
A Study in Character: Dedra Johnson on the "Real" Voice in Fiction



A nine-year-old girl wakes up on the morning she is to leave her mother's New Orleans home. Sandrine Miller will spend the summer with her father, and she will visit her grandmother - who she adores most of all; who lets her bring the collard greens in from the garden, teaches her to make jam, takes her to the library for more of the books she loves. Sandrine can already feel the strength in her grandmother's fingers as she works cornrows into her hair. Even so, anxiety dilutes Sandrine's excitement. Will her mother discover her? She is standing on a stool, wiping down the tops of the kitchen cabinets, early, before her mother (Sandrine hopes) is awake, righting an oversight, that, if caught, would be considered a grave one. Will her mother keep Sandrine in New Orleans as punishment?

"I stopped in the doorway, my clothes for the drive still on the floor where they had fallen off when Mama picked up the suitcases; I tucked the clothes under my arm. 'You keep your mouth shut. He asks you about me or this house you just say 'fine,' hear me?' When I left, she was muttering, 'He don't want to live with me, he don't get to know what goes on in my goddamn house...'" (Pg. 3)

So begins "Sandrine's Letter to Tomorrow," Dedra Johnson's impeccable first novel; hopeful and hurtful by turns, where reader and narrator walk together along a path of prose that wends its way through Sandrine's troubling childhood.

Through Sandrine we encounter the quandaries of adult authority, explore the specter of loneliness, and observe unusual resilience in the face of trouble, all of which compels us to examine questions of responsibility: of adults to children, of children to themselves, of readers to the characters they learn to love.

"Mama cooked breakfast every morning before work and I ate just enough to stop the pains in my stomach. Soon I'd be eating biscuits and grits and hard-rind bacon and homemade jelly every morning for the rest of my life. In church on Sunday I stood, kneeled, said words without thinking about them until it was time to go home and even though I usually couldn't wait for Lent each year because once a week our class did the Stations of the Cross and I could look at the stained-glass windows showing the Mysteries up close, the paper-white Jesus, the drops of blood, Mary's face turned up to heaven, begging God to save her son just for her, no other reason, just because she loved Him and wanted Him, I didn't even glance at the windows and didn't care about any of it. (Pgs. 67 - 68)"

We come to know Sandrine as we know the interior angles of our own assumptions. Yet we also know her as we know the child who sits beside our son at school, the girl we see, day in and day out, at the library — the one we caught once out on the sidewalk admonishing her sister. Dedra Johnson has affected a difficult, disconcerting, yet delicious writerly effect: the unreliable narrator. Sandrine tells us what's happening, accurately renders her encounters, but does so in a voice that reflects a child's vision of the world. It is us, Dedra Johnson's readers, who recognize another layer of meaning: we know Sandrine's challenges should not be hers to face alone. Thus we are bound to her, and to each other, by our concern. Will anyone step in? Are we the ones who must do our best to help?

It is in this way we recognize the power of fiction — that it compels us to care for those who are, in fact, imagined, that it shows us the most difficult things and makes it possible to look. Fiction is a window through which we view the experience of others, those whose lives may be different from our own, but who we are drawn to through the fact of our mutual humanity. It is this gift that Dedra Johnson gives her readers: a character that elicits our compassion, who reminds us that that the power for change lies in what draws us beyond the borders of the self. — Carlin M. Wragg, Editor

Note: This transcript has been slightly modified to enhance readability.



Dedra Johnson: [Reads *Sandrine's Letter to Tomorrow*, Part One, pages 3 - 6.]

Carlin M. Wragg: So we've met our main character, Sandrine Miller, the heroine of the book. You also mention a number of other characters, especially in the photograph. It seems like Sandrine is surrounded by family and adults, yet we learn as the book goes on that she's very alone. I'm curious about how you developed this character and set her into this family.

DJ: I think I pulled together a lot of different elements. As I started writing about her, I did determine that she was this "alone child." She was surrounded by adults, but no one really helped her — she was really very much on her own. As I realized this about her it became clearer who the adults were, and what their behavior was like.

