

STORIES ABOUT GROWING UP BLACK AND FEMALE IN AMERICA

a review by Mark I. West

Alicia D. Williams. *Genesis Begins Again*. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2019.

—. *Jump at the Sun: The True Life Tale of Unstoppable Storycatcher Zora Neale Hurston*. Illustrated by Jacqueline Alcántara. Atheneum Books for Young Readers, 2021.

—. *Shirley Chisholm Dared: The Story of the First Black Woman in Congress*. Illustrated by April Harrison. Anne Schwartz Books, 2021.

MARK I. WEST is a Professor of English at UNC Charlotte, where he teaches courses on children's and young adult literature. He also holds the title of Bonnie E. Cone Professor in Civic Engagement. He has written or edited sixteen books, the most recent of which is *Shapers of American Childhood: Essays on Visionaries from L. Frank Baum to Dr. Spock to J. K. Rowling* (McFarland & Co, 2018), which he co-edited with Kathy Merlock Jackson. His articles have appeared in various national publications, including an essay on "Martin Gardner: North Carolina's Historian of Oz and Annotator of Alice" in the 2001 issue of *NCLR*. Before entering academia, he worked as an early childhood educator and professional puppeteer.

North Carolina is home to many well-known children's authors, including Gail E. Haley, Sheila Turnage, and Carole Boston Weatherford. Such well-established authors, however, are now sharing shelf space with a rapidly expanding list of children's authors from North Carolina. Of these new children's authors, Alicia D. Williams, a writer from Charlotte, has had an especially auspicious debut. Williams burst on the children's literature scene in 2019 with the publication of her novel *Genesis Begins Again*. She received both a Newbery Honor Award and the Coretta Scott King-John Steptoe New Talent Award for this novel. She has quickly followed up her novel with two picture book biographies of prominent African American women: *Jump at the Sun: The True Life Tale of Unstoppable Storycatcher Zora Neale Hurston* and *Shirley Chisholm Dares: The Story of the First Black Woman in Congress*. With the publication of these three books, Williams has not only established herself as an up-and-coming North Carolina children's author, but she has also provided much-needed stories about the experience of growing up black and female in America.

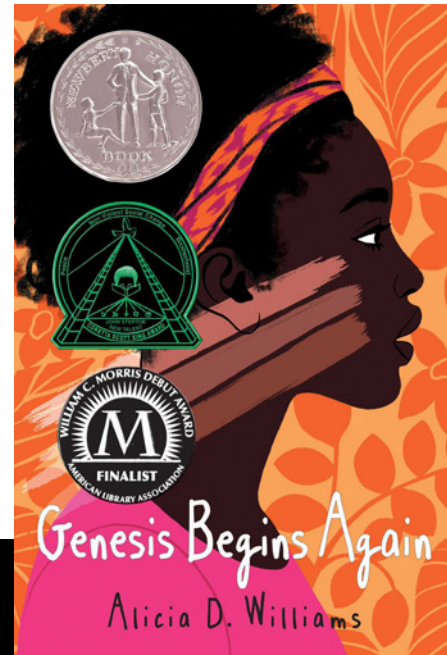
Genesis Begins Again, which is intended for middle school readers, focuses on a thirteen-year-old girl named Genesis Anderson. Genesis lacks confidence and has a low sense of

ALICIA D. WILLIAMS is a graduate of the MFA program at Hamline University; before becoming a full-time children's author, she worked as a teacher in Charlotte, NC, where she currently lives.

self-esteem. She keeps a list of ninety-six reasons she hates herself, and one of these reasons is that she thinks her skin is too dark. Her grandmother often makes hurtful comments about Genesis's dark skin complexion, and these comments have a negative impact on Genesis.

Genesis has internalized a form of racism known as "colorism." In a recent interview, Williams discussed this aspect of her novel. The story, she said, "evolved to be about colorism – discrimination within the same ethnic group based on skin tone and facial features. . . . I continued to see children of color – every colonized country has a colorism issue – struggle with self-acceptance and self-love based on skin color and hair texture. The need to speak to them was the driving force of completing this story."*

Fortunately, for Genesis, her life gradually changes when she moves to a new school and



* Interview with Alicia D. Williams, *Shelf Awareness* 30 Jan. 2020; later quotes from the author are also from this interview.

has a chance to begin again. She makes new friends, and she comes to the attention of a music teacher who recognizes her musical talent. Her teacher introduces her to Billie Holiday and other great jazz singers, and Genesis begins to look to these jazz greats as positive role models. In many ways, the second half of this book celebrates the life-affirming power of music. The novel also shows the value of providing black girls with positive role models. For Genesis, Billie Holiday is not just an important figure in the history of jazz; she is a successful black woman with whom Genesis can identify and, in so doing, imagine a positive future for herself.



Williams's interest in presenting children with black women role models is also reflected in her picture book biography titled *Jump at the Sun: The True Life Tale of Unstoppable Storycatcher Zora Neale Hurston*. Williams shows how Hurston's experiences growing up in Eatonville, FL, during the 1890s shaped her interest in African American folklore and sparked her love of storytelling. Williams

focuses much of the book on Hurston's childhood and early adulthood, but she touches on Hurston's career as a folklorist, anthropologist, and professional writer. The book has a lively, joyful tone that is matched by Jacqueline Alcántara's vibrant and energetic illustrations. The book also includes memorable lines from some of the tales that Hurston published in her folktale collections.

In her "Author's Note" that comes at the end of *Jump at the Sun*, Williams recalls her introduction to Hurston: "I remember when I first met Zora. I was in college, studying in the library. My friend, only a table over, giggled and giggled. She'd get quiet and then giggle again. Finally, I got up from my seat to find out what was so funny. She held up a book by Zora Neale Hurston. And she later gifted me the anthology *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive*" (1979). This book became one of Williams's treasures. She found in Hurston an author she loved but also a role model of sorts. Like Hurston, Williams has a passion for storytelling.

Williams's most recent book, *Shirley Chisholm Dares: The*

Story of the First Black Woman in Congress, is also a picture book biography. The illustrator, April Harrison, is a well-known folk artist from Greenville, SC, and her illustrations reflect her interest in folk art. Williams covers Chisholm's growing-up years in Brooklyn and Barbados, her education at Brooklyn College and Columbia University Teachers College, and her entrance into the world of New York politics. Williams shows how Chisholm's formative years helped her become such an effective political leader. Williams does not go into the details of Chisholm's political career, but she does cover the values and beliefs that motivated Chisholm over the course of her career in Congress. Williams presents Chisholm as a daring, rebellious, and persistent role model.

As a children's author, Williams draws on her previous experience as a teacher and storyteller in Charlotte. She clearly knows how to hold the attention of a child audience. She also knows from her experiences as a teacher and parent how important it is for black children to see themselves reflected in the books they read. Williams has already written three such books, and she's just getting started. ■

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