

The BiblioFiles: Jewell Parker Rhodes

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

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DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today, my guest is multiple award-winning and *New York Times* best-selling author Jewell Parker Rhodes. Already an author of adult works, Rhodes penned *Ninth Ward*, her first novel for children, in 2010. This led to two additional books in her Louisiana Girls trilogy, *Sugar* and *Bayou Magic*.

In 2017, her work shifted to more urban settings-- New York City for *Towers Falling*, Chicago for *Ghost Boys*, and Boston for her newest novel, *Black Brother, Black Brother*. Both beautiful and hard-hitting, Rhodes' books are about family connections, identity, racism, prejudice, violence, growth, pain, and hope.

From a young girl fighting to survive Hurricane Katrina to a 12-year-old ghost struggling to overcome his brutal shooting in Chicago, Rhodes writes with honesty and a powerful empathy. She is a truly gifted storyteller who takes us into the difficult lives of people, connects us to them through her words, and then invites us to carry that new understanding into the real world and change it.

Rhodes' books have won a Coretta Scott King Honor Award, an EB White Read Aloud Award, a Walter Award, and have been *New York Times* bestsellers, and Junior Library Guild selections. She holds a Master's and a Doctor of Arts from Carnegie Mellon and is the Piper Endowed Chair at Arizona State University, where she also teaches writing and literature. Jewell Parker Rhodes, welcome to The BiblioFiles.

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: Thank you so very much.

DR. DANA: Please tell us a little about your connection to and relationship with Louisiana and the bayou.

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: Actually, it's a strange one because I was born in Pittsburgh, and I was at Carnegie Mellon studying writing. And my teacher said, write what you know. And what I knew was living in a ghetto in Pittsburgh, so I wanted to write what I could imagine. So I went home, and I got a cookbook: The Time-Life cookbook on Creole and Acadian cooking. And in it, it had recipes.

But it also had narratives about Marie Laveau, a voodoo queen who lived in the 19th century, and about Bayou Teche, Bayou Snake. And that night, I wrote my first short story that would then become the touchstone for my very first adult novel, *Voodoo Dreams*. And then I went on to write four more adult novels. But when I became a children's author, it was New Orleans that

called me again. And I wrote *Ninth Ward* about Hurricane Katrina. So I actually think that in another life, I must have lived in Louisiana.

DR. DANA: You write so deeply about the wildlife and the people.

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: I know. It's absolutely amazing. And I adore-- well, maybe I should be more humble. But like, no. I do feel as though that's my landscape, you know. I have been there before. And it's really special. And there's another really special connection. I was writing a start of a trilogy for adults, a mystery trilogy set in Louisiana, set in New Orleans.

And the day that book published was the day that Hurricane Katrina hit. And I was so bittersweet because it's like, yes, a new book. But oh my god, these wonderful people that I've been visiting for, by then, almost 25 years were going to go through this tragedy. And my book's company sent me to New Orleans two weeks after Hurricane Katrina, which was crazy. But I got to see the devastation, the watermarks, see the empty town.

And that's when I got my call and knew I was going to write a children's book about Hurricane Katrina. And you've got to also understand that all my entire life, I've been wanting to write a children's book. So when I got the call in New Orleans, that this was it, that I was going to write about Hurricane Katrina. I was overjoyed.

But I didn't start writing *Ninth Ward* right then because I also need to hear the character's voice. So two years later, I'm living in Boston. And I hear that Hurricane Ike is coming to New Orleans. And I go, oh, no. Not again. And that evening, I went to sleep. And when I woke up, literally the first page and a half of Lanessa's voice was in my mind. And it poured out of me. And it's never, ever changed since publication, or up until publication.

So Lanessa says, "They say I was born with a caul, a skin netting covering my face like a glove. My mother died birthing me. I would have died too if Mama Ya-Ya hadn't slice the bloody membrane from my face." And it was very interesting. And so I'm a New Orleans girl, Louisiana girl in my heart and spirit.

DR. DANA: *Ninth Ward* is set in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. And the other two books are in more natural settings in Louisiana, the bayou and the brutal fields of a sugar plantation. But since 2017, your books have been decidedly more urban. Did this shift coincide with anything in your creative life?

