

Talking Points for *The Color of Lies*

Q: What compelled you to write *The Color of Lies*? Why this particular novel?

A: I wanted to create a woman trying to balance her many roles: single mother of two boys; daughter to an aging and cantankerous father; and teacher in a job that threatens to suck the marrow from her bones. Molly Culpepper is stretched to the breaking point, yet she'd still like to find time for romance in her life. At work, she is obsessed with "saving" J.D. Marshall, a black teen who disrupts her class. The well-behaved Brian Jones is a foil for J.D. Any number of bright black males I taught served as models for Brian. Often these teens are taunted by peers for earning good grades, and they face down that disapproval with great courage and perseverance. Molly's personal struggle with J.D. mirrors the larger struggle of the school system to educate all of its students, regardless of their backgrounds. As a retired teacher, this was a story I had to write. Most teachers have encountered a student like J.D. The kid who presents overwhelming challenges. The one that makes you wonder if you can drag yourself out of bed and go to work in the morning.

Q: What is the novel's setting?

A: Events take place in the fictional town of Alderson, Georgia. The story could take place in almost any small town in the South. The kind of place where you know your neighbors and they are going to tote casseroles to your house when someone passes, and where your neighbors are the usual mix of near-saints and serious sinners. Every town has teachers who become legends like Miss Baker and residents who are quirky characters like Molly's father, Woodson Trask. The saints have their dark sides and the sinners occasionally redeem themselves.

Q: Tell us a little about your writing process. Are you one of these people who outline everything first or do you just write down whatever pops into your head?

A: My writing process is as messy as a two year old turned loose with a box of crayons and a blank wall. I envy writers who outline and then watch their novels progress tidily through one draft with a few minor revisions. I try to outline, but my plot inevitably strays in directions I never foresaw. It took so long to write this story, the world changed on me. The first draft was finished before Barack Obama declared his candidacy for president. When Obama came on the scene, I had to alter some lines of the novel because Molly's student Brian wants to become the first black president. I typed in the line edit to make him aspire to become the second black president, and then my fingers stilled. My internal editor slapped me in the side of my head. I had been handed an opportunity to do more than minor edits. I deepened the racial conflicts and issues explored in the second draft to reflect the deep divisions in our country. The first scene of the novel was one of the last I wrote. During Obama's campaign, incidents of overt prejudice like the ones imagined in the book occurred, a reminder that we may have come a long way toward racial equality in this country, but we still have a long way to go. My daughter's family actually made the Obama campaign sign described in the novel. It was photographed for the Atlanta Constitution.

Q: So is the novel primarily about racial conflict?

A: That's one issue the characters are grappling with. But the characters spend at least as much, if not more time dealing with education issues. In later drafts I deepened the struggles of Alderson to address the failures of the school system. It is a failure our country is grappling with today. I examined research on what was working in formerly failing schools and incorporated those programs into the novel. That said, the novel is not an attempt to prescribe fixes, only to show how difficult it is to build consensus in a community about what must be done. So many groups have to buy into a plan. Teachers and their unions. Parents. Administrators. Community organizations. And the students themselves.

Q: Did you come across any programs that are really working?

A: No one program is the answer though many show potential. Any approach that stands a chance to work long term has to deal with the whole child and the environment he's raised in. Even the highly touted Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) that I mention in the novel is not without problems. About a quarter of all teachers in KIPP schools leave after two years. Burn-out is a real issue. I haven't taught in a KIPP school, but I can tell you there were days when I was teaching in public schools that I thought if I was asked to do one more thing I'd have a nervous breakdown. I think many teachers are approaching that "scream" point. With KIPP and other charter schools, it isn't clear if creaming—taking only students whose parents are involved enough in their child's education to sign pledges or drive them across town—is also a factor in their success. We all know schools need to do more, but how much more we can ask teachers to do without additional resources? Not just money. More human resources like aides to help with grading and maintaining regular contact with parents. More after school and summer programs to help children focus on homework and skill building. Instead, the financial state of our country is forcing schools to try to do more with less.

Q: How much of this story really happened?

A: It's definitely fiction. For example, one of my colleagues had a slip fall down in class, but the main character certainly isn't her, and the incident didn't happen as described in the novel. A boa constrictor was loose in a school where I taught and was slithering around over our heads unbeknownst to us, but the snake never fell through the ceiling—though the ceiling tiles were missing due to rain damage. I did meet a fellow in Wakulla County who has a parking meter by his hot tub, but that is all I know about him. I had a teacher in junior high who reseated the class constantly like Miss Baker, but that's the only thing they had in common. A fiction writer blends bits of the real world in with pure imagination. No real person is a character in my novel. Nor is the town a real place.

Q: Why the title, *The Color of Lies*?

A: I took me a long time with the help of my writing partners to come up with that title. It captures the many levels of deception going on in Molly's personal life, the school, and the community. The title refers to the distinction Molly's mother—and many of our mothers—made between white lies and black lies. Later it evolves along with Molly's perception that lies, like everything else in life, including race, rarely can be categorized neatly. We act shocked when we catch people, especially politicians, lying. But we shouldn't be. Lying is much more pervasive in our culture than we like to admit.

Q: So do you lie?

A: No, of course not.

Q: Is that a lie?

A: I can't tell. My mother might be listening.