Perspectives on Practice

Between Delphine and a Hard Place

Rita Williams-Garcia

This is a personal narrative of an author’s transition from writing YA novels and characterizations to writing middle-grade fiction featuring a tween protagonist in a trilogy.

When I proposed my novel One Crazy Summer (2010) to my editor, Rosemary Brosnan, I knew my viewpoint character would be younger than characters I was used to writing about—with the exception of 10-year-olds Akilah and Victoria in No Laughter Here (2004). It hadn’t occurred to me that this would in any way alter the direction of my writing or how I’d be known as a writer. It wasn’t until I was midway through One Crazy Summer and asked questions of myself about the other characters (Pa, Big Ma, Uncle Darnell) to better understand the three sisters, that I realized there was a sequel to this story. Then, early on in the writing and plotting of that sequel, P.S. Be Eleven (2013), I could feel the story’s inevitable but somber ending. Questions came to my mind—in particular, who did Big Ma come home to when she returned to Alabama? And where exactly in Alabama was home? According to Vonetta in One Crazy Summer, home was just “Alabama,” but according to Delphine, home was in a “one-cow town” (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 77) near Prattville, Alabama. I had a picture of place, story possibilities, two cows, and a title: Gone Crazy in Alabama (2015). A trilogy was born!

It is safe to say that after having written the trilogy of the Gaither sisters, I may be better known as a writer of novels written for readers younger than teens. Delphine Gaither, the viewpoint character, is very much a tween: as innocent as she is knowledgeable, as sure-footed—“spinning straw” (Williams-Garcia, 2010, p. 2)—and keeping her sisters in line—as she is seeking answers tied to her identity. I didn’t just wake up one morning and tell myself, “Rita, it’s time to switch gears and write for a younger audience.” Instead, I knew I wanted to write about the Black Power movement, but it was the subject of children within the movement that dictated who would tell the story.

Had I written the story for a YA reader, I would have told a completely different story in an entirely different voice. I would have dealt more fully with the contradictions within the movement, and I would have probably been more interested in the collapse of the party and the disillusionment of its followers. I would have definitely spoken more directly about the role of women within the party. I would have thrown my protagonist directly into the deep end of the pool and had her wrestle with questions like, What would I do for the cause? Would I give up my virginity for the cause? Baby, you know that chastity is a trick bag meant to enslave your natural freedom. Now, liberate yourself for the cause. And then I’d have the question escalate to, Would I kill for the cause? Knowing me, I would have begun the YA story from that point.

But it was the photographs of children being served by, participating in, and witnessing the movement that pulled me toward a younger narrator—one who would be in transition herself. I could see her having a role even as an 11-year-old and, more important, weighing and forming opinions. There was no one better to both witness and show this part of the movement than a character who was still open to possibilities.

As a young woman, I was deeply moved by the imagery in Ntozake Shange’s (1977) For Colored
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Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf—“dark phrases of womanhood/of never havin’ [sic] been a girl/ (p. 3)—and Jean Toomer’s “Karimba” from Cane (Toomer, 1975), the story of a girl, prey for men and boys who desired “…to ripen a growing thing too soon” (p. 1). These writers guided me as I articulated the reoccurring theme of aborted girlhood in the black community. One of the greatest gifts my parents gave my siblings and me was a childhood. Childhood provided room for childish wishing and hoping versus the thud of reality setting in. As sure as I knew the follow-up novel to One Crazy Summer, P.S. Be Eleven, would be about change, I knew that I’d have to chip away at the part of Delphine that was childlike. This was a girl who made wishes on lucky train sparks and believed Merriam Webster was a spinster who collected and defined words. Showing Delphine’s growth over a one-year period would be essential. I couldn’t let her remain childlike in a world that was experiencing such change.

In the book, Delphine learns bit by bit that nothing is as she has believed, and inwardly chides her youngest sister Fern for believing in birthday wishes. At the height of her tween years, Delphine asserts herself and rails against having been lied to through angry letters to her mother. No matter how righteous Delphine’s stance, her mother’s response letters put her in her place, always with the postscript to “be eleven.” I hoped this would resonate with tweens who are constantly fed the mixed messages to act responsibly, to know better, but to also remain a child.

By the final book, Gone Crazy in Alabama, Delphine grows confident. She shepherds her sisters on a nearly 900-mile bus ride. Still, at her core, she’s worried her family is falling apart, and that each vital piece is moving away from the nuclear center in different directions. When the protagonist in Achebe’s adult novel, Things Fall Apart (1958), doesn’t live up to her ideals of heroism and Africa, she retreats to a YA novel whose motives and characters she can understand. Similarly, Delphine’s inability to relate to an adult novel is only the beginning of things turned upside-down for 12-year-old. How is it possible that Native Americans could own or sell slaves? How could that be, when Native Americans were also oppressed people? How could the White sheriff and Klansman call her family the “N-word” but also call her great-grandmother “Mama?” How could she feel sorry for Pa’s new wife, but still feel joy in seeing her mother and father together, knowing they love each other under all the hurt and complications? Still, the hardest realization for Delphine is to learn that she isn’t only Vonetta and Fern’s big sister, but also their oppressor. (Ironically, it is Vonetta’s own burgeoning tweenhood that stirs conflict between the two sisters.) Ultimately, what Delphine is able to observe and realize in P.S. Be Eleven and Gone Crazy in Alabama is far more complex than what she knew to be true when we first meet her in One Crazy Summer.

I believe one of the reasons why these stories of Delphine, Vonetta, and Fern have come to an end in Gone Crazy in Alabama is that most—if not all—of Delphine’s girlish notions have fallen away. In each book, her outlook has to align with her growing intellect and experience, and I couldn’t move the clock backward. I think, while we respect Delphine for what she knows and for being very capable, her readers love her for what she has yet to know and for the heartbreaks and milestones to come.

References

Shange, N. (1977). For colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow was enuf. New York, NY: Macmillan.

Rita Williams-Garcia is the author of 10 celebrated novels for teens and young readers. She is a three-time winner of the Coretta Scott King Author Award as well as recipient of numerous other honors.

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