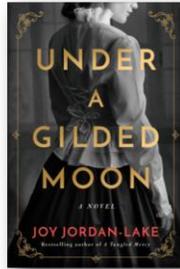

A Conversation with Joy Jordan-Lake



***Blue Hole Back Home* is inspired by a true story. How does this novel represent your own story, and what ultimately motivated you to write about it years later?**

Honestly, I've felt haunted by this story.

All the characters in *Blue Hole Back Home* are purely fictional, as is the town of Pisgah Ridge, North Carolina, but the story has its roots in several incidents during my own teen years. One of these incidents involved a family from Sri Lanka who moved to our all-white town in the mountains of East Tennessee. I grew up on Signal Mountain, a small town on top of Walden's Ridge just outside Chattanooga. The Sri Lankan family's older daughter was about my age, a year behind me in our high school down in the valley, and we became friends. She was beautiful, small-statured and had the thickest black hair and a smile that knocked you clear off your feet.

I remember her explaining to me that her family had moved to the United States because her father was convinced that America was "the end of the rainbow." She just beamed when she said it, so full of trust and excitement. And I recall even then being uneasy. They were the only dark-skinned family living on our mountain, and my friend seemed happily oblivious to the fact that perhaps not everyone thought it was just peachy that she and her family had moved to our town. She began attending my church—and in fact, the church still has some old photographs someone snapped of a group of us teenagers together. So far as I know, she was accepted there, at least, without question. Her family had come from a Muslim background in Sri Lanka, but they weren't practicing Muslims, and I'm guessing her father allowed her to become involved with a Christian church because it seemed the American—and certainly the southern—thing to do in

order to fit in.

Then one night my father announced he'd been notified that the Klan was burning a cross on the family's front lawn, and he was rushing there to be with my friend and her family. He and I had different memories of what happened next: whether I went with him that night or desperately wanted to and wasn't allowed. At any rate, here's what I recall of what actually happened: The Klan had, in addition to burning the cross on the lawn, also shattered the plate-glass window in front of the house and burned the family's car—and generally destroyed, of course, any sense of welcome or safety. In the midst of that night's terror, my friend's father turned to my dad and asked, "Which way is Mecca? Please, can you point me toward Mecca?" My father pointed him toward the east and then knelt beside him to pray.

Immediately after the cross burning, the family decided to move to Washington, DC, where my own family had moved from ten years before. And when I stood there saying goodbye to my friend, she looked me in the eye and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, demanded, "We thought America was the end of the rainbow—we believed it. Explain this to me."

And you know, I'd like to tell you that I made an inspiring little speech that revived her faith in God and in the United States of America—with freedom and justice for all—and that I exchanged addresses with my friend and that we've been close to this day, e-mailing and text messaging regularly. The truth is, I have no idea what I said in that moment as we stood there as frightened teenagers. I just remember being so rocked by the whole thing, so embarrassed, so powerless to say anything even remotely helpful. I never saw or heard from her again.

So maybe that's why I initially wrote a short story about it that was included in my first book, *Grit and Grace*. The book editor for the Chattanooga newspaper suggested in her review of *Grit and Grace* that I should consider making a novel of that story, "Blue Hole." And I thought, "Yeah, she's right. I'd like to do that. I'd like to have another chance to say, through fiction, what I wish I'd actually said to my friend back then." So even though it took me years to get around to writing the novel, maybe I've been trying to get it right all along, trying to make the story turn out differently, with more closure, more healing, more hope.

Interestingly, though, even in writing what I'd intended as a more hopeful version of the story than the reality, things in the fictionalized world still refused to tie themselves

neatly into a bow of perfectly resolved reconciliation. Maybe life is just more open ended and complex than that.

One of the editors of this book, Nicci, who was fabulous to work with, found it disturbing, I think, that justice isn't really served at the end of the novel—nobody really gets nailed for [spoiler alert] the death of a central character—and Nicci leaned on me a little, appropriately so, to make things happen more justly. I took her input seriously but just couldn't do it. Maybe something inside me kind of rebelled—maybe, not consciously, but maybe I couldn't because historically so many African-American deaths resulting from race crimes in this country went so utterly unpunished.

Any idea what happened to the Sri Lankan girl of your actual experience?

