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# Finding Her Voice: A Conversation with Allison Whittenberg

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## Finding Her Voice:

A Conversation with Allison Whittenberg

**S**weet *Thang*. *Life Is Fine*. *Hollywood & Maine*. These are all books by poet and dramatist Allison Whittenberg. These novels are about young black women coming to terms with who they are intellectually, emotionally, and culturally. Critics say Whittenberg's young adult fiction is well written, and they praise the way she crafts convincing dialogue and moving narration (Jones, 2009; Rochman, 2008; Brautigam, 2006; Hutley, 2006). They also commend her for offering readers an opportunity to see characters grapple with issues they are concerned about. For example, Martin (2006) points out that in *Sweet Thang*, "Charmaine struggles with many issues integral to African American life: whether to wear her hair straightened or natural, how to deal with her feelings of inferiority about her dark skin, and how to embrace her own intellectualism without inciting the ire of jealous peers" (p. 197). According to Brautigam (2006), the depiction of "[s]olid, loving parents" and a stable home in *Sweet Thang* ". . . provides a welcome respite for readers whose own lives are chaotic or who have had to read one too many problem novels" (p. 52).

### Finding Allison Whittenberg

I discovered Whittenberg's work in 2007 when I reviewed *Life Is Fine* for a magazine. The novel's tone, dialogue, and complex intergenerational friendship offer a fresh addition to the field. Interested in learning more about Whittenberg's work, I recently arranged a telephone interview with her. We talked about her childhood and her entrée into young adult literature. This profile is based on that interview and other sources.

Allison Marlo Whittenberg grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the middle child of Luther and Faye Whittenberg. Whittenberg's father was a salesman, and her mother took care of their three children. Though Whittenberg liked school, she describes herself as a "good but not excellent student." Yet, her teachers recognized she had writing talent early on. She says she always did well in English classes and she loved reading. "I would read anything. I was just that type of person," she maintains. In high school, she served as editor of the literary magazine, but she did not always feel an urgency to write. "It wasn't that I was burning to write. I did not say, 'I want to write. I want to write.' It was just that people told me that I had some aptitude for it," Whittenberg explains. She tried other forms of expression, too, including dance and music.

Whittenberg recalls, "Though neither of my parents went to college, I was on that track" (<http://allisonwhittenberg.com/page5/>). After high school, she earned a Bachelor of Arts and went on to graduate school at the University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, where she earned a Master of Arts degree in 1995. Since then, she has taught English at several universities, most recently for Drexel University.

### Finding Young Adult Literature

When Whittenberg took writing classes in literary centers, she rarely met writers who produced literature for youth. Yet, her focus eventually turned to young adult literature. Her first young adult novel, *Sweet Thang*, did not begin with an adolescent at the center. Instead, the novel originally captured the father's point of view. Whittenberg says, "Then I reworked it,

making 14-year-old cousin Charmaine the protagonist (feeling the conflicted feeling worked better coming from someone who is trying to understand the world)” (The Brown Bookshelf & Whittenberg, 2008). Whittenberg says she wishes she had discovered young adult literature sooner. “People are very serious about [writing young adult literature] and they know from the start that that’s what they want to do. They don’t necessarily go a few years writing poetry, a few years of playwrighting, and then finally getting to it,” she says.

But a background in playwrighting has influenced how she approaches invention; it is one of her best

remedies for the blank screen. She uses dialogue generation, a process that involves experimenting with how characters might respond verbally to each other, and role-play as methods of invention:

I love doing dialogue. I usually just do a lot of dialogue when I’m doing novels. A lot of my poetry is basically dramatic monologue, sort of cut up. I really just go line by line. I hope it’s not because I’m part of the television generation. I hope it’s because I just like the feel of it, playacting, pretending like I’m that person.

Whittenberg imagines she is the character she is writing about and shapes the dialogue so it reads the way she envisions the character would say it. She

## “Just a Taste”: Two Whittenberg Teasers

*Hollywood & Maine*

Allison Whittenberg

Realistic fiction

Delacorte Press, 2009, 166 pp., ISBN 978-0-385-73671-8

Reviewed by Jacqueline Bach, Baton Rouge, LA

It is January 1976 and Charmaine Upshaw’s life is perfect. She’s beginning a relationship with Raymond, trying to get into modeling, maybe acting, and starting her second semester of ninth grade. Then her Uncle E, the ex con, returns, and her family takes him back in, even though he left Philadelphia several months ago and cost her family the \$1,000 they had lent him for bail. Maine finds herself without her own bedroom, on the brink of losing Raymond, and her personal life interfering with classroom discussions.

