

## Biography of Alice Walker

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Multiple award-winning author and activist Alice Malsenior Walker was born in a small community outside Eatonton in Wards Chapel, Putnam County, GA, on February 9, 1944. She was the last of eight children born to sharecroppers Willie Lee Walker and Minnie Lou (Tallulah) Grant Walker (Bates 2; White 11–13; *World Has Changed* xi). In anticipation of Walker's arrival, her parents hired a midwife, Miss Fannie; the occasion was the first time they had the money to do so. Walker, however, was born before Miss Fannie arrived (White 11–13).

Walker started first grade at age four, a year earlier than usual, because her mother was forced to work to support the Walker family and had no one to watch her young, curious, and highly independent child. Walker was enrolled in the class of Miss Reynolds at East Putnam Consolidated—a school that Walker's father had helped to establish in 1948—with the hope that a strong education would keep young Walker from facing a future in which she would be forced to toil in the fields to support herself. From very early on, Miss Reynolds noted Walker's interest and intellect in the classroom (White 14–15; *World Has Changed* xi).

Towards the end of the summer in 1952, at the young age of eight years old, Walker suffered the eye injury that would change her views, both literally and figuratively. While she was playing cowboys and Indians with her brothers Bobby and Curtis, Curtis shot her in the right eye with a BB gun by mistake. The injury left her blind in one eye (Bates 3; *World Has Changed* xi). Immediately realizing the trouble they would be in with their parents, Walker's brothers entreated her to claim she sustained the injury from stepping on a wire. The boys later admitted the truth to their parents and received only a tepid scolding.

In an effort to help an ailing Walker, her father Willie Lee and brother Jimmy caught the attention of a white man driving down the highway and entreated the man to help them transport Walker to a hospital.

The man declined to help, so the Walkers were forced to care for their daughter on their own using natural folk remedies. Eventually, after realizing their daughter required modern medical treatment, the Walkers raised the \$250 necessary to send her to a white doctor in Macon, Georgia. According to the Walkers, the doctor simply gave Walker a bottle of eye drops and told her that eyes are sympathetic and therefore she would likely become blind in her left eye as well.

The injury indelibly altered Walker's personality and her perspective on the world. Her schoolwork suffered, as did her self-esteem. Once a self-assured young girl, she became much less so after the injury (Bates 3–4). This disorientation was compounded by her family's move to Milledgeville, Georgia—a town known as the location of Flannery O'Connor's farm Andalusia—and her enrollment in a new school. Eventually, Walker was allowed to return to Ward's Chapel, where she lived with her father's father Henry Clay Walker and his wife Rachel—Walker's prototype for Celie in *The Color Purple*. The return home, however, did not improve Walker's malaise. She withdrew into the world of literature and began to write. Later, Walker would come to see the incident as one that had alienated her from the rest of her family. She felt her brothers and her parents had betrayed her, and she began to realize that people can cause their loved ones intense pain. She also became more fully aware of the negative consequences of lying (White 33–40).

Walker graduated from Butler-Baker High School as valedictorian in 1961. Though she considered attending Savannah State University, Walker matriculated at Spelman College, in Atlanta, Georgia. Her attendance was financed by a “rehabilitation” scholarship she received from Spelman as well as seventy-five dollars she received from the members of the community in Eatonton. In August of 1961, she left her home for Atlanta with a suitcase, a sewing machine, and a typewriter (Bates 8–9; White 63–64; *World Has Changed* xi–xii). Walker felt increasingly out of place at a school she felt did not offer adequate support for students who advocated social change. She decided to

withdraw in December 1963 (White 95; *World Has Changed* xii). In the first months of 1964, she enrolled (on a full scholarship) at Sarah Lawrence College, an all-female college located in Bronxville, New York (Bates 10; White 99–100). Though she felt more at home intellectually at Sarah Lawrence, Walker could not help but notice the extreme wealth and privilege of her classmates (White 101). While at Sarah Lawrence, Walker met poet Muriel Rukeyser, who played an integral role in introducing Walker's work to a larger audience (Bates 10; White 108–9).

Walker travelled to East Africa in the summer of 1965 (Bates 12). She returned to school pregnant and decided to have an abortion. Her decision, however, would be easier formulated than executed—at that time, abortions were still illegal in the United States, and women looking to terminate unwanted pregnancies faced traveling abroad for the procedure or undergoing the procedure secretly and at a high price. Seeing little hope in her situation, Walker decided to commit suicide if she could not obtain an abortion (White 113–14). A friend at Sarah Lawrence located a doctor who performed the procedure for two thousand dollars. Walker was able to secure the money from friends and terminated the pregnancy (White 115–17; *World Has Changed* xii). In the aftermath of her turmoil, Walker wrote a number of poems and a short story titled “To Hell with Dying,” which she gave to Rukeyser (Bates 11). She graduated with honors from Sarah Lawrence in January 1966 (White 118–19; *World Has Changed* xii).

