

MISSISSIPPI BOOK FESTIVAL 2021 MISSISSIPPI CULTURE

How Black women and the church shaped Deesha Philyaw's writings



by **Brittany Brown**

June 23, 2021



Deesha Philyaw began writing in the early 2000s as a personal hobby. What started as respite from the duties of being a stay-at-home mom to a busy toddler has led Philyaw into literary

acclaim, a path she hadn't quite imagined for herself 20 years ago.

An award-winning writer, Philyaw studied economics at Yale and worked as a management consultant before returning to graduate school and becoming an elementary school teacher. Later, she started a family and decided to be a stay-at-home mom, which led her to writing.

“Our oldest daughter was a toddler who didn't nap,” Philyaw said. “So, I started grabbing like 30 minutes out of the day just to write, something I could do for myself and sort of lose myself in another world.”

Philyaw, the author of *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* which won her the 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and landed her as a finalist for the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction, will be a featured guest at the [Mississippi Book Festival on Aug. 21](#). Ahead of her first visit to Mississippi, Brown spoke with Mississippi Today about her career and her influences.

Over the years, she wrote dozens of stories based on the nostalgia of her childhood and young adulthood in her hometown of Jacksonville, Fla. Her writings centered Black women, like her own mother and grandmother, and the church, a place she spent much of her upbringing.

“It was a curiosity I had about these women as a child and as an adolescent that rose to the surface when I started writing about them because I was dissatisfied with my own life at that time. And so I thought it was safer to give my dissatisfaction to these characters that I was conjuring up rather than writing about my own life,” Philyaw said.

After she divorced in 2006, Philyaw began writing for a living to support herself and her two young children. She freelanced and published short stories and personal essays on themes like race, parenting, gender and culture in *The New York Times*, *The Undeclared* and *Ebony Magazine*. She also co-authored a book with her ex-husband, *Co-Parenting 101: Helping Your Kids Thrive in Two Households After Divorce*.

But it was while she was on hiatus from working on a novel when Philyaw's agent encouraged her to focus more on the “church lady stories” – the short stories she began writing all those years ago about Black women and the church.

“(My agent) sort of saw them as church lady stories. I wasn't thinking of them in that way. But

then I did get really intentional,” Philyaw said. “I already had a couple dozen stories in the pipeline with various degrees of completion that could be a part of such a collection... Finishing the collection felt like something I could do. And I did.”

The Secret Lives of Church Ladies, Philyaw’s award-winning book which published in 2020, is a collection of nine short stories, a sort of fine-tuned culmination of the stories she began writing years ago, exploring the themes of Black women, sex and the Black church.

Philyaw said she wanted Black women to see themselves reflected in the characters and stories in her book, which also grapples with themes of motherhood, personal freedom, agency, identity and truth.

“(The title) just seems to fit,” Philyaw said. “The stories are the kinds of things that Black women whisper amongst ourselves. So, those are the secrets about how we navigate our full humanity, our full sexuality, our full sexual lives in the face of the church’s teachings, which are, in many ways, antithetical to freedom, in particular, sexual freedom.”

Though the short stories center Black Southern church women, Philyaw said people of many different backgrounds can relate to and identify with the stories in *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*. Philyaw’s book is also being adapted for television for HBO Max by actress Tessa Thompson.

“So many of us have these struggles, trying to reconcile the reality of our lives and the complexity of who we are with these sort of oversimplified structural rules that the church gives,” she said.

Philyaw was recently named the 2022-2023 John and Renée Grisham Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi.

And as the 2022-2023 Grisham Writer-in-Residence, Philyaw is returning to her home region of the South for the first time in over 30 years, she said, following in the footsteps of other Southern writers like **Maurice Ruffin**, **Jesmyn Ward** and her dear friend **Kiese Laymon**.

“We’ve survived the pandemic. (Kiese) is one of the many people I can’t wait to hug again because we didn’t know if we were going to get to do that again,” Philyaw said. “Mississippi has this long, complicated literary legacy, and to be in the place where so many of the complex

and beautiful stories have been told by complex and beautiful people, I'm excited about that. And the food.”

BRITTANY BROWN

✉ bbrown@mississippitoday.org

Brittany Brown is Mississippi Today's Justice Reporter, covering the state's justice system with an eye for racial justice and inequity. Brittany formerly served as Mississippi Today's inaugural Emerging Reporters Fellow.

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