

## Please Don't Call Tayari Jones an Overnight Success

Endorsed by Oprah and Obama — and embraced by bookstores and readers nationwide — the "An American Marriage" author has learned the value of "all the different ways that people stand up for each other."

By Melissa Hung APR 26, 2019



GETTY/BRIANNA ELLIS-MITCHELL

You know you're about to have a big year when Oprah Winfrey calls you about your book. That's what happened in 2018 to novelist Tayari Jones with her fourth novel, *An American Marriage*. The novel tells the story of newlyweds Celestial and Roy and what happens to their relationship after Roy is convicted of a crime he did not commit. Not only did Winfrey select the novel for her book club and option it for a movie, but in August, Barack Obama included it on his [summer reading list](#).

Jones is still wrapping her head around these experiences. "I don't think I've had enough distance on it to understand what it means. I do know that the endorsements like Oprah Winfrey, Barack Obama — they've each lent their good name. It made me think a lot about all the other times people have let their good name to me. Like when I went to college, my high school English teacher lent her good name. She's not Oprah but her name is as meaningful to her as Oprah's is to her. And it just made me realize all the different ways that people stand up for each other."

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But success didn't always come easy for Jones. She knows what it's like to be dropped by a publisher and have no one — "No one, literally!" she says — show up to her bookstore events, even though her previous books were liked and well-reviewed. But the bookstore owners always made her feel that she mattered. "They just stepped up and understood that your book was important even if they had not been able to sell a single copy. At an independent bookstore, as an author, you never feel reduced to the numbers, ever."

Now, Jones is returning the favor, serving as this year's ambassador for Independent Bookstore Day, which highlights the diverse offerings of bookstores in local communities. This year's day is on Saturday, April 27, and 580 bookstores nationwide are participating. Jones plans to visit four of them in Atlanta, her hometown. One of her favorites in the area is Charis, a feminist bookstore. "[The staff] really look at the bookstore as a place for a community. They have book clubs and all kinds of meetings. Some of the groups have to do with books. Other times people are just meeting about issues. It's like an old school bookstore as a community touchstone, a cultural center."

I talked to Jones about why she wanted to write about incarceration, her love of typewriters, how Judy Blume became her fairy godmother, and why she recently moved back to Atlanta.

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**MELISSA HUNG:** *An American Marriage* is your fourth novel, and it's been the most commercially successful. Do you think the topic of incarceration led to this kind of interest?

**TAYARI JONES:** It's mysterious as to why a certain book takes fire at a certain time. A lot of different factors have to line up. But I do think that because of the times we're in, it feels urgent that we talk about issues in a different way than before. I feel like during the Obama years, as a nation — particularly those of us on the left — we felt kind of triumphant, like we were entering this era of hope and change. And what we looked for in novels [then] was different. But now during the Trump era, we feel like we are a nation in crisis and we are looking to art to help us find our way through. Art helps us light the way.

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**MH:** Can you tell me a bit about your writing career? How did you get started and what do you wish you had known earlier?

**TJ:** I published my first book in 2002 and I remember that I was at Bread Loaf [Writers' Conference]. A lot of [other emerging writers] had been on NPR and other things and I hadn't done any of these things. I remember I sat on my bed in my little Bread Loaf dorm room and I just cried. How will I ever catch up? I wish I could go back and tell my younger self, "This is such a long race. Just keep working." So that's how I started. I wasn't celebrated right out of the box.

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By the time [I was working on] my third book, BookScan had come into vogue. They could see exactly how many books you sold and I wasn't profitable for my publisher. My publisher kicked me to the curb and took my books out of print. I was devastated. But I kept working. As a teacher I tell my students, "You don't write for a publisher. You write because this is a story that you feel urgently needs to be told." So I finished the book to be a better model for them, even though I didn't think I would be able to publish it.