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: Oh, great question, Dana. Actually, after I had done the Louisiana Girls trilogy, I felt I had pretty much done the stories I had wanted to tell so far. And I was looking for a topic. And my editor said, "Jewell, why don't you write about 9/11?" And I said, "Nope, no way." I knew that that would be very hard, very, very challenging, and also very emotionally draining.

But then I got to thinking about it. And I thought of fifth graders, in particular. And I thought how our young youth who weren't born until post-9/11, how they deserve to know how our country changed and what happened to our nation. So I was flying a jet across to England, across

the water. And something about being in the darkness, being over water, being in a plane, and being cocooned, I all of a sudden was struck with the sense-- schools, teachers. If I set it in a school, I think I can tell the story.

But I did have a pact with my editor that if I didn't do the book right or if I wasn't happy with it, we simply wouldn't publish it. So I was actually thrilled that I did *Towers Falling*. I was amazed that I got through *Towers Falling*. I cried all the time. And then it's like, OK, I'm going to take a rest.

And then another editor-- this time, I had a new editor-- said to me, "Jewell, don't you want to write about the murder of young black boys?" And I said, "No, are you nuts?" My family said no. My kids said, "Don't do it." My husband said, "Don't do it." But again, I felt, after several months, that same sort of deep call that I have been practicing to be a children's writer not so that I could write in my comfort zone, but that I could write and make art because our children deserve no less.

So I felt, well, at least I can try. And again, we had another pact that if the book didn't turn out right, I would never publish it. And *Ghost Boys* is very slim, but it took me two and a half years to write because I would write in spurts. I would write a little bit, and then I'd sort of like have a breakdown. And I'd read, and I'd cry. And I'd feel depressed. Then I'd go back and write a little bit. And it layered very gradually over time.

So my last two books, I was asked to write them. And if you know my entire canon, I never, ever write what people want me to write. I always write stories that come from my heart, my feeling, my memories. And yet I think in accepting these requests from my publisher, I've come to realize that they must have seen in me an ability to do something that I didn't even know I had.

And I'm so glad I did those two books. I think they are impactful and important. And I'm very, very proud of them. And it's amazing. I think my whole life, I think-- in all its trials, and tribulations, and wonder, and joy-- made me maybe old enough to be able to write for you to tell them these two very tough tales.

DR. DANA: *Ghost Boys* was a *New York Times* bestseller. It is brutally powerful, both in the grimness of the character's death to the aftermath, where he must watch his family grieve and struggle. He also learns how his death connects to hundreds and hundreds of black boys who died of hate crimes. So the book is a hard read, but it is a rewarding one in that it exposes the ugly issues.

But it also shows us how beautiful life is and how beautiful our connection to life is. And you do this so simply and so poetically. And I really felt that the short chapters "School's Out" demonstrates this. Would you read it to us?

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: I would love to, thank you.

"Winter, spring, summer. Every time I see a black kid, I yell, "Be safe!" They never hear me. Walking my neighborhood, I wonder how anyone can laugh, be happy. The streets are

dangerous-- gangs, bullies, drive-bys, police with guns. But people need to be happy. Or else, "Be like me," I shout-- dead, listless, weighted down with hard stories.

Strange, though. I feel something's in the air, like a shift. Something I've got to do. Lately, I've been lingering on my street. Nights. Wild sunflowers in the vacant lot close up. Scents of chicken and collards blow through kitchen windows. I wish I could eat, play, hug my sister, pat a dog, stroke a cat. Without rest, I wander and watch, see a world that's no longer mine.

Carlos was trying to make me happy, and I was happy for a bit. If I'd known I was going to die, would I have become his friend? Truth is, even though it didn't last long, it was nice to have a friend."

DR. DANA: Thank you so much. So the final chapter in the book, to me at least, was ambiguous. What was it like to close this book?

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: It was a surprise. I did not know Jerome was going to speak spoken word poetry. That was just an utter surprise to me. But to me, Jerome has made a transformation from being Jerome to being a ghost boy, to wandering the Earth as a spirit looking for people to bear witness to tragedy, to bear witness so the deaths don't happen again, to bear witness to social injustice.

