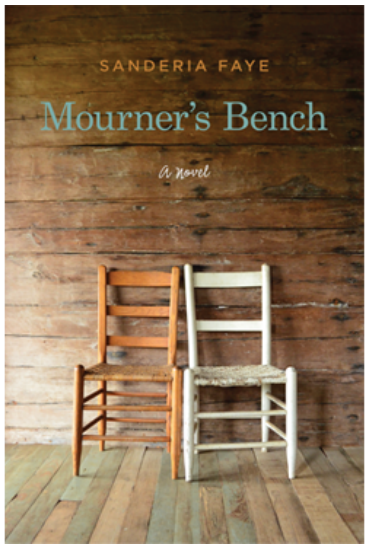
We’ve Got to Move **[1]**

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Novel Excerpt by Sanderia Faye

Chapter One from *Mourner's Bench*

Editor's Note: We're pleased to include the opening chapter of Sanderia Faye's *Mourner's Bench* in the TW Reading Series. This powerhouse first novel was published by the University of Arkansas Press in September 2015. As writer Dennis Lehane praises it on the press's website:



With *Mourner’s Bench*, Sanderia Faye announces herself as a bold, at times intoxicating, original voice in American fiction. This is a stunning debut.

Set in the early 1960s in fictional Maeby, Arkansas, *Mourner's Bench* takes places against the backdrop of the civil rights movement. Eight-year-old Sarah Jones is the narrator of a story in which she's caught between the traditional life she’s grown accustomed to and the new world integration will give her.

This chapter has been reprinted with permission from the author and publisher. For more about *Mourner's Bench*, see the University of Arkansas Press page. [5]

Don't miss "Sanderia Faye: 'I've Got a Lot of Swimming to Do.'" [6] an interview with the author by Imaani Cain that also appears in TW's Fall 2015 issue.

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Indoor plumbing was the last significant change in Maeby, Arkansas, before my mama left town. For as long as I could remember, my family and other colored folks kept our pigs, chickens, cows and all other animals in our backyards, and a little further back, a ways from the gardens, sat the outhouses. The all-white city council threatened to take the animals away from us if we didn't clean up our yards and do something about that horrific smell. We didn't pay them no mind, talked about it after they drove off in their city cars. Reverend Jefferson may have brought it up in one of his sermons, but generally, we went on back to minding our business and so did they until the next time they felt up to performing their civic duties.

Then one day the city council members decided to make good on their promises. They bucked up and passed an ordinance that required us to remove all the farm animals outside of the city limits, and to get it done in no time flat. Just for the sake of it, they told us that we must tear the toilets out of the outhouses and replace them with flushable ones. All the grown folks were in a huff about it, especially over the toilets, but since I'd never seen or heard of one, I reserved my passion for when I would know what I was getting upset about.

I thought about the girl, Ruby Bridges, who Esther said was around my age. She was making plans to integrate the elementary school in New Orleans. I imagined her mama pressing the pleats in her dress over and over again but never able to get them to lie straight. And the boys and girls at Central High School who should be near graduating by now, but still wasn't able to fit in like they did at the colored school. I heard one girl couldn't take it any longer and walked out on the others. I would never do that. Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. crossed my mind. He led the civil rights movement throughout the South. Esther told me stories about how she planned to join up with them one day. According to Esther, colored folks won the right to sit at the front of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama. They chose to walk to work instead of ride the bus for 381 days. With all the protesting going on throughout the country, we, the folks in our town, except for Esther and a few others, were more worried about our toilets and farm animals than integrating schools and demanding equal rights.

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Esther, who never agreed with anybody, sided with the white folks. She never stopped complaining about how funky the animals smelled. She was always holding her breath or pinching her nose. Said we should live more like people in the big cities like Chicago and New York. She strutted around the house like a cutting horse with her thick, black ponytail resting on her butt calling us all country bumpkins.

"Just 'cause you sneak over to Sister Tucker's store and watch that TV and read newspapers from Chicago and New York don't make you no better than us," Muhdea said.