Over the years, I've tried to find my old friend a number of times—and I've even had readers from a number of book clubs join the effort to find her—but so far, we've not been able to make contact, and all my letters to various addresses have been returned. No one I've found on social media matches her name so far. I changed her name for this book to protect her and her family, and also because the fictional Farsanna figure is only inspired by my friend, not a replica. Still, it's occurred to me to dream: wouldn't it be incredible if somehow, someone who knows her now and knows something of her early days having settled in the mountains of East Tennessee . . . What if this someone stumbled across *Blue Hole Back Home* and showed it to her—and we had a chance to reconnect? The possibilities are more than a little remote, I realize, but wouldn't that make quite an afterword for a later edition? An afterword, perhaps, more valuable than the story itself.

Your novel involves the Ku Klux Klan, racism in America in general, and evidence that it still exists today. What specific bits of history are particularly relevant to *Blue Hole Back Home*? How did that history drive your characters and storyline? What did your personal experiences teach you about such discrimination?

In addition to the cross-burning, other elements in the novel that were inspired by actual events and that occurred during this same time period—the late 1970s and 1980—include a Ku Klux Klan roadblock on Signal Mountain and a downtown Chattanooga shooting spree that injured several African-American women. During the eight or so years that I lived as a young adult in Boston, if I ever ventured to tell my northern friends any of

these stories, they looked at me like I must be about a hundred and twelve years old. They were convinced that the South remained an illiterate, racist backwater, but it still struck them as utterly impossible that someone my age (I was born on the last day of 1963) could have seen an actual Klansman anywhere outside a history book or known anyone whose yard had been the site of a burning cross.

The novel's scene with the KKK roadblock was inspired by one my family ran into driving back from swimming on the back side of the mountain. My father was driving. To that point, I'd never seen the Klan in person before, and I recall when we saw these figures up ahead, all dressed in what looked for all the world like bedsheets and pillowcases, I thought it was a joke—until we got closer. And they were holding fast food chicken buckets—an utterly ridiculous image, you'd think. But there was nothing amusing about these guys. They were collecting money in the buckets, and they poked shotguns in the driver's-side window to “encourage” contributions. My father declined to contribute.

At the time, it seemed only natural that he would calmly refuse—exactly what I expected, and I don't recall being as terrified as I probably ought to have been, maybe because I knew what he would say. But as a parent now myself, I realize how frightened he must've been, not so much for his own safety as for the safety of his family there in the car. He was declining to contribute to guys who'd just shoved a shotgun muzzle into a car with his family in it. And then—this is what my mother recalls being the most terrifying part—the bedsheets started rocking our car back and forth so violently it seemed sure to flip over.

My parents did what they needed to do morally, even at the risk of whatever might have happened. And I recall resting in the knowledge, even scared as I was in the backseat, that my dad would tell the bedsheets *no*. That there would be no compromising with racist ugliness and evil.

That's been an ongoing lesson to me as a parent myself: That our gut instinct as parents is always, always to protect our kids and keep them happy and safe. But that we also have to live in a way that grows and nurtures their souls, their characters, their moral and ethical sensibilities. And sometimes, as in the case of this roadblock, you just straight up have to say *no* to ugliness and evil—even when that's not the safest decision.

You mentioned the shooting spree was also inspired by actual events?

Right. The novel's shooting spree down in the valley was inspired by an incident on April 19, 1980—again, while I was in high school. In response to some Klan members

having met with leaders of the NAACP, three local Klan renegades who viewed this as evidence of the KKK's becoming too soft, drove through a predominantly African-American section of downtown Chattanooga with one of the three guys shooting randomly at the sides of the street. One of these guys, I'm told, graduated from my high school, though several years before I did. I'm happy to say we've never met.

Four African-American women were shot, though not killed that night, and a fifth was injured by flying glass from the blasts. Incredibly, two of the three men were acquitted, and the third, the one firing the gun, spent only nine months in prison. When the verdict from the all-white jury came down, the city's African-American population erupted, quite understandably. Again, we were well past what could be considered even the broadest definition of the Civil Rights era, and yet here were these atrocities going essentially unpunished. I suppose it made an early cynic of me about racial hatred ever being entirely eradicated from any part of our country—and at the same time, made me someone who is doggedly, even unreasonably, hopeful about the potential for individuals and towns and whole regions of the country to admit screw ups and tragedies and brutalities, and genuinely change.

In the wake of a number of recent events including the white supremacist march in Charlottesville, years after this novel's original publication but just months before its re-release in the fall of 2017, it has become clear all over again—to anyone thinking we live in a sweetly post-racial society—that we still have a long—a *painfully* long—way to go as a culture in terms of racial equality. Still, I've seen so much change for the good in my lifetime: individuals and whole towns.

