

A Conversation Between Kate Angus and Author Arisa White

Kate Angus, Augury Books: What made you choose to break from some more traditional ways of writing a memoir? Why did poetry seem like the best way to engage in this personal history?

Arisa White: I was crafting a father's absence and poetry was the best way to language the glimpses, the unseen: it offered freedom from cause-and-effect. Memory happens like poetry to me. It emphasizes the image and its emotional resonance and it leaps and associates, making metaphors to form connections. Because I was trying to connect with what was gone, to what was driving my unconscious behaviors, what was shaping my fears, and connect to what I was grieving. Poetry and the lyric gave me the space to explore and find my way to my father.

KA: Your book sometimes uses poignant quotes or inspirational passages from other authors, performers, and speakers, interweaving their words with your own. I'm interested in how these "texts of influence" became a part of your book.

AW: The documentary poetics of Jennifer Tamayo's *You Da One*, *Ghostbox* by Emerson Whitney, and Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* taught me to be transparent in my influences: who and what am I listening to, reading, and tasting that offers resemblances to the father, that offers attention to what goes unnoticed. This felt generative, and necessary when trying to construct a father's absence and its effect.

I curated an eight-week poetry reading series at the Museum of the African Diaspora in San Francisco in the summer of 2017, two years after my return from Guyana, in conjunction with the exhibition *The Ease of Fiction*, which featured the work of four contemporary African artists living in the U.S. It was my time immersed in that exhibition that produced a twelve-page prose poem that wove citations from artist Meleko Mokgosi, M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, and Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*. This was when the royal blue became a motif and water became the conjunction between my father and me.

The work was evolving from epistolary poems that I initially wrote to gear me up to write an actual letter to him in 2013-14. Since a connection was made, the poetic line was now much longer and I didn't want to break it. I wanted to get breathlessly to an endstop.

KA: In terms of your creative process, were you inspired to write *Who's Your Daddy* by using other texts as a starting point that you built outwards from, or did these texts become more important during the revision stages?

AW: Texts like the aforementioned, in addition to *Spill* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, Alexis DeVeaux's *Yabo*, Cynthia Dillard's concepts on endarkened feminism, and Rasheedah Phillips' theories on Black quantum futurism offered strategies for how to move across and through time, to incorporate ritual, to be rooted in Black cosmologies and ways of knowing and being so that I could imagine beyond tropes of failed black fatherhood and criminality. So I could reimagine beyond a belief of incompleteness. (Also writing along with these texts encouraged me to exercise and access unexplored parts of my voice.) These books were a revision in consciousness, a freeing from linearity, and master narratives so I could re-see and trust myself, trust all those Black queer woman technologies I've inherited.

KA: There's a lot of personal stuff in here, and I'm wondering what parts felt risky for you? I know a lot of writers find it difficult, but ultimately fulfilling, to write autobiographically, but it must give one pause to write so intimately about one's lovers, friends, and family. Can you speak to that experience a bit?

AW: I had a creative breakthrough in a therapy session. Ranting on, blaming everyone who has ever disappointed me, criticizing my partner's behaviors that were niggling at me, and the therapist stops me, says I am projecting. Projecting onto her my own shit, seeing her actions in a particular light to activate

the wounds I need to bring attention to. Although not fruitful for romantic partnerships, I realized I could make creative use of those projections. They become templates for characterization, scores for the kinds of energies, rhythms, and tensions I want to conduct throughout the work.

The autobiographical isn't risky for me, it is an anchor for me to perform the risky work. The risk was managing the intertextuality and spiritualism of *Who's Your Daddy*: the weaving of quotes from scholars; Erykah Badu; Guyanese newspapers and proverbs; and letters from individuals who wrote to their absent, estranged, dead fathers or patriarchal figures, which I solicited and used from community writing workshops. There are leaps between imaginary, ethereal, and real—the underwater crossing and the ceremony of stars with Gerald by the Atlantic Ocean in the final section of the book. There was the risk of it being too sentimental because those moments are about tenderness and repair. There is this risk in wanting it all to fit well and be right in word and beauty because I want to give respect to the lives that I'm recasting in *Who's Your Daddy*. It is the material of our lives, the energy of us being in relationship with each other that creates a space that generates meaning and deeper attention for us all.

KA: Did this book come together for you chronologically, or was it more mix and match, in terms of the childhood sections and the more adult sections?

