

A Calling and a Responsibility

Children's book author Senyah Haynes on teaching Black history through storybooks

by [Nicole Bond](#) | August 2, 2017



Drawing of Senyah Haynes by Lizzie Smith

South Side Weekly Stage & Screen Editor Nicole Bond recently had a chat with children's author Senyah Haynes. Haynes is the Founder and Executive Director of [Diasporal Discoveries](#), a nonprofit that connects youth to the history and culture of the African diaspora. In this conversation, what started out as two old friends catching up over coffee turned into a discussion about the role and responsibility of literature to its youngest audience.

Okay, so speaking of 'lit issues,' first of all, what has always fascinated me about you is that your name is a palindrome! Did your parents do that on purpose? I mean, they had to know, right?

Ha! By the time I was thirty I could still count on one hand the number of people who came to that on their own. Anyway, yes, it's a palindrome, which is a word, phrase, or series of numbers that can be read the same forward and backwards. And yes, my parents did it on purpose—though Mama said it was her genius and Daddy said it was his, you know how it is.

So other than writing a palindrome every time you write your name, talk to me about what else you write.

Right now I write children's adventure books that get young people moving across the map in their minds, and learning that as they travel across the map, the African footprint has been everywhere they visit. It's a series called [Jayla's Jaunts](#), where a little girl and her magical auntie travel from state to state and learn about the Black history and culture in each place they visit.

How did you come up with this idea? Okay, wait—has anyone told you *Jayla's Jaunts* feels a little like Octavia Butler's *Kindred*? I mean, if *Kindred* wasn't a sci-fi thriller and scary as all get out. But it has that mystical time travel thing happening. Say more about these characters, for people who didn't get to read the books, like I did.

I think someone did mention that. And as much as I love Octavia Butler, do you know, I haven't read *Kindred*, so I don't get the connection, but I'll take your word for it and I'll add it to my reading list. So, in the first book, Jayla, the main character, meets her Auntie Yah-Yah and very quickly finds out she has magic powers—she has a “tiny glittered, purse” that holds anything imaginable, she switches between being a young woman and an elder depending on whether or not she's teaching, and at the snap of her fingers she can transport them to another place or time. Anyway, Jayla spins a globe that has come from her auntie's magical purse, and when it stops spinning her finger lands on the United States of America. So her auntie asks her what's the first state that begins with the letter A, and then off they go, exploring Alabama! They magically time travel from Selma to Tuskegee and learn about Black pioneers such as Rosa Parks, Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and the Tuskegee Airmen.

They also learn about the marches from Selma to Montgomery on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In the second book, [*Adventures in Alaska*](#), they travel through the great outdoors and learn about the Black soldiers who helped build the Alcan highway—the road that finally connected Alaska to the lower forty-eight states, and they learn about the conditions those men lived in under in a segregated army.

These stories are so important for every child to learn, but for Black children especially, yet they are not always taught in schools. Was this just a creative calling for you, or did you feel some kind of responsibility to write this particular series?

It's both, a calling to be sure, and absolutely a responsibility. I am responsible for making sure there isn't the information gap between my generation and the next, that there was between mine and the generation before me. Most of what I've learned about my culture and history, I've had to seek out. I didn't have elders telling me anything. Black culture is so vibrant and varied, and has such a long history in these states—which is what I'm focusing on now.

You say in *these states* and your focus *now*; talk about some of your other work.

I also founded a nonprofit called Diasporal Discoveries, and we provide Black cultural studies programming and travel opportunities to teens during out-of-school time. We just took a group of young people to Detroit over Memorial Day weekend. But regarding *Jayla's Jaunts*, I think this is teaching the same lessons but via a different platform and to a different age group.

Sounds like you and your nonprofit are actually an Auntie Yah-Yah?

Yes, I guess you could say that! And I want to show with Jayla's Jaunts that little Black boys and girls can leave their communities, go off and explore, and see the evidence wherever they go—that those like them have been there before and changed the landscape, helped make it what it is. I really want to address the “whitewashing” that often happens when the subject of history comes up—or the “black-out,” whichever way you want to look at it.

I know, right. What I like about the series is that it tells stories that, if they get told at all, they usually only get told for the twenty-eight days in February, during Black History Month. Your stories expand beyond the Black History lesson. So hopefully people who

wouldn't necessarily choose a Black history book for their children will read the series. The illustrations are beautiful. And you use such a kid-friendly voice, it feels like you have what I call the "mommy gene," particularly when the stories explain sensitive subjects. To my point, you even include a controversial word in the book's glossary.

Learning about slavery in February in the classroom has become a cliché, but learning in a pleasure read that Black people have built things, and done things worthy of praise and changed the world in very real and tangible ways—all while taking fun-filled journeys—that's something that children of a variety of ethnicities and ages, as well as their parents, really sink their teeth into. And thank you—my illustrators were really great. My brother illustrated the first book, so he's the creator of the characters visually and he really set the tone.

As for what you call the "mommy gene," well, I've been doing it all my life, so I guess that helps. I was the sister-mama in my household—changing diapers since I was seven, nurturing, mentoring, had the babysitting jobs as a teenager. Youth have always just been there. It's been in the past decade that I've become more involved with youth development on a professional level—trainings, workshops, certifications, and things like that. I also think it starts with love. You just love them as they are and see them as who they can and will be—and you then give as much of yourself and your strengths as you can to help them get there.

And as an educator, I firmly believe that anything can be explained to a child, it just has to be done in an age-appropriate manner—and that's anything ranging from sex to quantum physics. But the topics I cover are mostly social, and let's face it: they're living in this society, so they really are no strangers to the material. I believe the word you're talking about is the N-word. The truth is, Black children hear that word all their lives. Unfortunately, we hear it in our own community and in our own homes often, and then when we leave our communities we often hear it in the way that it has been used throughout the centuries—to strictly dehumanize and degrade. While I don't use the word in the actual text of the book, there are illustrations that are based on historic photographs, and the N-word was written on a Jim Crow-era sign that was depicted. So, since the word was illustrated, though not in the text, I didn't feel it was appropriate to omit it from the glossary.

I applaud you for that, especially now during what I call the 'Huck Finn-ization' of the word. What's been the response to the series?

The response so far has been great. Folks love the concept, and like you said, the illustrations really pop. The parents have given me feedback that it's really important work, and that the educational components are their biggest appeal. The children—and I'm talking from seven-year-olds to teenagers—think it's fun. They like the illustrations, they like the motion as Jayla and her Auntie Yah-Yah zoom here and there, and they like the way Auntie Yah-Yah speaks in rhyme.

Senyah Haynes, Jayla's Jaunts. \$14.95. Discounts available for bulk orders. [Palindrome Global Publishing](#).

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