"I read the ones from Washington, DC, too," Esther said, which started an ongoing argument between them.

"You wouldn't have so much to complain about if you kept your head in the Bible instead of in the ways of the world," Muhdea said.

Muhdea shook her head as if she felt sorry for her, and I didn't know which one of them to side with. When Esther tried to pull me too far into their argument, Granny would beckon and send me to get her spit cup or some other trivial item. When I returned, they would be working in unison as if not only a few minutes before they'd been heated at each other. When Esther turned her attention to me, she made up stories after reading the encyclopedia, the newspapers and the Bible and told them to me. "One day we're going to travel the world to continents like Africa and the North Atlantic," she said.

When my grandmama, whose name was Mozelle, but we called her Muhdea, short for Mother Dear, and my great-grandmama Granny weren't around, she pinned the hem of her dress above her knee with straight pins and painted her lips with red food coloring. I eyed her like a mother hen watched her baby chicks. She was prettier than every girl I ever seen, even the ones on TV. Sometimes she sat me across her ankles, legs stretched halfway across the floor, and lifted me up as if I was on a seesaw. During those infrequent fun times, she tried to teach me to call her Mama, but every time she said "Mama," I called her "Esther" till she finally looked as if it wasn't fun to her any longer and scooted me onto the floor. In some ways, she favored Muhdea, dark complexion, full lips, and in others, she featured Granny and her Cherokee heritage, high cheekbones, long legs and funny-colored eyes. All put together, she didn't look or act like the rest of us even though Muhdea said she was homely 'cause she hadn't filled out yet. "Never seen a girl so flat after she done give birth," Muhdea said. Granny wasn't filled out and neither was I, "rail thin," Granny called me, but it would take three truckloads to haul Muhdea's hips. I was the spitting image of Granny, "as if Esther didn't have nothing to do with it," folks said.

When the council members came around, they couldn't believe we hadn't caught TB or some other incurable disease. They shook their heads when they saw the maggots in the toilet as if they never seen them the last time they came around. Muhdea wondered why would they go sticking their nose in there every time as if it would change just 'cause they didn't like it. Weren't nothing in there any of their business anyway. Mr. Sam Ray Blackburn, the white owner of the dry goods store on our side of town, held his breath and cussed at us.

"Damn crying shame," he said. He pinched his nostrils together after his breath gave out. "Can't y'all smell this shit?"

Folks rolled their eyes at him but remained quiet for fear of a night in jail. Esther might've said whatever she pleased to us, but when the white men came, she was on our side. She sashayed up to them and held her nose as if they were the ones who smelled, and without saying a word, she turned and switched away. Lord knows she could switch her small hips from side to side, and her thick black ponytail bounced back and forth. Granny adjusted her toothbrush every time she saw Esther switching and told her it was what got her in trouble in the first place.

"What trouble?" I said.

"Not the kind you need to know nothing about," Granny said.

It was after I heard them tell me so many times what I couldn't know that I started keeping a list of things I wanted to find out. I wrote so many pages that I started keeping them in a notebook. *Why did switching get Esther in trouble?* was my first question.

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Whenever the white men came around to warn us about the smell, over the next few weeks, some cow, or pig, or good laying hen came up missing. We locked the livestock up tight at night but that didn't help. Granny said the men only came around to scope out whose animals were the best to come back later and steal them. Some of the colored ladies who cleaned for the white people saw their very own pigs slaughtered and cleaned in the their backyard. They were certain some of the meat ended up at Mr. Sam Ray Blackburn's store and was sold back to us.

"They might as well take them when they come over here," Esther said. "There ain't one thing any one of us can do to stop them."

"Well, it's the principle," Muhdea said.

"Ain't no principle in stealing," Granny said.

I paid close attention to the three of them all the time. Close enough to know I didn't understand them at all. They never agreed, but then again they did. Granny was the one I mimicked the most, the one I wanted to be just like. I believed she sat on the right-hand side of God and He whispered in her ear. I learned not to mimic Esther as much though. One day Granny caught me in the bedroom mirror trying to move my tail from side to side like Esther, and she slapped me in the back of the head, not hard, but hard enough.