It was important to have her somewhat isolated from adults so that there were things she didn't understand completely. There were so many things she had to learn for herself, so many things she had to do for herself, and that made it possible for her to be the narrator, and to be the center of the story at such a young age.

CMW: She's waiting for her father to come collect her for a summer trip, and she's looking forward to it because, hopefully, she'll be seeing her grandmother, Mamalita. Now, events don't really play out the way she anticipates and she finds herself looking fondly back on her life at home with her mother, which we know is not an ideal situation. What did you feel about the mother in this book, about what she brought to her daughter and what she kept away from her?

DJ: In the first draft, I think I didn't understand her very well. I remember her portrayal being much more one-dimensional. And then, as I thought of her — I had to think of her while writing — I had to think of her as a wounded person, I couldn't think of her as someone who intentionally did the things that she did because she meant to be a mean person, or because she meant to be bad; she was just a wounded person, repeating things, not knowing enough, not thinking things through well enough, living a very selfish life as far as her child was concerned.

I really had to keep in mind that she was a wounded individual, otherwise it was easy to completely villainize her because she is just an awful parent in

many ways. I really had to keep that in mind and always think about her in terms of her place in her own family, and her own history, so I remembered

that though she is in control of her behavior, she's not really responsible for it, or she can't be held fully responsible for it.

CMW: As you got to know her did you have more sympathy for her?

DJ: Yes. And I needed that sympathy for her because writing it from Sandrine's perspective —

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you know Sandrine just ends up on the bad end of a lot of what Shirleen has to offer, and it's not all that Shirleen is — the only way I could make her a proper character was to keep that kind of sympathy for her in mind at all times.

A lot of times, when I was revising, I had to keep that in mind and really look at how she behaved in a scene, or what she did in a scene, and I would change things in large ways, or very small ways, so that I at least could see the woundedness in her — that she's not doing this to be evil, not doing this because she's out to get someone; she just really doesn't know much better.

CMW: Was there any corollary between her and anyone you'd observed in life, or did she spring out of the imagination?

DJ: She was a compilation of a lot of different people. I mean, some family members, but also people I would see in my neighborhood, or on the bus, or the parents of friends I had at school. I really pulled a lot of different things into what I put into Shirleen, but not more one person than another, really. I really did mix things up a lot, and I think that was important for me too — to not have a particular person in mind so that I could come to her as

she was, not with any of my own baggage.

CMW: One of the troubles Shirleen has with her daughter has to do with the color of her daughter's skin, which is lighter than hers. I

wonder if you can talk a little bit about the ambivalence that Shirleen feels, and also Sandrine's thinking about it. At some point Sandrine describes herself as not being at home in either the black world or the white world.

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CMW: I think this is one of the themes we see again and again in the book, so I wondered why that subject was important for you to include, and you thought it meant in the context of the narrative.

DJ: Yes, it was an important detail for me to include, it was something that I wanted to write about. Far too often there's a kind of glossing over of that kind of **COLORISM** in black communities, or it's told from the perspective of someone who's been wounded by someone else. Things come out in a somewhat distorted way — the stories were never told the way I wanted to tell them. I found that, personally, as a lighter-skinned black person in an environment that was largely made of darker-skinned black people, I was subject to a lot of different kinds of stereotypes and certain kinds of automatic behavior that always bewildered me.

You know, growing up, each color is represented in my family and that, to me, was always normal when I was much younger. When we moved south and my world expanded at school and I spent more time at school, I found that to other people it wasn't very normal.

So that was always a topic that I wanted to explore, just because it was something that I experienced, that I knew really well, and that I thought a lot about, not only from my own perspective, but from the perspective of others, and was something that you don't see a lot about.

For Sandrine, it was just another thing that set her apart, that made her — in my opinion — more likely to think about what was happening to her, and to be more observant, rather than living her life as a regular kid participating in everything.

CMW: Yes, absolutely, Sandrine has this wonderful way of reflecting on her experience, and it isn't from an adult perspective looking back, it stays true to that "child" point of view. She seems very wise, and yet at the same time is trying really desperately to figure out what to do next. One of the things she seems to take solace in is books themselves and young adult literature in particular. I was curious about that detail, and how

you chose some of the texts that you mention throughout the novel.