Often humorous and always heartwarming, Whittenberg’s follow-up to *Sweet Thang* captures life in the late 70s from the point of view of a black teenager who lives in a close community and finds herself negotiating with the larger themes in the world—such as redemption, doubt, and acceptance.

*Tutored*

Allison Whittenberg

Realistic fiction

Delacorte Press, 2010, 192 pp., ISBN 978-0-385-73869-9

Reviewed by KaaVonia Hinton, Chesapeake, VA

Love at first sight is hardly the case for Hakiam Powell and Wendy Anderson. Binary opposites, Wendy is a black, middle class, high school junior overwhelmed by stacks of letters from college admissions officers, while Hakiam is a high school dropout who was once in foster care. They meet at a tutoring center where Hakiam hopes to study for the GED exam. After several meetings, Wendy becomes interested in Hakiam’s home life, including his responsibility for cousin Malikia when her mother, Leesa, is working. Hakiam and Wendy start dating, and before she knows it, his problems impact her. Wendy’s father, Mr. Anderson, is not impressed with her decision to associate with poor people like Hakiam, introducing additional tension.

Whittenberg’s new novel, told in alternating chapters from both Wendy and Hakiam’s perspectives, has crisp dialogue, a rich setting, and poignant issues. Her portrayal of Mr. Anderson’s prejudice toward poor blacks is honest and revealing, as is her depiction of the poverty and hardships that Hakiam and Leesa face. Perhaps along with some of the characters, readers will be “schooled” on how to treat people, regardless of their socioeconomic status.

says most of her young adult literature came from thinking of the youth in her work written for an adult audience. As mentioned above, *Sweet Thang* was originally written from an adult male perspective until Whittenberg decided to focus on the youth in the story instead, shifting the book's focus.

### Leaning on Experience

Many of Whittenberg's poems for adults have been published in literary magazines, and some of her plays—*The Bard of Frogtown* and *Skylark*, for example, which were performed at the InterAct Theatre at the "Writing Aloud Festival" in Philadelphia in 2006—have been produced. Whittenberg says that when she began writing, she was writing outside her own experiences:

When I started writing, I was doing sort of sci-fi, apocalyptic sort of stuff. I list the *Twilight Zone* as one of my favorite shows. I read a lot of *Twilight Zone Magazine* and *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, so I was doing more things like that. I thought, these people are much older than I am. I'm trying to get these exotic locales that I've never gone to. Why am I doing this? I was reading that the first thing Lorraine Hansberry published was about football, so I thought that was odd. Women could definitely know football but, I don't know, I think the closer that she got to her own experience, *A Raisin in the Sun*, which is loosely based on her family—not necessarily socioeconomically, but her family did try to move into a white area—she was able to get a lot of truth out of that.

Although Whittenberg's work is not autobiographical, there are often remnants of the storyline that do come closer to her own experience than her earlier work did. For example, Whittenberg says,

*Sweet Thang* was loosely based on my recollections and observations growing up in West Philly until I was in second grade and there after, the first tier, predominately African American suburb of Yeadon, PA (which in the book I call Dardon). I wanted to show the type of intact, largely wholesome black family that myself and most of my friends grew up in. Most important, in *Sweet Thang*, Charmaine fiercely misses her Auntie Karyn. I channeled the deep loss I felt regarding my mother's passing. [<http://thebrownbookshelf.com>]

Whittenberg says she decided to set her novels in West Philadelphia because of its rich atmosphere: "West Philadelphia is an interesting place to live. There is such a range of incomes (University of Pennsylvania is on one end) and ethnicities (recent immigrants move there). I grew up around 52nd St.,

which to the outside eye seems rough, but I like the hustle and crowds."

Like Charmaine, Whittenberg is the middle child, and she also tried modeling and got about as far as Charmaine Upshaw did in the sequel to *Sweet Thang*, *Hollywood & Maine*. Laughing, Whittenberg says, "I would really dissuade anyone [from modeling]. I tell young ladies when I go to different schools to do something else with your life." Whittenberg's family is musical like the Upshaw's, too: they sing and play instruments. Whittenberg cautions, "It's one thing to, as they say, write what you know, but I think you also need to take a little bit of a leap too, to step outside [of your experience]."

### Reading Backward

While talking to Whittenberg, our conversation kept returning to books. Whittenberg reads widely, fast, and often. She is influenced by several authors, but Gwendolyn Brooks and Richard Wright are particularly special to her. Whittenberg says, "I wouldn't be a writer today without either of them" (<http://thebrownbookshelf.com>).