On March 17, 1967, at the New York City Family Court, Walker married a young civil rights lawyer named Melvyn R. Leventhal, whom she had met while working for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund in Mississippi the previous summer. They moved back to Mississippi to continue their work for the civil rights movement (White 154; *World Has Changed* xii–xiii). Later that year, Walker won the *American Scholar* essay contest for her submission “The Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?” (Bates 16; White 156–58). She became a consultant in black history for the Friends of the Children

of Mississippi, a part of the Federal Head Start Program, where she encouraged the black women she worked with to write their autobiographies (White 161–62).

*Once*, Walker's first collection of poetry, was published in 1968, and sold in stores for \$4.50. Langston Hughes selected "To Hell with Dying" for publication in *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers*, published in 1967. Rebecca Grant Leventhal was born at 7:06 p.m. on November 17, 1969, at Jackson University Hospital. In the margins of the birth certificate appears the penciled-in note "correct," referring to the racial status of the parents being listed as: "Mel White" / Alice "Negro" (White 181–82). Only three days before the birth of her daughter, Walker had placed the finishing touches on her first novel, titled *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) (Lazo 60).

In March 1971, Walker received the fellowship from Radcliffe (*World Has Changed* xiii) and she journeyed to Cambridge, Massachusetts with Rebecca that September. In 1972, Walker was hired to teach at Wellesley College, where she conducted what is considered to be the first class in black women's literature (Bates 16; White 222; *World Has Changed* xiii). She applied for and received an extension of her fellowship at Radcliffe and decided to stay in Cambridge.

*In Love and Trouble* and *Revolutionary Petunias* were published in 1973; both works drew new attention to Walker and her work (White 231). The same year, after a long fight with emphysema, diabetes, and pneumonia, Willie Lee Walker died on January 26. His death forced Walker to come to terms with their troubled relationship.

Walker and Leventhal left Mississippi in 1974 and moved to New York where she became an editor at *Ms.*, a magazine to address the concerns of women across the globe. *Revolutionary Petunias* was nominated for a 1974 National Book Award in poetry. Walker, along with fellow nominees Audre Lourde and Adrienne Rich, prepared a joint acceptance speech to be read if one of them won the award. Rich won and accepted the award "in the name of all the women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world, and in

the name of those who, like us, have been tolerated as token women in this culture.” (Rich). Walker published her promised children’s book, *Langston Hughes: American Poet* in 1974, and attended Yaddo, a writer’s colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, where she made finishing touches to *Meridian*, her second novel (White 277). Despite her success with her work, she felt her relationship with Mel was becoming strained, and by 1976, the couple had separated and filed for divorce (White 278–80).

In 1977 Walker published *Meridian*, a novel dealing with the sacrifices that individuals make towards a shared humanity as they engaged in the struggle for civil rights. The novel focuses on the conflicts among blacks in the struggle (White 285). Walker said of the themes in *Meridian*: “Part of our legacy is to maintain [the elders’] values so that our children will be able to see the beauty of their ancestors’ faces” (White 291). The novel also represented a departure from a traditional narrative format and revealed the impact of Jean Toomer’s *Cane* (White 292).

Walker received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1977 (*World Has Changed* xiv; White 310) and decided to leave New York for San Francisco to be with Robert Allen. They settled in the small town of Boonville, three hours outside San Francisco (*World Has Changed* xiv; White 308–11). Here Walker began working on the novel that became *The Color Purple*.

In 1979, Walker released two new works: a collection of poems titled *Goodnight Willie Lee, I’ll See You in the Morning* and a collection of essays on Zora Neale Hurston titled *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . and Then Again when I’m Looking Mean and Impressive* (*World Has Changed* xiv; White 319). The essays on Hurston were Walker’s effort to resurrect the work and reputation of the woman with whom Walker felt she had much in common (White 320–21). In 1981, Walker released a second short-story collection titled *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down*, in which she focused on black women who had been tested and tried, but never beaten (Walker xiv).