DJ: Her being a reader was really important, so that I could get away with the kind of narration that was necessary to tell the story. There's a big difference between the writing and speaking style of a child who reads a lot, and one who doesn't read a lot.

I have a daughter, she was about three or so at the time I was writing this, just starting to enter preschool, and I was also working with a program that tutored second graders, so I was thinking a lot about children and how they sound, what they do know and what they don't know, so as I was dealing with the narrator, with Sandrine, I wanted her to be young, I wanted her to be below the age of ten, but I felt that in order for her to be believable as the narrator of this story there had to be something about her that made it possible, and reading like that, that kind of covered it. I knew that it would because I was also a very heavy reader when I was a kid.

I remember **A WRINKLE IN TIME** I put in because it was a really fascinating book; common enough, but not that common. If you didn't read it as a kid you knew someone else who read it, so it wasn't something obscure that made her really weird, it was something that she could come across. As a kid growing up in the Seventies, or as I like to say sometimes, as a black child growing up in the Seventies, I came across a lot of paperback biographies of famous African-Americans: **MARY MCLEOD BETHUNE, HARRIET TUBMAN, SOJOURNER TRUTH, FREDERICK DOUGLASS**. There were lots and lots of biographies at that time. I remembered

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reading a lot of those and wanting to bring that in because it was important to make sure she didn't come across as an outsider who was so outside that she had no concept of even being a black person. I didn't want her outsidersness to be based on something like that; I wanted her to be someone who knows what's going on — as much as a kid can — and who understands the social situation as much as she can at that age, but who does not feel that she's somehow better because her skin's lighter, or that she's not a part of the community because her skin is lighter. Other people think that, but she herself doesn't. I wanted that inner feeling of hers to contrast with what other people looked at her and thought.

CMW: What did writing from this young child's perspective make possible for you as an adult writer?

DJ: I really enjoyed the challenge of having a narrator who observed things, lived through things, yet didn't completely understand what they were. I knew that the reader, as an adult, would understand better than the narrator what was going on, and I wanted that effect.

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telling you, and so I very intentionally did that with her. Sandrine being a child made it possible to do that. Kids see a lot more than we think they do, it's just that they don't understand it in the same way we do as adults. And sometimes it's a good thing that they don't completely understand what's going on. For example, my daughter was quite young when 9/11 happened and so it was a good thing that she did not fully understand the few things that did leak through to her. Later on, as

she got older, it was easier to bring in all the rest of the information.

But with Sandrine, the effect I wanted was that the adult reader would understand what was happening to her more than Sandrine did, and would feel even more intensely about what was happening to Sandrine than Sandrine did herself because not only would the reader be experiencing it with her while reading the book, but they would have another layer of understanding about what was happening to this kid.

She doesn't really understand the full implications of her mother's abusive behavior for quite some time, never quite catches on to her father's limitations, but the readers do, because as adults we can see it. So the challenge was to have her understand it in the way a narrator needed to but still leave it open for the adult reader to realize, "Oh my God, what's happening here?" or, "Oh my God, this is what's happening."

CMW: You've put such wonderful words to something that I was feeling very viscerally when I read the book. First, I sped through it — it's one of those wonderful books you pick up and start reading and you're in this world, and I didn't want to step away, and part of the reason was that I wanted to save her. I thought, "This girl, she needs help and nobody's helping her!" I'm wondering about that effect: how is it that some books make that experience possible for the reader, and why, though they may strive for it, don't other books bring you all the way?

It's also so interesting to hear you talk about your intentions for the narrator, and how having that child narrator made some of the experience of the reader possible. How did you come up with that technique? Did you read other pieces of literature and observe this happening, or was it something that you were working through as you went forward?

DJ: You know, this is really weird; there are a couple of books that do come to mind when I think about what I did with the narrator. One is

FORD MADOX FORD'S *THE GOOD SOLDIER*. For some reason it struck me, the unreliability of that narrator, his real ignorance of what was truly happening in his life — it was just well done; it was just so striking. I think that always stuck with me: the idea of having the kind of narrator where the narrator says one thing but the reader can understand two or three other things on top of that.

