



“Jerald Walker’s compilation of short essays is a **BLACK SURVIVAL KIT**. From teaching to taking care of his lawn, Walker provides insight into what can only be called the daily occurrences of blackness. How should one interact around the police? What goes through a father’s mind when his son does not return home on time? Walker writes with honesty and humor. His book in many ways magically measures the many degrees of life.”

—**E. ETHELBERT MILLER**,
writer, activist, and Grammy Nominee

Dear Reader,

Thank you for your interest in *Magically Black and Other Essays*, a collection that largely grapples with questions of racial identity. This grappling began for me at a very young age, as I was raised in a religion—a “cult,” if you will—that had white supremacy and Black inferiority as its core philosophy. When I came to reject this philosophy in my mid-teens, I was determined to discover the true meaning of race, Blackness in particular, a journey expressed here in ways you may on occasion find outrageous and troubling, but mostly, I believe, you will find them empowering and enlightening.



I also believe you will find them entertaining. Ask a random passerby on the street to give one word describing “the essay” and the likely responses will include “boring,” “dry,” “dull,” and “nerdy.” This is for good reason, as too many essays—let’s be honest here—are boring, dry, dull and nerdy. I think this is where my background as a short story writer at the famed Iowa Writers’ Workshop helps to distinguish my essays from

many others. I studied with some of the most accomplished practitioners of the game, including Denis Johnson, Thorn Jones, Debra Eisenberg, and James Alan McPherson. When I made the switch from writing short stories to writing essays, I employed all the elements of craft I learned about what makes for a compelling narrative: conflict; interesting characters; intriguing plots; descriptive prose; timely dialogue; a sense of style, and, in my case, humor. Lots of humor. In other words, I am still a short story writer, the only difference being is that now the stories I write are true.

But why, you might wonder, did I switch from writing fictional stories to true ones? And why are the true stories in this collection worth telling?

I switched to true stories after publishing my first essay in 2006. That essay, “Dragon Slayers,” was a tribute to my mentor, James Alan McPherson, the person who helped me to see the importance of focusing more on the heroism and resiliency of the African American spirit and less on the negative stereotypes about Blacks that I had been first introduced to in my religious cult. Creating a short story out of facts and real events was a creative challenge I found so invigorating that I have never looked back. I chose the topics of these essays because, in terms of racial identity, they are especially grapple-worthy. The title essay “Magically Black,” for example, which is about my first experiences teaching Black literature to predominately white college students, focuses on the culture of survival that Blacks created during slavery and continue to use to this day. The essay “It’s Hard Out Here for a Memoirist” explores the role cinema plays in the fostering of both positive and negative racial stereotypes, while the essay “Lost” looks at complications that arise when Blacks center their humanity over the color of their skin.

I hope you enjoy reading these essays as much as I enjoyed writing them. I hope, too, what you take from this book is an expanded definition of what it means to be Black, a greater understanding of the variety of ways Black identities are formed, and, perhaps most important, a heightened appreciation for the heroism and resiliency that has characterized African Americans since we arrived on these shores.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jerald Walker', written in a cursive style.

Jerald Walker



Here are 8 discussion questions for your book club based on

MAGICALLY BLACK AND OTHER ESSAYS by Jerald Walker

1. How does the title “Magically Black” play into the overall theme and narrative of Jerald Walker’s essays?
2. How does the author’s reminiscences of his youth contrast with his present reality?
3. Can you explain the significance of adding a drop of coffee to the milk in the classroom demonstration and how did this represent the concept of being “magically Black”?
4. What were some varied reactions from the students towards the concept of being “magically Black”?
5. Discuss the significance of humor as a coping mechanism for the author in dealing with uncomfortable situations.
6. How does the author’s interpretation of the novel “Sula” reflect on his views of Black unity and survival tactics?
7. Discuss the theme of betrayal and loyalty in “Sula” and how it parallels the author’s personal experiences and beliefs.
8. Discuss how the setting of the cannabis store mirrors societal changes in the acceptance of marijuana.