I've read and admired the work of acclaimed writer and thinker Ta-Nehesi Coates and I hear his warnings about the glibness and just plain not-getting-it-ness of white people wanting to make ourselves feel better by ending a story about race with hope, as if that could somehow whitewash over present pain or present inequities of, for example, who gets arrested for what and how they get punished. I do hear this. And I do believe I have an absolute obligation to listen well to the perspectives of friends and cultural leaders and writers who aren't white and can tell me what I cannot know or live out in the same way. I do believe in how far our country and our culture have to go. But I still also believe in the power of love and of hope to transform people and towns and nations—what the characters of *Blue Hole* remember about Jimbo, his “always digging out room for a chance that somebody could change.”

What about one of the chief villains of the novel, Mort Beckwith? Any

basis for him in real life?

Actually, yes. His first name is just a play on the French word for death, *morte*. But the last is a point toward Byron De La Beckwith, the assassin of African-American Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers, whom De La Beckwith shot in 1963 in front of Evers's home and then watched crawl, bleeding, dying, to his wife and children. De La Beckwith was set free in 1964 by two all-white juries in Mississippi, who failed to reach a unanimous verdict. All this I knew, vaguely, from history courses. But in the 1990s, when *Ghosts of Mississippi* came out in theaters, I was living in Boston and sitting by my husband and several friends watching the movie. In one pivotal scene, a central character insists that De La Beckwith has gone unpunished all these years, living free and easy up in his home on . . . and then the character's voice rises to what I recall as a shout—*Signal Mountain, Tennessee*. Or maybe it only sounded like a shout because of its exploding inside my head.

So the man whom everyone knew was Evers's assassin had been living on our mountain all those years and none of us knew it? And what was it about my beloved hometown that made it a place where he thought—or knew—he'd be safe, infamous as he was? I called every childhood friend I was still in touch with. Like me, this movie was the first any of them had heard of the fact. So if none of us knew as children or teens growing up there, and presumably none of our parents knew, who exactly *did* know?

In speaking to book clubs and school groups after this novel's initial 2008 publication, I learned that some folks on our mountain did indeed know, and that De La Beckwith had his own little group of old men with whom he'd gather and smoke and share ugly ideas. One book club member told me how her son would come home from his after school job at an establishment where these old men gathered in a back room, and the son would be shaken to the core by the kind of talk he'd overheard. But our justice system, the envy of much of the world but far from infallible, had acquitted a white supremacist murderer. Legally, Byron De La Beckwith was a free man.

De La Beckwith apparently did begin to talk, even brag, about the murder. Jerry Mitchell, an intrepid reporter for Jackson's *Clarion-Ledger*, worked with Evers's widow to reopen the case in 1989 and, finally, in 1994, to send De La Beckwith to jail, where he died of heart failure. But even now, if you look up my hometown on Wikipedia, it will tell you, essentially, that this is a remarkably beautiful place with a remarkably high average-income level, and that it is the residence of Byron De La Beckwith. It's so sad.

But this wasn't ancient history—these were my growing up years. And I'm not entirely

ancient yet, last time I checked. This wasn't just any old racist, decrepit southern town straight out of Faulkner's fiction; it was our own peaceful, neighborly, dogwood-covered hometown. How could it be that I learned of this particular ugly secret of my hometown thanks to Hollywood speaking through a cinema in New England? Maybe that was when the incidents from my teen years, the cross burning and roadblock and shooting spree, began to strike me as more than a string of unrelated events. Maybe that's when this particular white chick writer woke up to racial realities I'd never really connected the pieces to before—or at least never let it break my heart enough before.

How did the story behind *Blue Hole* impact your own ideas about spirituality or faith?

My teen and adult years have been a spiritual journey with plenty of unlovely stumbles, but a journey, at least, of seeking God—of being, on my best days, knocked-over grateful for grace.

Looking back, I realize how formative—and maybe fragile—those early years were, in terms of forming some kind of idea of who God is, what a powerful, ferocious, radical love is about, and what a faith community ought to be. Although the church I grew up in was all white, I just naively assumed that when I invited my Sri Lankan friend to church, she'd be warmly welcomed. And she was. There were rumors sometimes about someone or another in the church being known as a racist—this was a small town, after all, and people knew things about other people, or thought they did. But my friend seemed to feel genuinely comfortable there. I suspect a number of people went out of their way to be sure she felt cared for and included. It didn't seem particularly monumental at the time—and shouldn't have—that a church would welcome anyone wanting to walk through its doors. Wouldn't that be precisely the point?