Then there's another book I read in high school, ***KASSANDRA AND THE WOLF***, by Margarita Karapanou. It's about an even younger narrator than my own. It's very poetically written, and in that book the child has a fanciful explanation of what's going on, but as an adult you're reading it and you realize, "Oh my God, what are these adults doing to her? What is actually going on here?"

I guess in the back of my mind, now that you mention it, I had those two things bouncing around together. I think I admired the effect reading those kinds of things had on me. It created such a complex experience of narrator. I guess it just struck me so much that I wanted to replicate it.

CMW: One of the things I'm also curious about is the different neighborhoods that Sandrine lives in. These neighborhoods represent different aspects of life in New Orleans and elsewhere during the 1970s, the time in which this book is set, and I wondered what these neighborhoods meant to you, and what life was like in these neighborhoods. What was important for you to represent there?

DJ: Well, I think it was like that when I lived in New Orleans in the Seventies — it was a very tight neighborhood experience: there were neighbors all around you, there were local places that you went to, there were people who knew you by name even if you didn't know them, or they knew your parents. New Orleans has always been a small city where there are a lot of family and personal connections, especially in neighborhoods.

DJ: It was also a time, here in New Orleans at least, when older people felt responsible for you because you were a child, not because you were their child. So older people would stop you on the street and say things to you, you know, "Hey, what are you doing? You're not going to do that." Or, "I know your mother and I'm going to go tell her you're doing this right now." So there was that side of it. And there were people who would watch out for you, people who knew that this child down the street, his mother's not going to be home until seven o'clock, okay, so he's playing with their kids, "Oh come on in and have dinner."

There were stories my mother would tell me about when she grew up in the housing projects here, about how tight that community was, and how there were people who literally looked out for other people's children because they knew the parents didn't know any better, they couldn't do any better, and everyone would help pitch in. Somebody would do something here — there'd be a meal here, a lunch here, an extra dress or something here. That was kind of comforting in a way. You didn't have much, but you had so many people around you that you felt buffered from some of the worst of the world.

It was just very different than it is now. Even in the cities now, it's not just the suburbs, but even in the cities you don't necessarily know who your neighbors are, you don't necessarily let your kid go wandering down the block and you don't know where they're going. It's all so different now. I guess I just wanted to revisit that again, and play with that, and use it to her advantage.

CMW: Maybe we can use this moment to segue to a second passage which illustrates this community that Sandrine's a part of.



DJ: [Reads *Sandrine's Letter to Tomorrow*, Part One, pages 50 - 53.]

CMW: What's ironic about this party is that Sandrine has escaped from her father's care — that is, the care of his girlfriend, Philipa — and she's come home, and there's a celebration planned so she's put to work but it's not

acknowledged exactly why they're celebrating. What I'm wondering about in this passage is Sandrine's father, actually. At this moment in the book Sandrine's father is an absent figure, but later he returns and he brings her to a better place. I wondered about that. I wondered about his contradictions and what you were thinking about as you were creating this father figure for her.

DJ: I always saw him as a somewhat limited person. Unlike with Shirleen, I didn't have to work a lot to see him as flawed. He just came to me as flawed. I think he's very concerned about his child but it just doesn't hold his attention long enough for him to see all the implications, or for him to truly understand the effect his behavior does or doesn't have on the situation. Like, for example, when Sandrine is there with him and Philipa and Yolanda, he doesn't really think about what they do all day or where the children are all day, he just assumes that Philipa's taking care of it. Then when he finds out that she isn't taking care of it, he doesn't really do a lot.

I think he's just self-absorbed. He doesn't mean anything bad by it. He does actually care about her, but he's just not very good at doing the things that fathers are supposed to do; he's not very good at saving her, he's not very good at understanding what's happening. In a way, he had to be like that for Sandrine to have the life that she did. If he'd had any more awareness there would have been big questions in the reader's mind: "Why doesn't he do something? Why doesn't he realize this is happening? How is this happening if he's paying attention?" The only way for her to have this life was for him to be paying attention, but to not really see what he was looking at.

