

# The BiblioFiles: Maiya Williams

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

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. My guest is Maiya Williams, author of The Golden Hour series. Rowan Popplewell is composing the top 10 reasons his life stinks-- number 10, I have no friends; number nine, I'm not good looking; number eight, I have no personality; and so on. In the wake of their mother's death and a failing family business, Rowan and his depressed, uncommunicative sister, Nina, are sent to their aunt's house in the middle-of-nowhere Maine for a month. Rowan prepares to be bored out of his mind. Things seem to be looking up when he meets Xanthe and Xavier Alexander, a pair of twins who are staying with their nana for the summer.

But none of the children has any idea what's in store for them when they decide to explore an old, abandoned hotel called the Owatannauk. Formerly a luxury resort for celebrities of the time, the Owatannauk has fallen into a state of complete disrepair. Except, during the silver hour just before dawn and the golden hour just before dusk, the hotel transforms into a portal to any destination in history. And all the residents of Owatannauk, Maine are frequent flyers.

In the course of the series, the quartet has adventures in revolutionary France, ancient Egypt, and gold rush era California. Along the way they learn that while time travel can be exciting, it can also be dirty, complicated, and extremely dangerous. In the third book, The Hour of the Outlaw, they discover that there are dark forces at work at the Owatannauk-- forces that are threatening to use the hotel for self-serving purposes that could threaten the course of the future.

The Golden Hour books are an interesting blend of adventure, history, and science fiction. But they are never so fantastical as to seem implausible. Maiya Williams has a talent for creating the sights, sounds, smells, and people of the past so vividly, it's like you're right there. Rather than placing historical figures onto lofty pedestals, she presents them as real people with real problems. That admirable realism also applies to the four main characters as they tackle personal and other-dimensional problems alone, together, and sometimes as bitter rivals. Maiya Williams joins us from California. Ms. Williams, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Thank you.

DR. DANA: What came first in The Golden Hour series? Was it the characters, was it the concept of time travel, or something else?

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Well, the first thing that happened was that I just had this idea, really from a chance conversation with a friend. I wanted to write a book because I had some time, and I had always wanted to write a book. And then this idea was in the back of my head, and it started to

grow and blossom. Originally this came from a conversation that I was having with a friend who was a photographer and a filmmaker. And we were just walking around outside and all of a sudden she blurted out, oh, it's the magic hour. And I just stopped because I thought that was an interesting phrase, and I said, what's the magic hour?

And she explained that it's that time of day when the sun is low in the sky, and photographers use this to take their beauty shots of landscapes. And we've all seen those beautiful pictures with a golden glow of the sun. It's not a sunset picture, but everything just looks really pretty. And then we started talking about something else. But that idea that there would be an hour in the day when magic could happen, I just found really intriguing.

So later on I was in the mood to write a children's book, and this idea was still there. And then I just thought, if I wanted to read a book what would I want to read? And I started forming ideas into *The Golden Hour*. The themes that were in *The Golden Hour* were themes that were on my mind at that time, about children dealing with anger and guilt. So it's one of those things where it all came together.

And of course, when you're writing a book for the first time, you put everything in it that you like because you never know if you're going to get another chance. So I would say that *The Golden Hour* probably has every single thing that I like in it. It has mystery, it has science fiction, it has adventure, it has dotty old women, and chess and piano and pie.

DR. DANA: Pie, yes.

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Everything that's in that book is something I like. So if you want to know anything about me, read the book and you'll know everything about me.

DR. DANA: You manage to make the various periods in history seem so real. I'm sure it took quite a bit of research. Do you spend more time researching or actually writing the book?

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Well, the problem with research is that I love doing research, and it's a lot of fun, to me anyway. I majored in history and literature at Harvard. And so that's-- I've always loved history since I was in high school. And I had a wonderful-- I have to mention his name-- a wonderful teacher named Steven Teal, who was my history teacher two different years while I was in high school. But he really is where the genesis of the book came from because he made history come alive for me in a way that no other teacher I've had, has done.

He would dress up in costumes and bring in props, and he would tell us what it was actually like-- in fact he was the person who taught me about the French Revolution. And he would tell us what it was like to live during that time, and what people had to do to go to the bathroom, and all those kinds of things that kids really care about, not the politics. So it was just a joy to be in his class.

And so one of the things that I've always wanted to do was to make history come alive for kids, because I know that it's a subject that a lot of kids think is boring. And if you've ever looked at a history textbook, you'll know why. Because the textbooks are terrible. It's very hard to make

history interesting in a textbook. So part of doing the research was to find little tidbits that were interesting that would help make this time period come alive. And that's pretty difficult. There aren't a whole lot of books about popular culture of a certain time. There's a lot of books about--

DR. DANA: The royalty, the politics--

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Yeah, the royalty or just politics in general.