I imagine that if my hometown church had in any way rejected this Sri Lankan girl because of her skin color, lots of us my age would've rejected anything and everything the church tried to teach us from then on out.

Instead, despite what happened there on our ridge with the Klan, at least this particular southern church didn't bolt its doors.

The fictionalized church in the novel, though, I depicted more along the lines of how miserably so many other southern churches behaved during the Civil Rights era and years after. And the Baptist preacher of the novel, who is initially passive to the point of

cowardice, is decidedly *not* based on my own father, who was our church's pastor. One reason I probably pictured the good Reverend Riggs as a round, blond, balding mouse of a man was that he was diametrically opposed to my own tall, dark-haired, slender dad, whom I watched over the years take a lot of heat for his position on any number of issues.

If anything, the character of Reverend Riggs comes from my own fundamental tendencies to value harmony, as in the lack of conflict or turmoil, over just about anything. It can be a very dangerous trait, one I'm forever learning to battle. By nature, I just want the lion to lie down with the lamb twenty-four seven and be chummy, so I can relax and digest my food.

I was once privileged to eat dinner at the next table over from Archbishop Desmond Tutu—though he wouldn't know me from the pork tenderloin that was served. He said in his speech that night that taking seriously the teaching of Jesus means becoming not *peacelovers* but *peacemakers*. There's an enormous difference there, a difference that calls for active engagement on our parts, for speaking up. Which is why Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," reamed out the "nice" white clergy of the South as being ultimately more harmful than the Klan—letting things roll along for the sake of not upsetting the social order or disturbing anyone's day can contribute more to the perpetuation of evil than all the blazing crosses in the world. It's something I know I need to hear every day: are there ways that even today my keeping my mouth shut on an issue—because I am so blasted conflict averse—actually helped evil along on its way?

How are you like Shelby? How are you different?

I'm certainly not Shelby, and Shelby is not me. I was never, for example, in love with a Jimbo. Shelby, though, is about the same age I was when my Sri Lankan friend moved to town, and like me at the time, Shelby is skinny and awkward, more comfortable with her brother's friends than girls her own age. In my own early teen years, my own brother, David, let me run around with his buddies, who accepted me for no good reason other than that, I suppose, they respected my brother. Maybe Shelby partially comes from the more cynical, skeptical side of me, the side of me that screws up and then refuses to feel forgiven. And I suppose I share in common with Shelby that while she is capable of being fiery and feisty, she can also clam up just when she ought to speak out—and she despises that about herself.

What about the Blue Hole itself, where the novel's teenagers go to swim and to be together and escape heat and the tensions of the outside world? Is there a real Blue Hole?

The Blue Hole of this novel is loosely based on two swimming holes in my hometown: one actually called the Blue Hole and another reached by a trail that descends sharply at Rainbow Falls near Signal Point. The natural beauty of the mountain is stunning. Now that I live in the Southeast again, I love going to visit.

What do you hope most for your readers to glean from this novel?

I'd like to think that any story of bigotry or blind hatred or deceit reminds us of the ugliness any of us are capable of—not just by actively perpetuating it ourselves, necessarily, but sometimes by choosing to look the other way and let it continue. I also hope this is a story about the possibilities that always exist for complete and total transformation, against all the odds. The history of racism in the United States is a tragic one, no doubt about it. But I'm always fascinated by the individuals or groups along the way who, despite what they'd been taught to believe, despite how everyone around them behaved, held to an ideal of equality in God's eyes and couldn't be shaken from that. My most recent novel, *A Tangled Mercy*, explores many of these same themes.

Why set the novel in the late 1970s, rather than, say, the '60s, which was better known for racial turmoil?

For one thing, this was an era I remember well from personal experience, whereas I was a young child in the '60s. And it was important to me to set this novel in 1979, at a time that was supposed to be safely beyond the horrors of slavery or of early twentieth-century lynchings or of mid-twentieth-century legally segregated buses and sidewalks and school systems. The summer of 1979 was beyond that, yes—yet racially motivated ugliness was still far from underground. I hope this story suggests our taking a serious—and maybe intentionally skeptical—look at the not-so-distant past and our own era.

In fact, when several colleges and universities such as Baylor University and Amarillo College chose *Blue Hole Back Home* as their Common Book after its initial 2008 publication, I often heard from (white) students that their generation had “solved” the problem of racism, but that they saw things in this novel that were helpful for discussion on other areas of compassion for outsiders. It was like they thought their generation had

checked off that particular box on the older generations' To Do list. *Peace, justice and the equitable pursuit of happiness for all? Yep, got that covered.* Now, though, as the novel is being re-released in 2017—in the wake of numerous events including white supremacists, startlingly young, carrying torches in Charlottesville—I suspect I won't be hearing that anymore.