CMW: What I'm amazed at is that Sandrine maintains a sense of autonomy and a sense of her own power in the face of such neglect, and she takes it upon herself to leave this bad situation and return to the one that seems better, which is her mother's house, which is where we find her at this party. Where do you think that self-reliance came from in this character? Did you see that

around you in children that you knew growing up, or children that you know now?

DJ: Yes. I saw it then, as a kid, and I've seen it in people all my life. I saw it even in the kids that I was working with in this tutoring program. There were certain kids who had some experience with some person currently in their lives, or recently in their past, an adult that really was a good adult, that was nurturing, that was guiding, that was helpful, and that tried to do the best for them — who tried to give that child the best idea of him or herself.

I also saw it in kids growing up. I didn't know exactly what was going on in their house but I knew that it wasn't good and that there were other kids in the house who weren't doing so well. But there would usually be this one kid who held things together and was the one that the youngest kids relied on, or whatever parent that was there relied on.

It's easy to see a kid who's at least been taken care of somewhat. They just have something that truly abused and neglected kids don't have.

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They can hang on. They can make it through because they have something different in them.

And it's true: sometimes it's not your parents who fortify you. The program that I was tutoring in, a lot of the parents were very young and there was only so much that they could do because their own parents had been young. The kids who fared the best had some other adult somewhere, an older aunt or uncle, or a grandparent, or someone who gave some structure to the kid's life. I think with Sandrine — I don't know about Shirleen, I don't think she really got it from Shirleen — I think she really got it from her grandmother. She was the person in her life that simply loved her and

took care of her the way adults are supposed to take care of children.

With kids, a little bit goes a long way. It doesn't take a lot to give someone enough hope to persevere. When I was revising I read a news story about a research report about what helps some children survive abuse better than others and make it through adulthood with the basic survival markers intact: they can have relationships, they can hold a job — they can function in society. One of the factors was having one adult somewhere in their past who treated them well. That was enough to give them some resilience. I certainly had that in mind with Sandrine so she could be the narrator that I needed.

CMW: You deal with so many different issues, difficult issues, in this book. What was your intention with regard to putting these issues into a work of fiction? What did you hope this book would communicate to the wider world about children like Sandrine, or communities like the one that she's part of?

DJ: The things that happen to her happen because she is basically a neglected child who is not watched or guided by adults in the way that she should be. I guess that's a conviction of mine: that kids who are not supported properly do end up in all kinds of situations and all kinds of trouble. The worst of the abuse seems to develop naturally out of Sandrine being a child essentially trying to raise herself and then when Yolanda comes, trying to raise another child and not having the tools that she needs. Each time something happens she is in a situation in which adults have abdicated their responsibility, where they either don't care what happens, don't realize what happens, or misinterpret what happens, further isolating her.

It's not a direct blame or correlation, but if adults care about where you are or care about what happens they're not going to leave you alone in an apartment for hours and hours a day. If adults care about you they're going to believe you when you say "Someone's been following me when I'm walking home from school and I don't know what to do." Sandrine is not lucky enough — quote

unquote — to have adults who care at the right time.

Another thing that I wanted to show about her was that there are not only adults who neglect her but there are also adults who are out to use her for their own purposes, and you're ripe for abuse when you don't have anybody watching your back. So there are these, not really predators but you could use that in a mild term, out in her world who are able to find her and do what they do to her because she doesn't have the kind of supervision that she needs, and that she doesn't have, as a child, the power, in any sense of the word, to really stop them from doing what they're doing.

CMW: What do you hope happens to Sandrine after the book concludes? Do you have any hopes and dreams for her?

DJ: I do have some hopes and dreams for her. I hope that where she is at the end of the book, in that environment, she's finally able to be a child, is finally able to be taken care of. I hope that, at some point, she learns that she can trust people, that she can be taken care of, and that she doesn't have to do it all herself. I know that she will make it through school, and I know she will go to college, but I do hope that she's able to get over what adults have done to her and be able to have the kind of life that she wants.