But also, the responsibility with "bear witness" is to be empowered to do something so that there is justice or that there is recognition of a tragedy that has happened. And I think that empowering moment is really what I wanted to leave with you. So when Jerome, Ghost Boy, says his last words, he says, "Bear witness. My tale is told. Wait. Only the living can make the world better. Live and make it better. Don't let me or anyone else tell this tale again. Peace out. Ghost Boy."

And that recognition of live and make it better-- I say to school kids, "How many of you are living here?" And everybody raises their hand. Me, me, me. And so what does that mean? And they'll shout back to me, they'll roar, "Make it better!" And that's Jerome's message. Make it better. Make the world more peaceful.

And as ghost boy to make that transformation from Jerome to Ghost Boy, I also wanted to emphasize that Jerome, Emmett Till, Trayvon Martin, and all the other youth that we have lost over decades of racism and racial bias, that they aren't just victims. In the African-American culture, there's a belief that the dead never truly go away.

And as there's phrase that says, "Every goodbye ain't gone," meaning that the spirits are still with you and they are accessible. So for me, for Jerome to transform into a ghost boy, he's taken on his really heroic mantle to search the world for young people who can live and make it better.

DR. DANA: Please tell us about your new book, *Black Brother, Black Brother*.

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: *Black Brother, Black Brother* actually grew out of *Ghost Boys*. And that when I was reading *Ghost Boys*, I learned about the school to prison pipeline, whereby children of color, starting as young as toddler age, are discriminated against, and given harsher

punishments than their white classmates, are suspended at a far greater rate than white classmates, and are sent to prison, or jail, or juvenile detention at a far greater rate than their white classmates. And I found this absolutely just appalling.

Secondly, I am a mom of two wonderful biracial kids. One is brown-skinned like me and one is fair-skinned like her Norwegian, Scot-Irish dad. And their life in America has been very different because, though we taught them to value their heritages equally, right about the time of coming of age-- 11, 12, 13-- how the world started responding to them was very different.

And in particular, for my son, the world made very, very clear, in a lot of instances, we see you as a stereotype of a young, black man. We see you as a danger. So in *Black Brother, Black Brother*, I write about two brothers, two biracial brothers who have the same genetic heritage. One is fair. One is dark. And the darker one is suspended and sent to jail for supposedly committing a crime in school, which he didn't do.

And it's about that struggle to prove his innocence, that struggle for why is he discriminated against. And he decides that he wants to get back at the bully. And initially, it's about old hatred and, you know, I want him to feel humiliated. But he learns the sport of fencing. And fencing is about honor, chivalry, etiquette, playing by the rules.

And through that sport, he becomes a stronger young man. And he can see the beauty of himself so clearly that, though he wants to battle his bully with fencing, what he's really battling for is, you see me. You need to see me. But even if you don't, I'm still going to be me. I'm still going to be my great, wonderful self. And that's a really self-confident, impressive sense of self-esteem that he gains in the course of the novel.

A third thing-- because my books are always complicated-- is that *Black Brother, Black Brother* is about colorism. About 40 years ago, I read in the *Smithsonian Magazine*, that Alexandre Dumas was a black man. And I'm like, what? You know, it's like thinking of like in *Hamilton* the musical, with this great, diverse community. For me, it was the same kind of revelation that Alexandre Dumas, and *The Three Musketeers*, and *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and *The Man in the Iron Mask*, they could have been black or biracial?

And sure enough, about a decade ago, there was a book that came out called *The Black Count*, by Tom Reiss, in which he demonstrated that Alexandre Dumas was writing about his dad, who was a famous black count, general for Napoleon, who was a terrific, terrific swordsman. And so I got to thinking, you know, fencing is a terrific sport for getting into college, for seeing the world.

And yet I would think that most kids of color don't even consider that as a possibility as a sport. We have the idea that that's for a certain class of people, you know, a certain color group of people. And what would it have meant if television, if movies had shown fencers of all colors? And it just so turns out that for the Rio Olympics, we had five African, African-American biracial kids fencing, as well as three Chinese Americans.