But then the most amazing thing happened to me. I had one engagement left on my calendar. I was to go to the Key West Literary Seminar and I was embarrassed about it because I was out of print. But I didn't want to be a no show. I'm not that type of person. So I read and after the reading, a woman said to me, "I heard you can't get a book contract. I think I could help you." And she took my hand, and she put my hand in the hand of my publisher. I thought the publisher would reject me as soon as the publisher got home and did the BookScan. But the publisher said, "Wait! Don't walk away just yet. You didn't tell me how you know Judy." And I said, "Oh, I don't know Judy." And she says, "No, I mean Judy Blume, who just introduced us."

**MH: Shut up!**

**TJ:** I know, right?! (laughs) Let me tell you: I'm a person who has never even won a raffle before! I never expected someone to intervene on my behalf. That was not on the list of things that I thought could happen that day when I woke up! And then a few days later, I had a deal with Algonquin and everything was going well again. And that's why when it came time for me to write the fourth book I was wondering, "OK, this felt like divine intervention. Why has my platform been returned to me?" And I decided that my response to this opportunity was to try and write a book that was not so much rooted in my autobiography, but to try to engage something bigger than myself. This is not to say that my other work wasn't political. But this time, I decided to be more external about my interests. That's why I decided to engage the question of incarceration, because I think it is the most pressing issue facing us as a nation.

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## **The real moral of that story is that you have to do your work.**

**MH: That's a wild story. Judy Blume as fairy godmother!**

**TJ:** When I tell my students that story, some will say, "See, it's not what you know. It's *who* you know." They want me to give them permission to just become major schmoozers and meet people. But I say, "No, the real moral of that story is that you have to do your work. Because if I had not completed the [third] book, I wouldn't have had anything to hand over."

**MH: What were the questions that you wanted to explore with this book?**

**TJ:** I was really interested in the way mass incarceration affects African American culture in a larger sense because mass incarceration is just that — it's mass. I mean: I'm a full professor at a major American university. I doubt that very many of my colleagues know how to put money on an incarcerated person's commissary account. Mass incarceration touches so many lives in so many ways. Also, I was interested in this from an intersectional feminist look at it, because mass incarceration disproportionately affects black men. A lot of times when people [write a feminist take on] incarceration they look at the way that incarceration affects women. But there's also the question of the way that incarceration affects women beyond women being incarcerated.

I am so honored to see "An American Marriage" on President Obama's list. It's wonderful for me as a writer, but I really hope we can all raise awareness for the issue of mass incarceration.

<https://t.co/LMjzjVzhz9>

— Tayari Jones (@tayari) August 20, 2018

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**MH: Women on the outside who are family, friends etc.**

**TJ:** Yes. I was looking at this question of marriage, too. What is commitment? This story arose from me seeing a young couple arguing and the woman said, "Roy, you know you wouldn't have waited on me for seven years." And he responded by saying, "I don't know what you're talking about. This would have never happened to you in the first place." So I was thinking a lot about that too, about expectations of reciprocity. I was thinking about the fact that in the African American community there is a sense that the men are under siege — because they are. And how does that affect the conversation about marriage?

**MH: Class also comes up in Celestial and Roy's relationship.**

I think there is a definite fear among middle class and upwardly mobile African Americans that despite the fact that you've done everything right, the state can come and get you at any time. That happens to Roy. And then what? What is collective responsibility? Is individualism ever appropriate? How does that intersect with feminism?

We always tell women to follow their dreams. But when we tell women to follow their dreams and to have their full agency in a marriage, we don't think of it in a context where a man is under siege. I tried to find novels by black women about women who were dissatisfied in their marriage for any reason. The novels I found where black women were getting free of marriages, they were always in danger. They were running for their lives. I couldn't find anything à la *The Awakening* where a woman is just like, "I'm not pleased." But there are so many white women's novels [like this] because the family or the marriage isn't seen as a lifeline for a community. So when a white woman writes a novel about pursuing her dreams, everyone's like, "Yes, girl. Pursue your dreams." But with black women it's far more complicated.