CMW: What is it like when you finish something like this and you've gone so far with a character, you've gotten to know them so well, to write that last line? How do you come to a conclusion when these characters seem so alive and so real?

DJ: I think after months of revision I get to the point where I feel like the character has told me everything that she's going to tell me, where I feel

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like the part of her story that I'm going to tell is finished. That's when I move more into forming the story and making sure that things are in the right place, everybody's the right age, that I have my stuff correct. It's not really a resolution, but I feel a certain sense of peace about the character, like I've told this part of the story and I've told it the best that I can.

With Sandrine especially, I felt that she didn't want to tell me anymore. It really felt like, when I got to the end, she was really done. Even if I wanted to write past that point I wouldn't get too far because she'd gone through more than enough.

I guess my idea of her is just, in this strange way, "Okay, I'm leaving her alone to live her life so she can grow up. I hope that nothing else happens to her at this point so I'm going to leave her alone so nothing else will happen to her." Because I know that if I'm going to write a story something is going to have to happen.

CMW: You have such amazing power as a novelist: you create these people, and then you're the one who has to make the bad things happen to them. Was that hard?

DJ: You know, you want to say it's hard but actually it's not hard at all. It sounds perverse to someone who isn't a writer but there's a part of you that's totally in sync with the character and just feels with the character, and there's another part of you, the writer, that's like, "You know what, something has to happen here, it can't be that because that's really too boring, it can't be that because I've seen that in every other book I've ever read... Ah! Here it is! Just this side of unbelievable — I'll do this."

So you have that sympathy, but you also have that kind of "man behind the curtain" kind of, "Oh, I can do anything I want here." So it's not that hard. It should be, but it's really not. It makes me sound like a terrible person but really, they feel so real and you put them on the page as real, but you know, in my experience of it now people are like, "Oh, I was so moved when she said that," and I'm like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, that really was moving;

I was moved by that, like, four years ago when I wrote it, now I've read it forty-eight times and I've counted the number of words..." In writing it there's this part of you that is attached, but isn't so attached that you can't do what you need to do, even if it's bad for the character.

CMW: What you just said is really interesting: that piece where the book is published, and it comes time to do some readings and to share it with people, and it's old to you now. What is that like? How do you negotiate that space?

DJ: It was really weird. Initially it was kind of difficult to get into those conversations, even with the editor, and with people about the book, because for them it was so present and for me it was really kind of over. But eventually I found a persona. I used my teacher persona: "Ok, I can discuss anything," and took it that way. Actually, as I started reading and people started talking about it, I would say things like, "Oh yeah that did happen in the book, didn't it?" because I'd literally forgotten things that I'd put in the book because it had been so long for me. So I went with it. I never got as into it again as, say, when I was drafting it or revising it, or as involved as people are when they read it.

It's a strange me/not me kind of sensation, really. You know it, it's part of you, you were very involved in it, but it's also a detachment because it's a phase you've gone through, it's a lifetime you've spent.

As a matter of fact, it's been interesting because I've been finally able to talk about and remember the process, and look at what I actually did, as opposed to when I was still drafting and revising, when I was totally in it and really found it difficult

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to explain what it was, or to talk about the character. So the distance has been good.

CMW: I guess this is a kind of necessary evolution if you're ever going to write something else — you need to let the last thing go.

DJ: Right. I mean, even when you don't feel like it's done, you know when you're finished with it; it's just kind of a gut thing, you just kind of have to feel it out. It's one of those things about making something: no matter what you make there's a certain point at which you have that kind of detachment, where you're invested in it, but not so invested in it that you can't let it go.

CMW: Your work has been compared to **TONI MORRISON'S** and to **ALICE WALKER'S** and to the work of some other wonderful writers. I wonder what you think about that, and if they were present in your mind as you were working on this.

DJ: I think that the effect is somewhat indirect. I was very struck by Toni Morrison's early work, with respect to **THE BLUEST EYE** and **SULA** and **SONG OF SOLOMON**; I found them to be wonderful, powerful, moving works that also defied the idea that you couldn't write serious literature about women, or about black people.

