

The Writing of *The Color of Lies*

My writing process is as messy as a two year old turned loose with a box of crayons and a blank wall. I envy those writers who start with an outline and watch their novels progress tidily through one draft and a few minor revisions. I try to outline, but my plot inevitably strays in directions I never foresaw.

A writing professor I had at West Virginia University told the class their writing could be map-making or pot-making. *The Color of Lies* represents pot-making. No one should read it as though it were an accurate map of any real place. I shaped the characters, locations, and events of the novel. I tried to follow Donald Maass's advice in *Writing the Breakout Novel*: "What would make it even worse for your protagonist? Write that. Then what would make it even worse?"

This novel began with the title *What's Cooking in the Faculty Lounge*. I thought it would be a rather quiet story of teachers in a small town. But as I revised, the characters grew more and more rowdy as I followed Maass's advice, and the issues deepened into serious territory, touching on that conversation about race Attorney General Eric Holder said our nation needed to have and on the failure of our education system to meet the needs of all children. The original title no longer fit the story, but neither did the others I had tried out, like *Alderson's Angels*. With the help of friends, particularly Rhett DeVane, I finally settled on *The Color of Lies*, which captures two important threads in the novel, race and deception.

From the beginning I knew I wanted to create a teacher obsessed with "saving" a young man, J.D. Marshall who disrupted her class. I had a few students over the years who made it hard to get out of bed in the morning, but none were as uncivil as J.D. (What would make it even worse?) I added the well-behaved Brian Jones as a foil for J.D. Any number of bright black males served as models for Brian. I knew the taunting some of these teens faced from their friends for working hard in school and getting good grades, and I tried to capture that harsh peer assessment these kids confronted with great courage and perseverance.

At first, the lawsuit I invented in the novel was fluffy. One trusted reader, Pat Murphy, told me limiting the issues to the homecoming court made the whole thing feel frivolous. He was right. I researched schools and racial issues and plugged as many of those as I could into the story. (What would make it worse? What would make it even worse?) Surely no present-day town has the accumulated discrimination I heaped onto Alderson. I hope not. Pockets of discrimination do still exist, however, and if any communities recognize fragments of their own town in the novel, it is certainly time to work on improvements.

A kayak trip on the Slave Canal with a former student, Augusta West, gave me inspiration for developing Woodson Trask's character. We drove into Wakulla County, Florida, to rent a canoe, and met a fellow who lived in a trailer in the woods. He had a parking meter standing by his outdoor hot tub. Augusta boldly asked him the question I was thinking to myself—what was the parking meter for—and I am grateful to her for soliciting the story behind the meter, which I shamelessly appropriated for *The Color of Lies*.

A few real instances from Thomasville High live on in fictional form in the novel. My colleague Anne Lewis's slip did fall down in class, an incident I embellished and transferred to an English classroom rather than a computer class. Science teacher Steven Barronton's boa constrictor did escape. It lived in the crawl space over our heads for some months, unbeknownst to us. The snake didn't fall through the missing ceiling tiles. (What would make it worse?) That was my imagination, driven by nightmares I had after I learned how long the slithery beast had

made its residence over our heads. My students did write scripts and make wonderful videos of *The Taming of the Shrew* over the years. I also taught newspaper journalism and received both praise and flak for the articles students wrote, so that part of the novel is based somewhat on reality. I, unfortunately, never possessed Molly's quick wit. I'm the kind of person who thinks of what I should have said when I wake up in the middle of the night. I modeled Molly's sense of humor after my colleague Karen Crews, whose students loved her funny zings.

Miss Baker is an amalgam of teachers I had in school, sprinkled with embellishments from my imagination. In junior high Miss Shetter resealed us regularly, a technique that offered immediate feedback and worked well for competitive children. It was probably cruel, however, for those who always found themselves in the last seats. Miss Shetter was tiny but no one ever messed with her. She was a force to be reckoned with. My junior English teacher, Miss Nutter, was the other teacher behind the creation of Miss Baker. She, too, was a force, and you learned to structure a research paper in her class whether you wanted to or not. You didn't dare refuse to complete her assignments, and she broke them into manageable steps so every student could complete them. Every school has legendary teachers like Miss Baker. Surviving Miss Baker is a badge of honor. An A from such a teacher is a source of great pride. But the rest of Miss Baker's character is imaginary. Neither of the models for her ever uttered a racist remark that I knew of, but I have heard the words I put in her mouth—the idea that blacks were better off on the plantation—expressed here in the South.

For the record, I never met a principal like Mr. Van Teasel. A novel needs conflict, so one element of it emerged from his character. The little bit of dread Molly feels when she is being evaluated is something most teachers have experienced—because students are unpredictable. No teacher knows exactly how kids are going to respond to a lesson or what else is going on in their lives that might distract them or even erupt in the middle of class.

The first draft of this novel was finished before Barack Obama declared his candidacy for president. When Obama came on the scene, I had to change some lines of the novel because Brian wanted to become the first black president. I typed in the line edit to make him aspire to become the second black president, and then my fingers stilled. My internal editor told me I had been handed an opportunity to do more than line edits. I deepened the racial conflicts and issues explored in the second draft.

The first scene of the novel was one of the last I wrote. During Obama's campaign, incidents of overt prejudice like the one imagined in the book occurred, a reminder that we may have come a long way toward racial equality in this country, but we still have a long way to go.

In later drafts I also deepened the struggles of Alderson to address the failures of the school system. It is a failure our country is grappling with today. I examined research on what was working in formerly failing schools and incorporated those programs into the novel. That said, the novel is not an attempt to prescribe fixes, only to show how difficult it is to build consensus in a community about what must be done. Even the Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) is not without problems. About a quarter of all teachers in KIPP schools leave after two years—so some claim on the Internet. Burn-out is a real issue. It isn't clear if creaming—taking only students whose parents are involved enough in their child's education to sign pledges—is also a factor in their success. We all know public schools need to do more, but I'm not sure how much more we can ask teachers to do without additional resources. Not just money. More human resources like aides to help with grading and maintaining regular contact with parents. Instead, the financial state of our country is forcing schools to try to do more with less. My take? Don't

expect improvements and reform unless communities and the country make quality education a real priority.

In some drafts, I broke up the story with recipes mentioned in the story. The recipes went in, the recipes came out, they went back in again. Finally I decided the recipes slowed down the plot and the issues the novel confronted were too serious to be read alongside recipes for orange juice cake. If anyone wants the recipes, they are on my website.