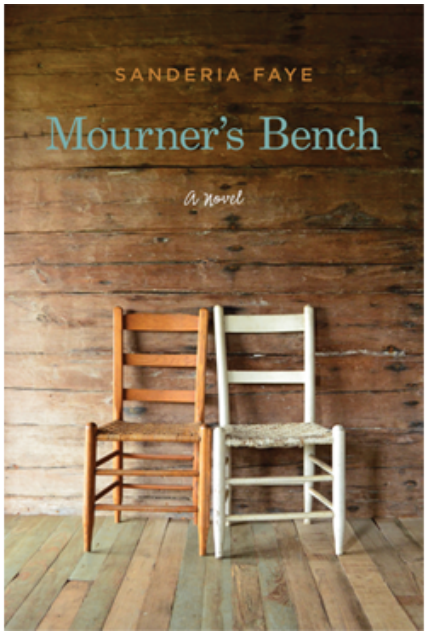
Sanderia Faye: “I’ve Got a Lot of Swimming to Do” [1]

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TW Interview by Levi Cain

Historic Events from a Child’s Eye View

Sanderia Faye’s debut novel *Mourner’s Bench*, published by the University of Arkansas Press this September, casts light on the civil rights movement from an often-forgotten perspective: that of children, especially young girls.



Is her book YA literature—and if not, why not? This and other tricky questions about race, religion, and writing from a child’s point of view were part of the hour-long interview I conducted with Faye by phone this past July.

Sarah Jones, the eight-year-old narrator of *Mourner’s Bench*, isn't too concerned at first with the integration process her small town of Maeby, Arkansas, is hurtling toward in the early 1960s. There are other things to combat, such as being baptized in front of her congregation—sitting on the “mourner’s bench,” where churchgoers dedicate their lives to serving the Lord—and the return of her mother Esther, who in the book’s opening chapter leaves to study art. Sarah remains behind with her grandmother, great-grandmother, and Uncle Robert. When Esther comes back to live with them, the young mother's liberal attitudes scandalize the town—but despite Sarah's best efforts, she's swept into the civil rights movement.

I grew up in a household primarily concerned with African-American history, which drew me to Faye’s book. It seemed familiar: a story of a young black girl coming of age around outspoken women and challenging the education she was receiving. Sarah was someone I’d not previously seen in literature, and I relished our similarities.

Like the heroine of her novel, Faye hails from Arkansas, born and raised in the town of Gould. She’s an engaging older woman with the kind of slight Southern drawl that cloaks you in comfort. A former accountant who currently lives

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in Dallas, Texas, Faye has also worked as a pharmaceutical sales rep and a feature writer for *Houston Sun* and *Newspages* (now known as *Houston Style Magazine*).



She didn’t start out as a novelist, but by the late ‘90s, Faye says she felt “a total emptiness inside.” She began taking Oprah Winfrey’s advice seriously about finding her passion, returning to school at Arizona State University in 1998 to earn her MFA in creative writing. She then moved on to the University of Texas at Dallas, where she's earning a humanities doctorate in aesthetic studies.

It wasn’t easy going back to college, even if it eventually led to the manuscript of her first novel. I can relate. During our wide-ranging conversation, Faye told me she was initially frightened off by the pressure of writer’s block and the question of whether writing can be a viable career:

> The biggest hurdle for me was self-confidence—for me, where I’m from? Writing wasn’t something you did.

This TW interview has been condensed and edited.

Don't miss “We've Got to Move,” [5] an excerpt from *Mourner's Bench* by Sanderia Faye that also appears in TW’s Fall 2015 issue.

***TW*: Before you went back to school, you didn’t write fiction at all. Didn’t it interest you?**

SF: I think I was discouraged from it. I just remember people saying when I was little, “Why does everyone have to die in your stories?” My English teacher in high school suggested I go to school for creative writing, but I had an uncle—a play-uncle, really—who was an accountant, so I thought, “Okay, I’ll do accounting.” I became an auditor—I did sales and marketing. I wrote features about different people. But I stopped doing that when I lived in Phoenix. I went to a career advisor, and she said changing from an accountant to a writer was a complete 180 degrees. She said it was like crossing an ocean. And I said, “Well, I guess I’ve got a lot of swimming to do.”