I'm an English major so I got to read all of this old criticism and to see all of these really backwards arguments, written in very lovely language, and after reading so much literature by and about

whites, and white males especially,

it was just really striking to come across Toni Morrison and Alice Walker and other writers like them. So there is an influence because, in part, they showed me: "You know what, you can write

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about this stuff, and you can do well, and you can move people." In that sense, they are an influence.

CMW: Do any writers stand out in your mind as authors whose texts are close to your heart?

DJ: Let's see... I like **VALERIE MARTIN** a lot. **MAYA ANGELOU'S** autobiographies really stand out, still, in my mind. I read a lot of odd stuff. I mean, there's **JIM THOMPSON**, there's **ROBERT WALSER** — it just goes weird after I get past a few people [laughter]. You know, Jim Thompson was always a favorite. I just like his straightforward style. Again, he's someone who does a lot of complex things with character as far as what the character says and what the reader understands about what's actually happening, or what the character is really saying.

CMW: Now, you're living and working in New Orleans. What is it like to be a writer in that city in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the levee breach?

DJ: There's a lot going on... I find it a little overwhelming and somewhat bewildering to even think about; "Okay, where do I start in writing about where I am now?" Then you feel like, "Oh wait, I'm a writer and I'm here now so I have to be writing something." And you have all these descriptions in your head and think, "Oh, I should be doing all this kind of stuff." But I think that, as a writer, it's a bit harder than that for many reasons.

Initially, that first year afterwards, I think it was really easy to get your "New Orleans voice" out there because everyone wanted to hear about what was happening. You know, it's going on three years now and it's a little harder to get people's attention now that we're into the long-term, deeper, systemic issues that we have, as opposed to just moving through the crisis phase. I think we've moved on from the crisis phase to more long-term sustainability issues like, "Who are we?" and, "What's our city like?"

The city has changed quite a bit. You know, it's an old city, we have a lot of history, we have a lot of

physical landmarks, and a lot of those things changed after the flood. Some of our housing projects have been torn down so there are these big open spots — there are these big gashes in neighborhoods now. There are houses that haven't been put back up, there have been houses that have been torn down and brand new construction put there. Some things have reopened. Some things have not reopened. Some things have moved to Metairie. Some things have moved to the West Bank. So there's a lot of change.

There's the past to try to hold on to, there's the present to try to get a grip on, there's the future to try to understand — what that might be like. A lot of people scattered. Communities are somewhat different. It's also more expensive to live — New Orleans used to be a nice cheap place to live, you could "get by" in New Orleans, and that changed a bit. So it's very different to be a writer in New Orleans. There's a lot to tap into; it's almost too much to tap into at this point.

CMW: You mention that it's three years on now, so as the crisis passes, what is it that you hope people will keep in mind as time goes on and they're thinking about New Orleans?

DJ: I hope that people keep in mind that what happened here is going to take a long time to fix, and that even though we're past the initial shock phase, there's still a lot that needs to be done. It's a really slow process to rebuild a community. It's a really slow

process to rebuild a city, and though we have a lot of physical structures still here, a lot of infrastructure was damaged. Many things are getting better, absolutely, but that things are getting better

doesn't mean we're out of the woods yet. We're still not where we used to be. We were a flawed city, but we made things work.

"A lot of the bad things that happened to us — a lot of our crime, a lot of the problems that we're having — come because a lot of these social networks were broken up"

Another thing that's happened that I'd like people to remember is that with the evacuation and, as some of us call it, "The Exile," a lot of families and social networks were shattered. This was a very family-based, community-based kind of place to live. People lived near their mothers, their cousins, you knew your third cousins, you knew your cousins' in-laws; they were very tight social relationships, and those got shattered when people got scattered around.

A lot of the bad things that happened to us — a lot of our crime, a lot of the problems that we're having — come because a lot of these social networks were broken up and the things that people relied on were thrown out of the city, just kind of scattered about.

CMW: It's the very same thing in *Sandrine's Letter to Tomorrow* — you describe these social networks, and we were talking earlier about how crucial they are. When you were writing this, where did the hurricane fall in the process of composing the book?