DR. DANA: Geography.

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Yeah, or even if there's a war going on, you'll find a lot of books about different war stories and that sort of thing, but not about what people did to have fun. And if it is about what they did to have fun, it'll be a sentence or two, and you'll have to fill in the blanks. So what I ended up doing was finding a lot of original material, like letters and diaries, that sort of thing. And those are very useful, because they're written by people who lived during that time.

Or sometimes I would read books by people from that time just to get the rhythms of what was going on. And they might mention different articles in the house, things that you don't really think about that much. So that was the fun part. It was also difficult, though-- and this may be getting into a slightly different topic-- but a couple of the characters in the book are African American.

And to find what African Americans were doing during that time was nearly impossible. It was just so hard to find out. I have these two kids, Xanthe and Xavier, who are now going back in time to the French Revolution. And I had to figure out, where could they fit in? Could they fit in? What would they be? What would they blend in as? And I had to do the same thing for Alexandria, Egypt, which is slightly easier because Egypt is in Africa, and then also the California Gold Rush. There were plenty of African Americans around. So that one was the least difficult, but also probably the most interesting, because they were doing so much that people don't know about.

It was fun to write about the kinds of things that I was positive nobody had read in a textbook. The point I was leading up to, though, is that I can get so caught up with the research. I could just research for years and years and never write a word down. So at some point, I have to carve out the story, sometimes using the research to come up with a side adventure, or something that might happen, just so that I can go into that particular piece of research that I find interesting.

But I have to keep myself from letting the story flop all over the place just so that I can stick in every interesting thing I found. So that's the hardest part, is deciding what to use, and what not to use, and knowing that there's a wealth of stuff that I'd love to put in the book that just doesn't fit.

DR. DANA: I would like to ask you a question about Xanthe and Xavier. You brought this point up, but if you don't mind returning to it briefly, they are African American. And as you note on several occasions in your book, there are definitely issues with race and traveling to certain time periods. And I really like how you address this head-on in your book. Can you talk a little bit about your approach to race and history?

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Well, the thing that encouraged me-- this is going to sound odd. I, myself, am African American, which your listeners may or may not know. But when I was a kid, I would read a lot of books. The kind of books that I liked were adventure books, and mysteries, and that sort of thing, books where kids would be having some sort of fun adventure. And usually the protagonist in these books were white. And that didn't really bother me that much, because I grew up in a pretty mixed atmosphere, in neighborhoods where there were all kinds of people.

So it didn't really occur to me that there was anything wrong with that, except that when I did read books that had African American protagonists, they were usually historical. And they were always about racism, and people being oppressed, and just very depressing subjects. They were never about kids having any fun. And I began to feel like, why do black people always have to have a bad time and white people always get to have a good time? So I thought, well now is my opportunity to address that.

And so I very blithely decided I was going to make my characters African American. Rowan and Nina are not African American, and the first book is from Rowan's point of view. So it's not like I set out to just write a series from an African American point of view, but I did want to include them in there. So I blithely put them in there and then realized, oh, now I have all this extra research I have to do.

But what I wanted to show was just that, here's some kids, they are African American, it's not like I'm saying they are and then never address it again. I wanted to make them realistic versions of kids who are kind of like my family-- well-educated, just pretty much nice kids, they don't live in a bad neighborhood. But they do have to deal with the fact that they have dark skin once in a while. And they're aware that they're black, and that, in America, that has certain implications, even today. But especially when they go back in time.

And one of the things that Xavier says right up front, when they first discover these time machines, he says, let's just not go back to a time when I'm picking cotton. That's the only thing I ask for I actually don't want to do. Just because there's so many places in time when you are going to hit a snag if you're African American, or black, or dark skinned where you're not going to be treated very well. And this came into play a couple times when I had to decide, when I was writing the next book, and I would decide, where do I want to send these kids. And normally I just pick places that I personally like. So I'm interested in the French Revolution, and I'm interested in Alexandria, Egypt, and I'm interested in the California Gold Rush. And I knew these were places I would love to do research on, so that's where I sent them.

But I have a lot of questions from people who are saying, well, where are they going to go next? And I keep thinking well, I'd love to send them some place in say, Asia, like, Japan. But that's very problematical, because there aren't a whole lot of African Americans walking around Japan when you go back in history, because there was such a pure culture. So I would again, have to really dig and find some research and figure out, OK well, how am I going to get them there, and what are they going to be treated like?

So it does limit me in some respects, in that I do have to be careful about where I put them and know if I put them someplace where they can't move around, then I'm going to have a pretty

confining story. But at the same time I do find it very gratifying to do research about my own background that I didn't even know, and be able to share it with other people.