I decided to write a thirty-page story—thirty pages of fiction was required to apply to Arizona State University—I took my GREs, and I got in. Imagine my surprise! I had no idea what I was applying for. I just knew that, as a black woman, if I wanted to write, I needed some credentials.

***TW:* What was your fiction piece about? The one you submitted for your program?**

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SF: Right around page 248 of *Mourner’s Bench*, there’s a part where Sarah and Malika go out to the countryside to get women to register to vote. That’s what my first thirty pages were about.

TW: **Was Sarah your most fleshed-out character? Did you always know you wanted to write a book about her?**

SF: She was always the narrator. Maybe *To Kill a Mockingbird* was engrained in my head. I’ve read it several times—but her voice was always so strong, so clear, hers and the granny’s. The most challenging character was Esther. Her voice was very silent. I remember the University of Arkansas Press editor looking at my manuscript and saying, “Well, she definitely has something to say, but she’s not saying it.” After I got the contract, Esther finally started talking, and I was like, “Well, thank you!”

I don’t think this will sound strange to other writers, but I do hear the voices of my characters very clearly, as if they were talking to me. Even when they’re silent, I hear them. Until she decided to speak up, I had pages where Esther connected the story together. She’s the glue.

TW: **Esther is definitely a very strong, driving force. Even when she’s not in the room, everyone’s always talking about her.**

SF: I’m glad she decided to talk. I actually almost decided to cut her out because I thought I was trying to tell too many stories at once—I almost cut her and Robert.

TW: Robert? No! [laughs] I loved him!

SF: Yes! [laughs]

TW: **How did you get the story to come together, though?**

SF: I did the draft before I did the research, and I think that’s a part of how I’ll always write. I didn’t want it to seem like a scholarly book. It’s a novel. I wanted people to be able to absorb themselves in it. I wanted enough reality for people to probe and ask more questions, but I didn’t want them taken out of the story.

TW: **Did you want it to be less of a scholarly book so you’d have more room for the characters?**

SF: Exactly. But I’m thankful the University of Arkansas Press treated it like an academic book. So, it’s actually been peer reviewed, and with one of the reviewers, a historian, I could tell by the questions he sent back to me he really must’ve known Arkansas history and Arkansas civil rights. I was happy about that, but I do get scared when I think about scholars reading it.

TW**: Although Maeby is a fictional place, it resembles real towns like Pine Bluff and Little Rock. Is there a reason for that?**

SF: I wanted to write about Arkansas—I’m from there, and I will always write about there, it seems. When I started out, I just wanted to write love stories like Danielle Steele. She was my hero! Then I started reading more books by African-American writers, and I thought, “If I’m gonna be part of this profession, I want to have a serious voice.” If I didn’t write these stories, I don’t know who would. That was information I received from Toni Morrison, when she was doing a book signing for *Paradise* at the Northern Arizona Book Festival in 1998. I asked her, “Should African Americans write African-American stories?” And she said, “If you don’t, who will?”

TW: **Maeby’s quite poor. Do you think poor, smaller towns like this get passed by?**

SF: I’d read a lot of books where white people come in and save the town—I didn’t want that. I wanted the characters to take full responsibility for their town. And I wasn’t really writing about men. That was very important to me, to put women in a role where people could see what they’d done for this country.

TW: **The town isn’t too happy about integration. They also seem like they’re opposing it in order to help**

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Sarah.

SF: Sarah is a child of the community, since she’s born out of wedlock. They don’t want her to have to do the things they did. They don’t want her to go to the cotton fields. She’s been put in adult situations, but she’s a kid. She mimics the adults.

