." I completely agree. The problem is that novel writing isn't the same as public relations. You've got to be willing to tell the ugly facts, to look at where things don't work. On a certain level, I think you could make the argument that *all* novels are about something that doesn't work. So, if you want to set a novel in Kansas City then you're bound to say some things that people don't want to hear -- it might even be your duty.

In the end, I hope Kansas Citians will see that writing books is about taking the bad with the good. There are heroes in this book as well as hypocrites. And the characters themselves are meant to be fictional -- this is not a roman a clef. At times, I may steal, say, the physical habits of someone I know and graft them onto a character whose views are completely different. So I discourage people from drawing connections to the real world. If these arguments don't work, I fall back on this: "There's no such thing as bad publicity."

8) The most famous novel about Kansas City is Evan Connell's Mrs. Bridge. Did you consider Connell's book when writing The Huntsman. How is your book different/similar?

Connell's book gives me great hope, especially given the last question. Here is a book that couldn't be more critical and sardonic about Kansas City society, and yet Kansas Citians have embraced it heartily. Bravo. I have always admired Connell's book, but I also think it only represents a small part of the city. He gets only the white, upper middle class world. The other worlds -- Italian immigrants, the black population, the office workers -- only circle this world like satellites. I wanted to be able to enter them, to write about them from the inside. I did not, as a writer, want to get trapped like Mrs. Bridge does. The Huntsman, I hope, succeeds in that.

9) How did you get started writing?

I'm one of those, "for as long as I can remember, I've wanted to write" types. It just always seemed present in my mind as a possibility. I wrote my first real short story after taking a class on John Cheever's short stories during my sophomore year of high school. It was a long, excruciating description of a family meal, during which one of the family members passes out and everyone else pretends not to notice. I gave it to my English teacher at the time, who promised to read it and respond. Two months later, after much excruciating waiting, I asked him what he thought and he said: "I lost it. I think that's probably better for both of us." It was probably the best lesson a teacher ever gave me. He was saying, there's no room for coddling in this business. If you want to make it, it's going to take some work. And I've been working at it ever since.

11) What are your plans for the future?

I intend to write a series of interlocking books set in Kansas City. In fact, if I can get away with writing about Kansas City for my entire life -- if readers will keep reading the stuff and publishers will keep publishing it -- I'd be a happy man. I want this to be my territory, my universe. I would like for different characters to reappear; I'd like to write about families over different generations. The next book, which I've already started, will be about corruption surrounding the building of the Interstate here. Land rights are to Kansas City what water rights are to LA. in "Chinatown." The Interstate changed this city permanently -- and not necessarily in good ways. I also think the 50's and 60's were a particularly wide-open time in the city's history.