*The Color Purple*, published in 1982, grew out of a Walker family story originating from Walker's grandfather's life-long love for Estella "Shug" Perry, even though he was married to Rachel (White 18, 334). The novel was written in black folk English and the epistolary style (composed of ninety letters). Even though her publisher warned against her reliance upon the epistolary format, Walker would not yield on what she felt had been passed down to her from her ancestors (White 341). The project garnered much attention in the literary world even before it was officially released, and Walker's friends fought for her work—most notably Gloria Steinem, who dedicated a cover story in *Ms.* to Walker (White 341–42).

Once the book finally was released, it began to draw much attention. Many felt that *The Color Purple* represented the strongest manifestation of the themes that Walker had considered. The result was emotionally and technically impressive (White 348–49). Regardless of how people reacted to the novel, they read it and debated it. This attention reached its apex when Walker won the Pulitzer Prize in fiction on April 18, 1983. Walker was the first black woman to win the prize (351; 352–57). That year, Walker's novel also received the National Book Award (Walker xiv; 21). In her response to the awards, Walker deferred the honor to the joy her characters must be feeling—she seemed only to care that the people who inspired her work were widely recognized and valued (White 358–61). The novel sold more than six million copies, and Walker, true to form, declined to attend the Pulitzer celebration in New York (White 362–63; *World Has Changed* 21).

*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), released six months after *The Color Purple*, sold very well in the wake of her Pulitzer Prize (White 370). The book, a collection of short pieces, focused on black women as they relate to other black women, the black community, and themselves (White 373). The titular essay further advances the study of black women's literary theory, much as her Wellesley course did (White 373–78). Walker was featured in the *New York Times Magazine*

cover story “Novelist Alice Walker: Telling the Black Woman’s Story” (White 380–81).

Together with her companion Robert Allen, senior editor of the *Black Scholar*, and her friend Belvie Rooks, Walker launched Wild Trees Press in 1984. Situated on her newly purchased land in Mendocino County, Wild Tree was inspired by Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth Press, and the new publishers were dedicated to “publish[ing] only what [they] love” (White 388). Walker then issued *Horses Make the Landscape More Beautiful*, her fifth volume of poetry, in 1984 (Bates 52). The collection received a positive response from readers and critics alike (White 390).

Quincy Jones and Steven Spielberg approached Walker about making a film version of *The Color Purple*, which would be financed by Peter Guber (White 393). After some hesitation (spurred by the portrayal of black characters on screen in the recent past), Walker met with Jones and Spielberg and agreed to the film. She was motivated to make the film especially for her mother, the aging and ailing Minnie Lou Walker; Mrs. Walker was unable to read the novel, so Walker saw the film as a way to share her story with her mother (White 400–401).

If Walker’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel stirred controversy, the film reignited that kind of reaction as well. The Hollywood chapter of the NAACP and groups like the Coalition Against Black Exploitation (CABE) offered up their criticisms of the film (White 414–15), which was released on December 18, 1985 (416). Walker and Robert attended a private screening of the film in San Francisco, where Walker realized that much had been changed from her novel, most notably, the relationship between Shug and Celie (417).

Ruth Walker, Alice Walker’s sister, began the work necessary to have *The Color Purple* premiere in Eatonton at the Pex Theater and to establish The Color Purple Scholarship Fund (White 424–25). The film was shown in Eatonton to the delight of Walker’s hometown, especially Mrs. Walker (425–26). Soon after, the film was nominated for eleven Academy Awards (427). It received none.

Walker published *The Temple of My Familiar* in 1989. The novel, inspired by a vanilla bean pod, followed the stories of three couples trying to find peace with themselves and the world (White 445–46) and borrowed much from magical realism, myth, and fantasy (446). As the follow up to *The Color Purple* and in its departure from her previous work, *The Temple* received lukewarm reviews (446–49).

*Finding the Green Stone*, a children’s book, and *Her Blue Body Everything We Know*, a poetry collection, were published in 1991 (White 466). The following year, Walker published *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, a novel that takes up the topic of female genital mutilation. With director Pratibha Parmar, Walker produced a documentary film on the same topic entitled *Warrior Marks* (1993) (459).

Walker has continued to write, adding two more novels, three volumes of poetry, and four collections of nonfiction to her oeuvre. In 2007 Walker placed her archive at Emory University (“Walker, Alice 1944–”). Alice Walker’s Garden is her official website and hosts her blog (Alicewalkersgarden.com). As committed to humanitarian activism as ever, Walker joined the Freedom Flotilla II to Gaza aboard *The Audacity of Hope* in the summer of 2011 to deliver “letters expressing solidarity and love” to the people of Palestine (*Guardian*).

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