DR. DANA: I would like to ask you about something that might not be a character in the book, but it almost seems like a main character, and that's the Owatannauk resort itself. It's a time portal. It transforms during the silver and golden hours. And even without the unearthly transformations and the phantoms wandering within it, it's a really bizarre place that reflects the whims of its creator and owner Archibald Weber. In the third book, the kids decide to explore the hotel in its dilapidated state, and its stunning and eerie. I'm wondering if you could read a passage that describes some of its strangeness.

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Sure. This passage is actually from *The Hour of the Outlaw*, which is the third book. So you do get glimpses of the hotel and I try and reveal various aspects of it in each book. But this is the third book so it probably reveals a bit more than the first two.

"Xavier would have thought that by now he'd be used to the faded carpeting and peeling wallpaper, the thick layer of dust on the furniture and the stale air, but in truth it still raised the hairs on the back of his neck. Even though it wasn't technically haunted-- the phantoms that appeared when the hotel transformed at the golden and silver hours were not exactly dead people-- it was still creepy.

'Where do you guys want to start?' Nina said, brushing a cobweb from her face. 'The dining room is interesting...'

'Oh, let's go up the staircase!' Xanthe pleaded. 'I've wanted to go up there since the first time I came to this place!'

'I bet these will come in handy,' Xavier said, waving a large ring of keys he'd found behind the front desk. The sound of the jangling keys excited the group, so up they went. At the top of the stairs they found a long hallway lined with doors, each with a brass number on it. Crystal sconces, opaque with dust, lined the wall, along with paintings from different eras, some of them modern. A Ruisdael seascape hung next to a Georgia O'Keeffe desert flower. A da Vinci sketch of an angel hung next to a Cézanne still life. Xavier's eyes were drawn to a stained glass window at the end of the hallway depicting Saint Francis of Assisi, his eyes closed and his arms crossed. A dove sat in each hand. Animals lay sleeping at his feet: lion, lamb, dog, bear, rabbit, peacock.

'I guess these are the hotel rooms,' Rowan said.

'Not this one,' Xavier said, unlocking the door to room number one with the master key. He was surprised to find a staircase that led up to a landing, then turned to the left and disappeared behind a wall. 'Come on!'

He bounded up the stairs. The others followed. At the first landing he made the turn and saw the staircase continued upward and turned again. He scrambled up the second staircase, made the turn, then stopped. Xanthe crashed into him, followed by Rowan and Nina.

'Xave, what's the problem?' Xanthe snapped.

'The staircase ends. It just goes right up to the ceiling.' He ran his hand along the walls and ceiling, searching for a trap door. 'There's nothing here. Go back down.'

Back in the hallway, Xanthe examined the door to room number one carefully. 'It's got to be another one of Archibald Weber's puzzles. That guy spent way too much time trying to confuse people.'

The door to room number two opened up to a brick wall. The door to room number three revealed another slightly smaller door of dark burnished wood. When Nina unlocked this one, it revealed a light wood door intricately carved with images of Hindu gods. Behind this door was a metal screen door, then a door with beveled glass, a sliding door, an upside-down door, a miniature barn door, a swinging door, a submarine hatch, and finally a painting of a door, which of course would not open.

'That was a big waste of time,' Nina sighed as they made their way back to the hallway.

'There have to be bedrooms somewhere,' Xanthe said. 'Let's keep going.'

Rowan opened the next door. The brass number four had loosened over the years so that it hung at an angle. Behind this door stretched a narrow hallway, wide enough for only one person to pass through at a time. They walked tentatively through the passageway, which twisted this way and that, leading them to yet another door. When they opened this door they found themselves back in the hallway, coming out door number six.

'This is ridiculous,' Rowan said. 'We're not getting anywhere. Let's just go back downstairs.'

They started down the hallway, but stopped. The staircase had disappeared. In its place was a wall decorated with a mural painting of the staircase. It was a very good painting, a little faded by time, but nevertheless not the real thing.

Xavier whistled, impressed. 'Wow. This is a good one.'

'A good what?' Nina asked.

'It's called a trompe l'oeil. That's French for "trick the eye." A painting that creates the optical illusion of three-dimensional space,' Xavier said, recalling trivia he'd picked up from an art history book.

'Thanks, Professor,' Xanthe said wryly. 'But that still doesn't answer the question of what happened to the staircase.'

'Xave, you were last in line, right?' asked Rowan suddenly. 'Did you close the door to room four behind you when we went down the passageway?'

'No...'

'Well, it's closed now.'

They all looked at the closed door. A smile broke out on Xavier's face.