"Sarah! Don't let me catch you doing that no more," she said.

I just about jumped up to the ceiling. "I ain't doing nothing," I said.

"Just don't do it no more," she said. "'Fore you end up like your mama." She hit the back of my head again. "Listen to your Granny if you want to stay out of trouble."

I wasn't trying to disobey her; I only wanted to know why Esther got into so much trouble. As far as I could tell, my hips didn't stick out as far as hers yet, and my hair refused to cooperate. I attributed my hair's behavior to the head full of plaits and the array of colored rubber bands twisted at the end of each one of them. I watched Granny, Muhdea and Esther as if I was an outsider. They wouldn't allow me into their trio, not yet anyway. So I stayed quiet and out of their way. I could see and hear them but they didn't hear or see me.

Then after a couple of weeks of disappearing hogs, chickens and cows, we went on back to living as if nothing had happened. We pitched in and helped replace whatever they took to whomever they took it from. Then five or six months later, some other white person would be offended by the smell, and the white men would show up on our side of town again.

Esther and Uncle Robert were always someplace where they didn't have any business, hardheaded, disobedient, contrary. Folks said he was a tall, cool drink of water. Uncle Robert wasn't our blood relative. Muhdea took him in when he was a boy like she did with other kids. Some lasted and some didn't, but Uncle Robert stayed. Granny said he minded her better than Esther did but he was headstrong, and 'cause of that, he would learn plenty of lessons in life. I figured learning was a good thing, so it was okay to pattern myself after his behavior.

One day Esther was up there lurking around the combined jailhouse, utility house and city hall being disobedient. She was probably on some mission for our town activist, Mrs. Carrie Dilworth, Maeby's own version of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., but Granny said she was nobody's reverend. Granny tolerated her from time to time, but they weren't friends and nobody knew the reason why. Anyway, Esther overheard the city council pass ordinances that would require us to get our side of town up to code by the end of the summer, which meant removing all animals except housepets out of the city limits and upgrading to flushable toilets, either outside or inside the home didn't matter except they must flush.

Esther was out of breath when she got home and told us about it. Muhdea got ahold of the pastor of the First Baptist Church, Reverend Jefferson, and he put the word out to meet at the church at seven o'clock sharp.

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"Make sure at least one person from every household, and each church denomination, Baptist, Methodist, Protestant, Jehovah Witness and Pentecostal, meet with us. If what Esther heard is true, we ain't got much time if we going to get all this done before revival," he said.

Esther gave the papers to Reverend Jefferson, and he took the copies as if he was the one who stole them from the city hall. Mrs. Carrie reminded everybody that Esther risked life and limb to get the papers.

"We should be proud of her," she said. "The least they would've done to her if they caught her would be to lock her up for God knows how long."

Mrs. Carrie talked slow and deliberate. She spoke to children and grown folks in the same manner, which was trying on me. It would be easy for me to fall asleep halfway through one of her sentences if I hadn't been taught to respect my elders. She and Granny looked so much alike they could've been first cousins. They were about the same height, but Mrs. Carrie's face and body were wider, and she wore her hair pulled straight back while Granny wore hers with a part down the middle and plaited on each side of her head. Mrs. Carrie spoke before the meeting started for she wouldn't be allowed to voice her opinion during a church meeting. Neither Esther nor Granny cared for that rule, but Reverend Jefferson was pretty good at running all other church business so Granny overlooked it, but Esther let her voice be heard whether anybody was listening or not.

Reverend Jefferson called the meeting to order. He stood at the podium in the pulpit still wearing his overalls. He rubbed his work-beaten hands across his face and head. The other preachers, including the jackleg ones like Mr. Stith, sat in the chairs behind him, except for the one female preacher, Miss Ora Bea, who sat on the front pew next to the mothers of the church. Reverend Jefferson began the service by reading a scripture from the Bible and delivering a prayer. Then he opened the meeting. "Well," he said. "It's good we know in advance. We knew that this day was coming and now it's upon us."