DJ: Actually, I'd finished the book before the hurricane, but afterwards it was much easier to get someone to read it.

CMW: That's what I was going to ask you next. You've published the book with an independent publishing house, what was that experience like? Did you seek them out? Did they come to you? What kind of editorial process did you go through with them?

DJ: They found me through a friend of mine from graduate school, through some of his connections, so they approached me. On and off for a couple of years, I'd tried to send it to agents and a few

editors, and I hadn't really gotten any kind of positive response from anyone, not a negative response, but just like, "I can't sell this," that kind of strange response.

Then Ig was interested, and it was a pretty easy editing process. Honestly, I spent about three times as much time revising it as I did drafting it; that's just my process — I'm a big reviser. I'm very into revising, so I had gone over it a great deal, so there weren't a whole lot of changes that he asked for, there weren't many issues that we had to go through; it was a polishing for printing, really.

CMW: When it came out, what was it like to have the real thing in your hand? Did that change your thinking about yourself as a writer? Did it make you want to do more? What was that like?

DJ: Oh yes, I was finally validated [*laughter*]. I was like, "Wow! This is real, it looks good; people are going to buy it!" And then I thought, "I've got to do some more." It made me feel like a real writer, even though I'd published a few things before, I felt like a real writer because here's a book that you can hold in your hands, and you can look at page one hundred thirty-two, and I can sign it, and you can buy it, you can order it — I felt like a real writer then.

"I've been thinking a lot about the changes in people's families and social networks since the storm, especially right after the storm when people were scattered around and weren't sure where all of their kin were."

CMW: Since then, what have you been working on? Have you been working on any project in particular?

DJ: I am kind of honing in on one idea. I debated about whether to write anything that's happened post-Katrina because I was kind of like, "Oh, I don't know, maybe I should wait, maybe I should think about it more." But it does take place post-



Katrina. Like *Sandrine's Letter to Tomorrow*, it's going to be about a character and her family — I'm really interested in family relations, how they go right and how they go wrong.

I've also been thinking a lot about the changes in people's families and social networks since the storm, especially right after the storm when people were scattered around and weren't sure where all of their kin were; they were constantly looking for people.

It takes place in that time period right after the storm when things were very unsettled. My character is a parent so there's that added difficulty of losing a lot of your social networks when you're a single parent, then all the multiple changes with employment, and with transportation, and with schools that happened right after the storm, so all those are in the blender of trouble for my character.

CMW: It sounds absolutely fascinating, and you pose an interesting question: When is it okay to start writing about these things? How much time needs to pass? It seems that there's more and more post-September 11th literature now, and we seem to be able to accept it. I think that it's really important to put what you're talking about into the conversation.

DJ: It is, but it's a hard thing to do. 9/11 is a good parallel, but that happened in a part of the city, whereas what happened here affected the whole city. Even if you didn't live in the part that got flooded you knew someone who did, or you grew up over there, or your best friend lived in that house. I mean, I remember watching footage on TV and pointing out to people, "I know that's on the corner of that and that, I know the address for that, I know this..." And then, when you live in the

aftermath of it, there's so much that's immediate, there are so many immediate survival issues.

I don't even think that, for the first year or two, I thought about writing much of anything, much less about what was actually happening, or what had happened after the storm. Some people were able to jump on it right away, especially with nonfiction, but I just found day-to-day survival to be too overwhelming to really be able to rise above just the basic "What time does the store close?" level and "What do I have in the refrigerator?" to really think in that kind of, not higher, but more complex way about it — not just to think about my little piece of what was happening, but to be able to think in a broader way.

I think I'm finally ready — I mean, I hope I am because I'm about to start this new book.

Dedra Johnson graduated from Northwestern University and the University of Southern Mississippi and received her MFA from the University of Florida - Gainesville.

Her first novel, "Sandrine's Letter to Tomorrow," placed second in the novel category of the William Faulkner - William Wisdom Creative Writing Competition and was published in 2007 by Ig Publishing.

She currently lives in New Orleans where she teaches composition and creative writing at Dillard University.

To download the podcast of this interview and to read additional information about Ms. Johnson, go to www.openlooppress.org