Have you always wanted to be a writer? What turned you into a writer?

I've wanted to write ever since I learned to read, I think. And the more I read, the more I wanted to write and keep reading and write better.

I remember in fourth grade, my teacher, Mrs. Gross, read aloud to the class a poem I'd written about having spotted a buck in the snow. Now, I don't know that I'd ever seen a buck in the snow before, and it was probably an atrocious poem. But it was a turning point, letting my imagination create this scene, then creating that scene for a group of other people and having the teacher hang up my poem for everyone to see. I was never the kid who could knock the kickball clear out of the field—the skill that matters the most when you're nine and perpetually picked last for teams in P.E.—so it was a real gift to be noticed that way. For days, I'd pass my poem hanging there on the bulletin board and just couldn't believe anyone else had taken notice of it or that my words had actually connected with other people. In fifth grade, my teacher, Mrs. Buckshorn, quietly left me an article on my desk one day and whispered, "This is for you to read now, for when you grow up and become a writer." I don't know that I'd told anyone about wanting to be a writer, and I've always been spectacularly insecure, so, again, her insight was an enormous affirmation.

I have times of wishing I didn't enjoy writing so much, since unlike lots of other professional endeavors, there's not necessarily a direct correlation between how much time you put in and how far you get in the field. I enjoy teaching on the university level too, and I often try to convince myself that since I dedicated all those years to gathering the proper credentials, I should simply, and only, teach. But teaching, if you try to do it well, often crowds out time to write, and I become . . . well, out of balance, off kilter with the universe, when I can't write. I just want to snarl and snap at anything that moves. So it's probably best for all concerned that I try to write on a regular basis.

What else have you written, and what intrigues you for future novels?

Blue Hole Back Home was my fifth book, but my first novel. Earlier, I'd written a

nonfiction book, *Working Families*, on navigating kids and career; a collection of stories, *Grit & Grace*; a collection of reflections, *Why Jesus Makes Me Nervous*; and an academic book, *Whitewashing Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that looks at nineteenth-century women novelists' responses to Harriet Beecher Stowe. That era, nineteenth-century America, continues to fascinate me. My most recent novel, in fact, was birthed out of that dissertation research. Originally a purely historical novel set in early nineteenth-century Charleston, South Carolina, *A Tangled Mercy* became a dual timeline story in which a Harvard graduate student desperate to discover what caused the dissolution of her family and struggling to save her torpedoed academic career finds her life intertwined with a slave revolt two hundred years earlier and the gifted blacksmith who became its weapon maker.

Regarding the next novel, I've begun work on a story set during the Gilded Age at Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina. The Vanderbilts themselves were fascinating, of course, along with all the intrigue of financial crises and jockeying for social position, but I think a lot of us forget about the uproar during the 1890s over immigration and who ought to be allowed in and which of all these new groups flooding the country might "ruin" America. My husband's people are from Southern Italy and one of my daughters was born in China, two groups of people particularly reviled and feared in this era. It can be incredibly chilling doing research and reading the sorts of things highly educated cultural and political leaders were saying about the lack of intelligence or worth ethic or the criminality of the Southern Italian and Chinese newcomers. And it makes for interesting discussion in terms of our own current debates about newcomers to this country.

Like a gazillion others, I loved the PBS series "Downton Abbey." This Biltmore novel (so far) is being told from the perspective of four different characters, two from the privileged upperclass and two from immigrant and refugee populations. I hope it will be suspenseful and engrossing. Right now, I'm still doing a lot of whacking around in the weeds. But that's always where my books seem to start so...here's to hope and hard work and the brilliance of a good editor—God bless that entire profession.

Finally, I'd like to thank readers of *Blue Hole Back Home* once more. Truly, I am grateful for your time in traveling through these pages to Pisgah Ridge—and perhaps to some past stories of your own—and I value hearing your thoughts.

Author Joy Jordan-Lake



Joy Jordan-Lake is the author of eight books, including the #1 Amazon Bestseller *A Tangled Mercy* and *Blue Hole Back Home*, which won the Christy Award in 2009 for Best First Novel. Her upcoming novel *Under a Gilded Moon* to be released on 12.01.20.

She holds a PhD in English Literature, is a former chaplain at Harvard, and has taught literature and writing at several universities.

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