It was the first time I'd seen grown folks in church wearing their work clothes instead of their Sunday-go-to-meeting ones, and all of us kids were still wearing our play clothes. The deacons prayed.

It seemed like regular church, but nobody preached and the choir didn't sing. Reverend Jefferson told us what to do in the same manner as he gave us orders from the Bible.

"First, I need everybody to make a list of the type and number of animals that need to be moved. Second, whoever got room on they farm to house some of these animals give your name to Reverend Stith and let him know what type and how many you can hold."

By the time he was done, most of the deacons had instructions to come to church on Sunday with a compiled list including carpenters who had free time, where to go for supplies for the toilets, trucks for hauling and everything else Reverend Jefferson and the men could think of.

"You know where to find me if we missed anything," he said. He began his speech to close the doors of the church but then he stopped right after he got started. He scratched the deep wrinkles his forehead. "Go on 'bout your business as usual," he said. "Don't let on we heard nothing. They want us to be caught off guard. They want your livestock. We don't want to lose as much as a chicken with this move. Now, the one thing we not going to do is forget the Sabbath. We will continue to keep it holy."

The church clapped, and "Amen" roared through the crowd. Reverend Jefferson said a closing prayer and dismissed us.

Every preacher and deacon present struggled with at least two or three lists they were responsible for compiling by Sunday. During the week, there weren't very many men in town. All able-bodied men were off working, laying highways or putting up big office buildings throughout Arkansas and as far away as Georgia. The ones like my granddaddy, who was a foreman for the colored highway crew, worked all over Arkansas and were able to come home every weekend. Some of the others could only get home once a month, if that.

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When the men were home, we made it nice for them, cooking, ironing, behaving, drawing bath water, and even Esther wore her dresses below the knee instead of pinned up. Miss Ora Bea and Mrs. Carrie were the exception. They weren't respectful of the way we treated the men. They gave them lip on any day of the week, and insisted on never taking a backseat. I didn't know what seat Mrs. Carrie took at the Methodist Church, but at First Baptist Miss Ora Bea sat right on the pew next to the mothers. She might've called herself a preacher, but nobody else in town referred to her as reverend or pastor like they did Mr. Stith and the other men. I liked her though, and she knew her Bible. Granny said so and she liked her too. I believed Esther wanted to pattern herself after Miss Ora Bea and Mrs. Carrie but she wasn't old enough yet.

Uncle Robert gave Esther half of his lists to complete. It was reported that the other men shared their lists with the women as well. No way we could get it all done unless everybody helped out. I followed Uncle Robert around while he worked on his list. He was always in town on account of his illness. He didn't look sick most of the time, but he did take to his bed on occasion when he didn't take his medicine. They called his illness "Sugar." It was the kind folks didn't say out loud like when Granny called me to bring her the sugar for the cake, the tea, the Kool-Aid. When they talked about Uncle Robert's "Sugar," they whispered in each other's ear as if his "Sugar" was a secret. He preferred to act as if he were as healthy and strapping as the men who went off to work, and that's how I treated him except for them occasions when he took to his bed, and then I waited on him hand and foot. Orange juice seemed to make him feel much better.

Mr. Stith gathered up the lists and Reverend Jefferson gave every household their marching orders. He requested that the men come home every weekend till all the work was done. Their biggest project was the toilets. The men could start cutting down trees and preparing and treating the wood, but they needed to be careful, put everything away, and they couldn't be caught taking or bringing nothing from the country till we got the word from the city council. He didn't want the white folks to catch on to our plans like we did theirs, so the other preachers needed to make sure they didn't have any tattlers in their mix. He told the owners of the juke joints to keep their customers in line, and he gave Bro Hollin instructions to keep an eye out for his field hands and the folks who didn't go to church or to the juke joints like him. We were going to meet every Sunday after church service, Christians and sinners alike till we got the job done.

"Reverend Stith got the major list," he said. "Y'all check in with him regularly. We moving a few animals at night, little by little, so nobody will notice it."