**MH: This reminds me of the moment in the novel where Celestial describes the trial. She testified for Roy, but the jury didn't believe her. She says, "I tried but I didn't know how to be anything other than "well spoken" in front of strangers." That really struck me, because especially for black and brown women, you have to be well spoken to be successful in your career. But it's this aspect of herself that Celestial feels fails Roy.**

**TJ:** You can't win, right? Thank you for asking me about it. No one ever talks to me about this. You remember when George Zimmerman was on trial for killing Trayvon Martin and there was a young lady [Rachel Jeantel] who spoke on behalf of Trayvon Martin? She was his friend. She was a working-class [teen] and her affect and presentation reflected that. And everyone said she wasn't a good witness. They said she wasn't a good witness because she *wasn't* well spoken.

[Celestial] decides that because she was too well spoken people don't think she's sincere. But had she had a different affect, she wouldn't have been credible because she wasn't educated enough.

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**"You can't see the whole room until you've looked at it from all the corners."**

**MH: Can we talk about the structure? You have all these different viewpoints.**

**TJ:** Different viewpoints give me life! I actually have to restrain myself from not doing more viewpoints. I just bought a new house and I'm trying to figure out what I'm going to do about this situation with my curtains. And I find myself looking at the room from different parts of the room. Sometimes people say, "Are your narrators reliable?" I feel like when I'm looking at this room, this angle is no more reliable or

unreliable than another angle. It's just different. But you can't see the whole room until you've looked at it from all the corners. That's what I believe about story.

**MH: What is your writing process like? I don't know if you write everyday because you teach.**

**TJ:** It can be done. I feel like when the writing is going well, I don't have any rules. It's like being in love. When you're in love, you don't need time to be in love. You don't need special restaurants. The world has to make its time around you. But when the writing isn't going well, the rituals become important. And that would be: I like to write early in the morning. I have a couple cups of coffee. I like to have a very clean desk. I write on typewriters. I set a timer. If I can spend 90 minutes without getting up, just writing, I will have moved the book forward. I feel like writing a novel is a lot like being in a relationship. Sometimes you're in love and you're just zipping through and everything is sunshine. Other times you have to work at it but you work at it until you fall in love again and then you zip through until you finish the book.

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**MH: You write on typewriters!**

**TJ:** I do!

**MH: What is it about working on typewriters? I'm sure not being connected to the Internet helps.**

**TJ:** Yes. And I love making all that noise. I feel like I'm getting something done. Also, it's more legible than my handwriting. And unlike a computer it slows you down because if you type too fast you get tangled. When I compose on the computer I compose so fast I don't even know what I wrote. It's like when you eat too fast. You know you ate it. Clearly the plate is empty, but you don't quite remember eating it. That's how I feel when I compose on the computer.

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**I want to write not out of memory of the South, but from my experience.**

**MH: You write about Atlanta a lot. What is it about Atlanta that inspires you?**

**TJ:** After I moved away from Atlanta I discovered that people really don't understand the South. In the American imagination the South is often put forth as shorthand for African American suffering. I grew up

in Atlanta. It's a major American city. There is a thriving black middle class. When I was up North I would tell people I was from Georgia and they would act like I got to Brooklyn on the Underground Railroad. So, it was really important to me to write home to represent home — and also because I was so homesick.

I wanted to move back home because when I was on tour I noticed that I would constantly be interviewed by people who lived blocks from my home in Brooklyn. They could be from anywhere in the world but they all lived in walking distance from my apartment in Brooklyn. What does it mean for American literature if so many of our major players frequent the same coffee shop? I am trying to represent for regional literature. I think that the richness of the potential of American literature is in the fact that the country is so large and diverse. And I want to be a Southern writer writing from the South. I want to write not out of memory of the South, but from my experience. I want to record the present moment.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

*Melissa Hung is a writer and journalist. Her essays and reported stories about culture, race, and immigration have appeared in NPR, Vogue, Pacific Standard, and Catapult. Find her on Twitter.*

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