TW: **Do you think that was true of mostly black towns at the time? That they didn’t want to force integration and were more into “separate but equal”?**

SF: This was my original impression of the civil rights movement: All black people wanted it, were up for change, everyone worked toward it. And then I realized it wasn’t the case. I just imagined that these things happened everywhere, like everybody was just singing “Kumbaya.” I had to investigate more as a writer and do more research, about rights for sharecroppers, the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, the civil rights movement. For all those generations, there’s been unrest.

TW: **I thought it was really interesting that you portrayed the church as a source of anxiety.**

SF: In that respect, I think Esther was right—Sarah was too young. At eight years old, can you really understand religion? The anxiety over her losing her religion, of her being baptized, it was making Sarah sick. The church can be difficult to understand—I don’t know that I understand it now [laughs]. You know, I talked to my mom recently, and she told me they don’t sit on the mourner’s bench anymore.

TW: **So the mourner’s bench is real?**

SF: That went on in churches forever, and probably still goes on in churches now. You have to sit on the bench and pray for forgiveness of your sins. I remember doing it, but it wasn’t a stressful thing. It’s like a rite of passage. But I wanted to show both sides of what could cause Sarah stress—both the civil rights movement and the church—and that it was adults deciding everything. In my story, it was the child being put on the front lines.

TW: **You mentioned Toni Morrison earlier. Did she inspire you to become a serious writer?**

SF: When she spoke at Northern Arizona State, her publicist told me, “You only have a second to say hi.” Toni Morrison was sitting, and I stooped. She asked me several questions, and the publicist said, “Move on”—and Morrison gave the publicist this look I’ve seen my grandmother do. At the time, I didn’t know how important that was, that she would take the time to talk to me.

But it was actually Maya Angelou who inspired me. She was from Arkansas, and she wrote from a girl’s point of view. Every time I thought about quitting, it was her I thought of. I dedicated the book to her and my great-grandmother. That’s how much influence Maya Angelou had on me to stay the course. It was her that I looked to when I thought about applying to the MFA program, when I changed careers, when I didn’t think it was going to happen. I didn’t even know her, but I would look to Angelou and think, “A woman like me, from Arkansas, wrote a book.” I figured I could as well. Her, Toni Morrison, Harper Lee—they inspired me, because it can be difficult for a young character to carry a book on her own.

TW: **Sarah’s quite young, but this isn’t a children’s book, right?**

SF: It’s marketed as adult lit because it’s concerned with things children don’t usually think about. But there were kids involved in civil rights, and they were right in the middle of the war. People are talking about the Black Lives Matter movement now and asking each other, “Should you take your child to these events so they can witness history and see what’s going on? Or should you let them read it in books?” I believe if I had a child, I would take them. I believe it forms you as a person.

TW: **So, is *Mourner’s Bench* a response to current events?**

SF: No, because I started this book in 1998. But someone from the press asked me, “Why is this book relevant?,” and

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I was surprised. There was never a time when civil rights for African Americans wasn’t relevant. We always have been in the forefront of the civil rights movement, whether we’re fighting publically or privately. To have the movement be so public now—I’m honored to have a voice. I did have a dedication page for #blacklivesmatter, because I wanted to say that black lives do matter. And I wanted to give a nod to the people who are doing the work right now.

TW: **Do you have any advice for young writers—especially young female writers?**

SF: As women, we have to believe in ourselves and just keep going. I don’t think this writing thing is easy—it’s definitely not easy, but it’s doable. There are a lot of people who may think they can’t use their vernacular, but I wrote about a small town in Arkansas, and I wrote in my vernacular. I wrote about poor people—and not to make them feel sad, like, “Oh, poor little poor people with no money.”

That’s not the spirit of poor people. They work hard, and they believe. They want their children to have better. That’s what I was trying to say with this book. We’re resilient folks. We’re resilient as a people. Every time we have to move ahead, we have to recreate ourselves and move in a new direction, but we do that, and we do survive, and we show up—and we look beautiful when we do.

For more information, see the University of Arkansas Press page *[6] for* Mourner's Bench *and* Sanderia Faye's website *[7].*

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