And this is due to the fact of a former Olympian, Peter Westbrook, who has a studio in New York City, who really helped integrate, I think, the sport and change. So colorism, racism, racial

discrimination, and also coming to terms with your own self-worth and needing no more, no less than your own ability to see yourself clearly and with love. So that's what *Black Brother* is all about.

DR. DANA: And all your books, all of them, such power of family. Both your chosen family, your blood family, your kin, the connection that goes beyond death into the supernatural world-- all of them. It's just amazing.

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: Family is so important. And actually, when I was about eight months old, my mother left my sister and I. And she didn't return until I was in the third grade. So my family was a multigenerational household of grandparents, and parents, and an aunt, and cousins. But it was my grandmother, and her love, and her teaching me the oral black tradition, telling me stories on the porch, that really, I think, soothed my soul and kind of repressed any bitterness.

But I was a very, very lonely kid. And I've got to say, besides wanting to write children's books for kids like me who never saw themselves in children's books, I also wanted to have a happy, strong family. And I am so blessed that I have been able to do that.

So I think in some sense, I'm trying to show all the variations of a family, whether it be a grandmother, or a community member who sort of adopts a child, or just an extended family, or even a teacher in a library who acts as a parental influence, I'm trying to give kids that sense that there are all kinds of untraditional ways-- or actually, they are traditional. But you know, that they're not just the nuclear family model of having family, and that's OK as long as you have relationships with people who love, love, love you.

DR. DANA: I'd like to end the interview by asking you what you've heard from readers about your books and what you have to say to the future kids who are going to discover your books and either recognize their own lives or become newly aware of the realities your books address.

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: Oh, wow. What a big question. What I hear from kids is that-- I've been really lucky. They generally like all my books. And I'm very proud of that because all my books are very different. They don't follow a pattern at all, from historical to contemporary, to boys to girls, to that mixture of cultures from Vietnamese to Chinese to Asian. So I'm very, very proud that they say, "I like all your stories."

And I think that because I'm very plot-oriented and yet there are layers. I try to put in layers of imagery and symbolism so that if you went back and reread it, there's more to discover in the stories. So I think that kids with their wonderful intellectual curiosity, enjoy that. You know, that it sort of sticks with their ribs.

But for kids in the future, I would say I take writing for youth as a sacred pledge. I am writing one for legacy, longevity. I'm trying to think not about what sells today. I don't care whether my books sell or not. I'm going to write what I'm going to write, you know, and so be it, you know? Publishing them is gravy, and I'm honored that I'm being published. But I'm really trying to make art to leave as the legacy for children.

The other thing is that I'm writing also for teachers and for parents, that I think a book gets amplified in its power when you can open up a subject, and a kid can ask questions, and a teacher is there, and a parent is there. So it's not just about go off and be on your own, and absorb this book. But I'm wanting to make more connections, more social connections, make more familial connections.

And I remember, in particular, one time in Connecticut, they had read *Towers Falling*. And a stewardess was sitting there with her son on Skype. And she said, "That day of 9/11, I was supposed to go to work. And something told me, don't go, don't go. And I wasn't going to go. And so by not going, I survived." And you could just see her son's face. He never, ever heard the story.

And then like a second later, you could see this kid sort of begin stuttering because he realized that if his mother had gone to work that day, he would not have been born. To me, that was powerful. Also, for *Ghost Boys*, I like the fact that-- and all my books do that, that it takes-- everyone needs to address social injustices. It's not just black people, brown-- you know, brown people, Latino, white people, Chinese people, Asian, Native American. Everyone needs to address it.

And so for *Ghost Boys*, it's a reminder that we need all of society, all kids to say, I'm going to be a critical thinker and live my life the way that I believe. That I think kids don't have to accept what their parents necessarily believe, particularly if their parents are still embedded in cultural racism. And I wanted to give kids that strength and remind them that the love that they had in their hearts, it did great to keep it when they went into the voting box when they turn 18 years of age. So I hope my books do last. And I hope that they are talked about with loved ones.

DR. DANA: Jewell Parker Rhodes, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

JEWELL PARKER RHODES: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

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