I was with Esther when she met with Mrs. Carrie and Reverend Jefferson on Back Street, in front of Mrs. Carrie's house. They didn't believe he should start moving any animals to the country.

"We can win this in court," Mrs. Carrie said. "These ordinances they passed are illegal."

Reverend Jefferson disagreed with her. "Whenever this go down, Carrie," he said, "you do what you have to do, but I ain't risking the little bit these folks got over your shenanigans."

Mrs. Carrie protested. Esther wasn't allowed to talk back to her elders. In the end, he walked on down the road and left Mrs. Carrie in the middle of her sentence.

We got the word from the white people a few weeks later. Most of the folks had complied with Reverend Jefferson's orders. When the city council summoned Reverend Jefferson, Mr. Stith and a few other preachers to a meeting, they put on their Sunday-go-to-meeting suits, walked uptown together, and brought back the orders from the council to us.

Mrs. Carrie rustled up a few folks from the low end of town to protest the ordinances, including Esther, Miss Ora Bea and Bro Hollin. While we were obeying Reverend Jefferson and the white masters, she sought the advice of an NAACP lawyer. I reminded myself to look up NAACP in the encyclopedia.

"Mrs. Carrie, me and the others going to picket at the city hall," Esther said. She stood in the middle of the living room floor, right after supper, and said it as if she were delivering the church announcements. "Will you join us, Robert?"

"You can't be sure how your plans will turn out," he said. "There's a lot of physical work to be done and only a few men around here to do it. I want to support you and I want you to win, but just in case you don't, I wouldn't feel right if

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I stood by while folks lose all their belongings."

Esther flung her head around before she walked out the door and said, "I can't believe you, Robert. For real."

The following day every man, woman and child got to work doing whatever they could, laboring day and night to finish the projects. I ran back and forth helping everybody. By now, I could hammer a straight nail as good as anybody else. I worked alongside Granny most of the time unless Muhdea or Uncle Robert needed me. I rounded up the animals and put them in the cages we built out of chicken wire. Uncle Robert rode on the back of the trucks with the men, and they transported the animals to the farms. While we were running around fixing toilets and moving livestock, Esther switched out the door and said she was going to the city hall. Muhdea and Granny both shook their heads. Like Uncle Robert, I knew my place was to help Granny and Muhdea, but I sure did want to know what it meant to picket the city hall. It wasn't unusual for Esther not to take me with her. She never did for me what I saw other mamas do for their kids. Granny combed my hair, laid out my clothes, and chastised me.

Then a few weeks later, out of the blue, Esther announced that she was leaving town on the Continental Trailways bus. "I got an art scholarship," she said. We were all at the table eating breakfast, getting ready for another long day's work.

Uncle Robert wasn't surprised, and he said as much. "I knew it. You always been a good artist," he said. "I'm proud of you."

Esther was always drawing and painting pictures that looked like us. She painted the stained-glass windows at the church. Her other seven sisters lived in Kansas City. She was the only one who never left town. Granny shook her head as she always did when it came to Esther. Muhdea left out the back screen door and slammed it behind her. Esther had better be careful. Slamming doors wasn't a good sign.

That night as she packed her suitcase Esther told me she was leaving the next morning. "I'm doing this for us. I won't be gone long," she said. "You understand?"

"I guess," I said, but I didn't know why she was leaving when we still had so much work to do, or why she was explaining it to me. She finished packing, and we walked to the living room, where Muhdea lit into her.

"I know it's more to it than what you letting on," Muhdea said. "Robert, what you know about this?"

He tried to explain that Esther had been applying to art colleges ever since she graduated from high school. "Ain't nothing here for her. You have to let her go."

The next morning Muhdea came into the kitchen and told me to come with her. "We walking your mama up to the highway."

We all went, Esther, Muhdea, Granny, Uncle Robert and me. Uncle Robert carried Esther's brown-striped suitcase. We crossed the churchyard and took the trail between Mr. Buddy's and Mr. Matthew's white houses. We passed by the city hall on our way to Highway 65. Esther stopped to say goodbye to Mrs. Carrie and the four other folks who were walking around in a circle carrying signs with slogans written on them. Miss Ora Bea said a prayer for Esther. Bro Hollin wished her well. He told her not to take any wooden nickels. It was my first time seeing the other man and woman, and nobody introduced them to me. Both of them told Esther she made the right decision.

