

THE QUEEN OF SUGAR HILL

AUTHOR LETTER

Hello!

I am beyond thrilled to present to you *The Queen of Sugar Hill*, a fictionalized story based on the life of one of the women who inspired me for years – Hattie McDaniel.

Like many, I knew of Hattie because of her win as Best Supporting Actress at the 1940 Academy Awards for the role of Mammy in the controversial movie “Gone With the Wind.” The accomplishment of being the first Black person to take home such an honor was historic. The movie – despite backlash then and now, made Hattie a star. But it never opened the doors she dreamed that it would.

As an aspiring actress, I began studying Hattie McDaniel in high school. The more I learned, the more intrigued I became. I was fascinated by her story, which began long before that glamorous night at the Ambassador Hotel where she stood as the only Black woman in the room to accept an Academy Award. As I moved into my career as a journalist and writer (who acted on the side), I put my research of Hattie on the shelf, but she was never far removed from my heart.

Over the past few years, I found myself being drawn to her once again. In fact, she started coming to me at night, telling me she wanted me to tell her story (my mother says I need to stop telling people that before they think I’m crazy)....but so goes the life of a writer. When Hattie’s voice became too loud to silence, I once again dove into her story. I became immersed in the life of Hattie McDaniel.

I found that so much of her story had been distorted over the years. So I traveled across the country, visiting research libraries, her Sugar Hill home and the surrounding neighborhood. I did extensive research – from Hattie’s humble beginnings to her successful blues career to her relocation to Los Angeles.

I spent two years continuously pulling back layers to things I didn’t know. I discovered her role in integration, how she fought to open doors for young Black actors, and her friendship with actors I loved from the Golden Age of Hollywood, like Clark Gable, Bette Davis, Dorothy Dandridge and Lena Horne.

Throughout this process, I felt an interminable connection to Hattie because of her perseverance – in SPITE OF....In spite of criticism from Blacks, who hated her “demeaning” Mammy character. In spite of hatred from whites, who felt Mammy was too sassy. In spite of being pigeonholed into maid, servant and slave roles and nearly 100 unaccredited films. In spite of four failed marriages and never feeling seen. In spite of everything, she forged ahead.

In some ways, she also reminded me of my own grandmother, who embodied so much of who Hattie McDaniel was. We hear all the time about militant women of the past, who changed the world with their aggressive fight for a better future. But there is also a quiet faction of people – like Hattie McDaniel, and my grandmother, Pearly, who fought the injustices bestowed upon them in other ways. Women who worked around Jim Crow laws, who went along to get along, while keeping their eyes on a bigger prize. Women who make the best of the life God had given them and used their positions to make quiet change.

I hope you’ll love Hattie’s story as much as I loved writing it. I feel a special connection to this wonderful woman. In fact, one of my best friends commented that she felt Hattie had taken her place as much as I talked about her like we were old friends. I’d like to think that had we lived in an era together, we would’ve been. I believe she would be pleased with my bringing her story to life. Enjoy!

— ReShonda

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AUTHOR Q&A

1. Can you provide a brief introduction to yourself and your journey as an author?

I have loved making up stories ever since I was a little girl. My mother called it lying. But I had a passion for storytelling. I had my first published piece in a magazine called *True Confessions*. It was supposed to be a true story, but my story "I stole my sister's husband" was completely made up, especially since I was only 15 and my sister was 12. But seeing my words on the page ignited a fire inside me. I got sidetracked after college when I began my career as a television news journalist. In 1999, I decided to return to my love of making up stories and wrote my first book. I self-published it after not being able to get a book deal. The book came out and did so well it caught the attention of an agent who got me a book deal with a major publisher. And the rest was history.

2. When writing about a historical figure how important is it to you to be accurate, and how do you fill in the blanks that are unknown?

As a journalist, I'm trained to unearth the facts. I wanted the foundation to be historically accurate. The fiction came in the things we don't know that fill in the blanks. For example, we know Hattie and her "Gone With the Wind" co-stars went to a club after the Academy Awards and she was denied entry. The fiction comes in showing the reader her feelings, the nuances of that evening. I love sticking to the facts, then allowing my imagination to fill in the blanks.

3. You've written over 53 novels. How has your process changed from book one?

This book is the most challenging that I've ever written. I usually research just to make sure I have situations, careers, etc, correct. This time, even though the book is fiction, I wanted to stay rooted in facts. So I had to do a lot of research to make sure the foundation was there, but oftentimes I would get lost in the research and spend way too much time on that. So that process was definitely different.

4. How did your experience as a TV news anchor and reporter shape you as an author?

I had to learn there is a big difference between writing for TV and writing novels. My first book was 63 pages because I had been trained to write tight. So I had to retrain my brain. I also know a lot about marketing and publicity because I've spent more than 25 years in the news business, so that's helped me when it comes to marketing my book.

5. What advice do you have for aspiring authors, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds?

Good books aren't written, they're rewritten. A lot of aspiring authors get off track because they sit down and try to write books like the books on their shelves. And then when they can't, they get discouraged. If you saw the first draft of my books, you'd think I had some blackmail photos of my publisher. That's because my first draft is usually awful because I'm simply getting the story out, then I go in and work my magic. So that's one thing I would say. The other is you have to understand that writing the book is only half the journey. Writers, especially writers from underrepresented backgrounds, can't take the "If you write it they will come" approach. You have to market your book (and not just wait on a publisher to market for you). Those are just some of my tips.