Her favorite contemporary author is probably Sherman Alexie. She says, "[Alexie] stands out in terms of who I currently admire. I've heard him speak a couple of times, and he's a very off the cuff, uncensored type of person." She also likes the work of young adult authors such as Laurie Halse Anderson, Walter Dean Myers, and Rita Williams-Garcia. When Whittenberg reflects on reading young adult literature, she says,

I would say reading these books as an adult is a totally different experience than reading them when I was at that particular age. You know you always read a little bit ahead of your age when you're young. You're reading *Seventeen* magazine when you're twelve or something like that, so I would always read that far ahead, but now I'm reading in the opposite direction. So when I pick up a young adult book, I feel like I've already sort of been through this, and I'm sort of going backwards.

Whittenberg believes it is important for readers to expand their reading interests. "I see people now who say, 'I only want to read women authors or I only want to read this time period.' I would read anything, things that wouldn't necessarily relate to me. I think people cut themselves off pretty quickly with what they think they can relate to, but I think they'd be surprised." Whittenberg continues, "I'm keeping my

reading up because I don't just want to write or do my own thing. I try to keep a balance." Whittenberg says she learns more about writing when she reads:

I'd read a lot of anthologies. There was an anthology that I found about nurses who were writing poetry about their experiences. It's different than a doctor's experience, their closeness to the patient. That sort of helped. I like people who are not necessarily trained but can write. I think that makes all the difference. A lot of times when people are trained, it all sounds the same. They're doing technique, technique, but there's something to be said for someone who has a story first and then finds their own voice.

## Pushing through the Writing

Whittenberg is a disciplined writer, writing daily for about four hours. "I wake up early and do some writing. I used to be a night person for writing, but now I'm a morning person." The dedication to her craft has yielded a steady flow of fiction. Her fourth novel, *Tutored*, was released in December. *Tutored* is told from the perspective of Wendy Anderson and Hakiam Powell, two adolescents with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds who meet at a tutoring center. Of her new book, Whittenberg says,

[Writing] the male perspective was easier actually than the female perspective because she's upper class and I didn't grow up in an upper class household. I didn't necessarily grow up in quite his household either, but I've definitely seen that [poverty] enough. It was harder to get her voice, and there are more things that happen with him. He's in more dire circumstances than she is. She's going to an all-white private school. This is modern day; it isn't *Brown vs. Board of Education*, but it's still very hard if you're one of the few—I have this line [in the book]: "the only chip in the cookie." That's what she always felt like. It's hard to be different.

Whittenberg is already at work on another book:

The thing that I'm working on right now is not really going well. It was a short story, and I said, well, maybe I can make it longer. Now it's sort of at the novella length. It really does have a definite ending. It has a young adult protagonist, but I think it works better as an adult book. Two teen boys are being abused by their father, and they're devising a plan to kill him because they've had enough. This sounds really dark, especially compared to the other things that I've written. There was something about domestic violence in *Sweet Thang*. I wanted to write a little bit more, not salaciously, but I wanted to write a little bit more about it, just about how trapped some people are. How do they figure to get out of it, run away?

When asked about advice for writers, Whittenberg laughs and says, "Writing? I really wouldn't say that's a good profession. Yes, it's bad on the posture. It has horrible hours. You get obsessed with things that aren't really reality. I think writers just can't help themselves. Once you get the bug, you just can't stop yourself from writing. Having written is great, but writing?"

However, if you are bit by the bug, Whittenberg suggests you ignore distractions and commit to writing. "You have to push through . . . and just finish it," she says. If you're wondering what keeps her returning to the keyboard, the answer is simple: stories. Whittenberg explains,

When things happen to the people I know or I'm reading the paper, I always think, let's put a story around it, or a "what if" with it. I think that's just something that you can't stop once you start doing it. It helps to make sense of the work in a lot of ways. I'm just a girl from Philadelphia with very humble beginnings and you can get someone to listen to you, which is amazing. You're not going to get the world to listen to you, but you get someone to read your mind, to sort of see your thoughts. Now, that's priceless. That's incredible. That someone would actually read your book? That's amazing.

*KaaVonia Hinton* is the coauthor (with Gail K. Dickinson) of *Integrating Multicultural Literature in Libraries and Classrooms in Secondary Schools* (Linworth Publishing, 2007) and (with Sueanne McKinney) *Mathematics Literature in the Classroom and Library* (Linworth Publishing, 2010). She is the author of *Angela Johnson: Poetic Prose* (Scarecrow Press, 2006). She can be reached on her blog, <http://kaavoniahinton.blogspot.com/>.

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