As we walked away, they waved at Esther for a good while. I read a couple of the signs aloud: "Livestock deserve equal rights," and "Our animals are our pets too."

"Are they picketing city hall?" I said. "Is carrying a sign all it is to it?"

"No," Esther said. "It's more meaning to it than what you can see but I don't have time to explain it now. Robert, will you tell her for me later?"

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We walked with Esther on up to the highway. We waited a while before we saw the bus speeding toward us. When Esther and Uncle Robert saw it coming, they flagged it down. The man in uniform pulled over to the side of the highway, got off the bus, took Esther's suitcase, and placed it in the luggage compartment. She held my face between her hands and placed her nose close to it. Her eyes were big, and today they were a grayish blue and light brown. They changed colors all the time. She smelled like lavender. I couldn't recall ever being that close to her.

"Be good, Sarah, till I come back and get you," she said and kissed me on the lips. I wondered why she acted so sappy with me. "Don't forget me, and don't believe everything Muhdea and Granny tell you. Go to Robert when you have a question."

I watched her as she got on the bus, waved to us, and blew kisses as the bus pulled out onto the highway. We never kissed or blew kisses before, and acting sappy out in public was uncalled for.

"Your mama always got to show out," Muhdea said when we turned back toward home.

"Well, we'll miss her," Granny said. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hands.

"We sure will," Uncle Robert said. He placed his hand on my shoulder. "Alright, Sarah?"

Granny caught hold of my hand and squeezed it. "Sarah be just fine," she said.

I looked up at Uncle Robert and told him as if he didn't hear her. "Granny said I'll be just fine."

At church that Sunday, Muhdea told Reverend Jefferson Esther had left town. "We put her on the bus yesterday." He already knew.

"We'll add her name to the prayer list at every service," he said. "Don't you worry, sister, God will watch over her and keep her safe. She resilient likes the rest of us folks. We fall down but we gets up. For show. We resilient folks."

The only services where they didn't call Esther's name for prayer were Baptist Training Union and Wednesday-night Bible Study. I reckoned she would be alright 'cause the whole church prayed for her at eight services per week, and we prayed at home too. I figured the church members who always laid hands on Esther and me, prayed to God to relieve us of our sins and sprinkled us with holy water most every time they saw us, would continue to bless me and lay hands on me even though Esther was gone.

By the time we finished constructing toilets and herding livestock like the men on the TV show *Rawhide*, it was almost time for revival. We didn't lose even a chicken, as Reverend Jefferson prophesized. White folks said they could finally tell the smell of our town from that of the paper mill. We moved the last of the pigs to the farm the day before revival started that August 1959, which was a blessing 'cause whether we finished or not, all things except the Lord's work came to a complete halt during revival.

I admired the new commode in our outhouse. We started calling it a restroom and began using store-bought tissue instead of newspapers and brown paper sacks. A few weeks after revival, the white people held a parade in honor of the clean fresh smell in the air. In time, the parade turned into the annual Turtle Derby and people gathered from all over the state to our fairgrounds to watch and bet their money on painted turtle races.

Art Information

- "Filming High School Classes" (Little Rock, Arkansas, 1958) by Thomas O'Halloran; courtesy U.S. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Catalog.

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Sanderia Faye was born and raised in Gould, Arkansas. She is the author of *Mourner’s Bench* (University of Arkansas Press, 2015). Her work has appeared in various literary journals and in *Arsnick: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Arkansas*, edited by historians Jennifer Wallach and John Kirk. Faye moderated a 2015 AWP panel and the grassroots panel for the Arkansas Civil Rights Symposium during the Freedom Riders 50th Anniversary. She is a recipient of awards, residencies, and fellowships from Hurston/Wright Writers Conference, Eckerd College’s Writers in Paradise Conference, Callaloo Writers Workshop, among others.

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