'Brilliant! He's brilliant!'

'Who's brilliant?' Xanthe said.

'Archibald Weber is brilliant,' Xavier answered smugly. 'This is not the same hallway where we started.'

'Except for the staircase it looks the same,' Rowan said, scratching his head.

'Actually, it doesn't,' Xavier retorted. 'First of all, as you rightly pointed out, the door was shut, and I definitely left it open.'

'Maybe somebody else shut it,' Xanthe said. 'We might not be the only people here.'

'Maybe,' Xavier said, 'but take a look at the number on the door. The four is straight. The other one was crooked. I know you're not going to say that somebody fixed the number...'

'Hey! Look at the window!' Nina cried, pointing down the hall. 'They're awake!'

It was true. St. Francis of Assisi's eyes were open and the animals were standing. Moreover, the saint's arms were outstretched and the two doves had taken flight.

'We *are* in a different hallway!' Nina laughed, clapping her hands. 'This is awesome!'

DR. DANA: Amazing. The books are historical, but there are also all sorts of cool high-tech devices-- the alleviators, translators you clip to your tooth to speak other languages, bullet proof fabric, even a lifelike robotic horse. Oftentimes, time travel books divide themselves by leaning more towards the historical or the technical aspects of travel, but you've woven them together quite nicely. Was it easy to write this way, or did you have to rein yourself in at times?

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Well, I would say that the reason why they're both there in equal proportions is because I like history and science, probably equally. And I like little gadgets. In real life, I like gadgets. So I like to put them in there and think of, what would a fun gadget be. And I also wanted to make sure that people didn't think of this as being a book about going back in time magically, that it's not a magic wand, or anything like that. So I put a lot of the science fiction gadgets in there just to underscore the fact that it's all something technological, that somebody made and not a magic thing.

It wasn't difficult to write this way, because like I said, I enjoy both types of books. So I've made this book kind of the everything book-- science fiction, mystery, history, adventure, a little comedy. So it's all in there.

DR. DANA: So the last paragraph in your third book is a complete cliffhanger. Will there be any more books in this series?

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Well, each book has been written from a different character's point of view, so I fully intended to write four books.

DR. DANA: Hooray.

MAIYA WILLIAMS: And I think that I will write a fourth book. The only problem is that the publishing industry is changing quickly. And so they are scrambling to continue to make money. So the kinds of books that get published, and that you know will get published, are the same way movies work-- the ones that are either already written by somebody who's already a very well-known writer, or something that is eye catching in some way. And although The Golden Hour series has a lot of very-- it's a very large base of fans who love the books, and are very vocal about it, and I get a lot of fan mail from them-- it's more specific than widespread. So they're waiting to see if the books make enough money to ask me to write a fourth one, which I may write anyway, just because I feel like I need to finish the set, so to speak.

But it's not one of those, it's not like the Harry Potter series, or Series of Unfortunate Events, or those kinds of series which were immediate money makers.

DR. DANA: That's an extremely honest answer, I appreciate it. That might be--

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Well, it's a business.

DR. DANA: --enlightening for some of the readers.

MAIYA WILLIAMS: The problem with entertainment, in general, is that, for the creative people, we care about the creative part, and of course, the public does, too. But for the people who provide the money for these things to be made, they need for it to make a certain amount of money. But the other interesting thing about this, though, is because publishing is changing, I might not need to have a publisher to write the book and get it out there, anyway. If you know what I mean. There's a lot of self-publishing going on. Things are being done digitally. The industry is changing.

So I think I will end up writing the fourth book. I wouldn't say I'd be doing it soon, because right now I'm writing something else. But it will happen, I'm hoping within the next four or five years.

DR. DANA: In the meantime, you have written another book. It's a standalone book. The Fizzy Whiz Kid. Was it fun to just take a different step?

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Well, it was refreshing. It was sort of like having sorbet after a rich meal. Fizzy Whiz Kid is a much frothier kind of book. It's funnier, there's less emotional weight to it. It's really about my experience in Hollywood more than anything. Because Hollywood is a very strange place. It's like going into Wonderland, or Oz, or something like that. You get used to it, but things are done very strangely here. You see huge billboards, and you see celebrities. But not only that, there's a lot that's about Hollywood, about the industry-- the entertainment industry-- that's strange. And I wanted to show what it was like to be on the inside of that industry from a kid's point of view. So that's basically what the story is about-- somebody, a kid who becomes an instant celebrity, and then finds out that it's not all that it's cracked up to be. There's a lot of irritating aspects of being a celebrity.

DR. DANA: Maiya Williams, thanks so much for coming on the BiblioFiles.

MAIYA WILLIAMS: Oh, it was my pleasure.

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