AW: The final section of *Who's Your Daddy* inspired the writing of the earlier sections of childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. I was very much trying to avoid writing about those younger years—I did it before and felt that the terrain of those memories was already explored. What more could be uncovered?

You, as my editor, had made the suggestion of including childhood sections after reading the first draft, which concentrated more on my visit to Guyana to meet Gerald and a series of pivotal romantic relationships, interlaced with citations. Essentially, the latter half of the book taught me what I needed to call up from my childhood and adolescence to deepen and extend the metaphors that were appearing.

For instance, I recall a dream my mother had of Gerald while I was in Guyana. She said he was in a royal blue suit. Through these kinds of imagistic triggers, I was asking: *Where is the father? Where is the royal blue in childhood?* And the memory of me hiding behind a blue door when my father came to visit me surfaced. I was three years old and that was the last visit I had from him.

KA: The trip to Guyana in the book feels transformative. Did you take part of Guyana back with you, e.g., do you feel connected to Guyana more now after the trip?

AW: Yes, it was, like my soul found a key and a lock opened. There is clarity and I appreciate having resolution so that I can evolve my sense of self. Evolve how I'm in relation to life around me and be in a power that is authentic to how I want to be in the world. Guyana, especially the trip to Kaieteur Falls revived my spirit, and being in Georgetown during Mashramani was exciting. I was reminded of the West Indian Day Parade in Brooklyn, family outings with my mom, my stepfather who is Guyanese as well, and siblings, and I recognized the different ways Guyana and its culture have always been a part of my life.

KA: The title of the book, *Who's Your Daddy*, is both a statement and an implied question. Do you feel the book answered that question for you?

AW: It does and because of the implied question it continues to ask. And the asking interrogates along different layers of meaning. There is always the need to question patriarchy and its role in our social and political institutions, how we are governed by what is there and not there, how our consciousness functions around the ways we identify (and often those identities are defined through systems of power). It is one of those questions that can ripple throughout you, if you allow it.

KA: A lot of writers talk about writing for a specific person or ideal reader, as well as a wider audience. Do you have an ideal reader? Who do you feel this book was written for?

AW: Readers who want to be swept up by a story, who love the play of language, who enjoy the weaving of

the critical and the poetic, readers who desire to go on a journey that is figurative and self-reflective, who can suspend judgment and anchor in beauty. Queer, Black young women healing from abandonment and perfectionism and everybody who loves them.

KA: Your middle-grade book *Biddy Mason Speaks Up* has won a number of awards, including the Maine Literary Book Award for Young People’s Literature and the Nautilus Book Award Gold Medal. Could you tell me a bit about that book, and maybe speak to the experience of writing for the younger audience versus writing for young and new adults?

AW: It is co-authored with Laura Atkins and illustrated by Laura Freeman, and is the second book in the Fighting for Justice series for young readers. Through lyrical verse, historical documentation, and full-color illustrations, we chronicle the life of Bridget “Biddy” Mason, an African American philanthropist, healer, and midwife who was born into slavery and later became a business and civic leader in the fledging city of Los Angeles. She was able to secure her freedom in 1856, through the help of the free Black community in Los Angeles, and a sympathetic white judge, a year before the ruling of *Dred Scott v. Sanford* that denied Black Americans, free or enslaved, citizenship.

The experience of writing for younger readers taught me simplicity. That I cannot escape the difficult through jargonistic language. Taught me to think more intentionally about how I used the metaphor to convey realities that are often erased and serve to obscure the violence that has occurred. There was a critical moment when one of our beta readers, a PhD student researching children’s literature that focused on narratives of enslavement, pointed out that I was writing from the POV of someone in a position of power—a power that Mason would not have access to in her times. Here I was, feeling like I’m doing all this conjure-work to revive the absences, omissions, silences of history to make sense of and recover a Black woman’s humanity, and I was reproducing the dominance.

If anything, despite the audience, I recognize the responsibility of creating narratives that help people to get free.

KA: What would you say to other Black, queer, or female authors living and writing in these times? What are your hopes for them, and the industry in general, in the future?

AW: I posted on my Instagram this quote from the astrologer Chani Nicholas: “Our self-worth is always bolstered by being able to use our resources to deepen our connections, not our competitiveness.” It’s a reminder for how I want to be in relationship with others, with the industry, in the now and future.