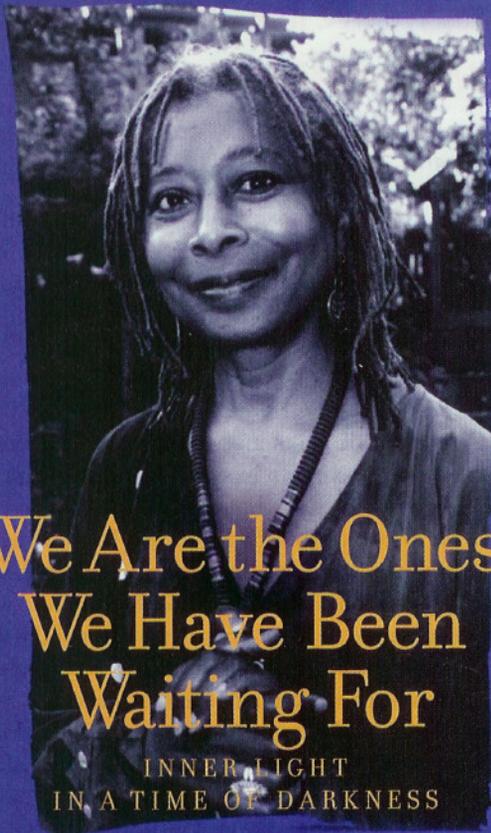


ALICE WALKER



## We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For

INNER LIGHT  
IN A TIME OF DARKNESS

MEDITATIONS

## A CONVERSATION WITH ALICE WALKER

In Her New Book, the Georgia-Born Author Offers Insights on Living Through Troubled Times

BY HILDA J. BRUCKER

the knowledge and means to change things. In other words, we are the ones we have been waiting for.

The book is made up of essays; since many were previously delivered as talks, they are immensely readable, colloquial and literary at the same time. Walker's ruminations range from the spiritual to the political to the personal, and are punctuated with anecdotes from her own life: the poverty-stricken Georgia childhood that left an indelible love of nature on her; her participation in the Civil Rights Movement and fascinating personal interactions with Martin Luther King; the taboo interracial marriage that was illegal in Mississippi at the time; and a visit to Cuba that included sharing a hug with dictator Fidel Castro.

Many of the essays become meditations when they are coupled with a call to action, or, more simply, a call to awareness. At the end of one chapter, Walker asks you to reflect on history and consider what might be done differently if a similar event were unfolding today. At the end of another, she urges you to share a ripe, sun-warmed peach with a child and let the juice run down your chin.

Whether or not you agree with all of Walker's passionate convictions about what can be done to solve the greatest problems of our times, you're likely to find something that resonates with you in this book. Walker is not only a good storyteller, she is wise and compassionate; she makes you want to believe that humanity can rise above oppression of any kind. You'll want to keep a pen in your hand while reading this book and underline all the passages that touch you in some way. Then you'll be able to pick up the book over and over again, and the messages that recharged your spirit will come forward to inspire you once more.

“IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES.” So opens “We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For,” the latest literary offering from Alice Walker, released this month. She quickly follows the famous Dickens quote with an eloquent explanation of how these words apply to the state of the world today. “It feels as though the very Earth is being stolen from us, by us,” she explains in the book’s introduction, ticking off as examples the polluted status of land, air and water; the looming extinction of so many species; the wars breaking out around the globe; and the degraded and misguided condition of humanity in general.

Yet Walker doesn’t dwell on this bleak scenario for more than a few sentences, instead using it as a prologue to a compelling message of hope. We have entered a period, she writes, “of great clarity as to cause and effect.” Unlike our ancestors, we don’t have to cower under clouds of doubt, uncertain as to the origins of our suffering, waiting for salvation from supernatural forces. Because we can now see into “every crevice of the globe,” as well as “unexplored crevices in our own hearts and minds,” we have everything we need to survive. Our newfound awareness, she asserts, means that unlike those who came before us, we have

*"We have only to open our eyes, and awaken to our predicament. We see that we are, alas, a huge part of our problem. However: We live in a time of global enlightenment. This alone should make us shout for joy."*

ALICE WALKER

*"We Are The Ones We Have Been Waiting For"*

*Points North* contributing writer Hilda Brucker chatted with Alice Walker about her latest book and her thoughts on the world.

HB: What inspired you to put these meditations together?

AW: Because we're in such a terrible time. I think the world has never been in such stress. There is such a danger, for instance, of nuclear war ... once people start thinking of a nuclear exchange of any kind, it's possible we're in tremendous danger as a human population. So it's very important for people to be able to center themselves and, in a sense, get ready for we-know-not-what-exactly.

HB: Will this book have more of an effect on your readers' political beliefs or on their inner, spiritual lives?

AW: Well, I think all of my books have had an effect on how people act in the world; otherwise I don't think I would bother to write them. For instance, "The Color Purple" has made a great deal of impact on domestic violence, on incest, on rape. And other books have helped people to see how art is right there in their own homes, and in their communities, and that their histories are stronger and much more vital than they think.

HB: Do you write primarily for women?

AW: I write, but I'm not writing for anyone, really. You know, there has been a women's movement; women are very conscious; women do buy books. But some men are conscious; many men buy books, too. So at this point, I hope to connect with people who really just want to survive intact as human spiritual beings.

HB: A friend of mine had the experience of reading "The Temple of My Familiar" back in 1989 and not understanding it all, until she re-read it in 2005. Then the message was clear to her, and she said it was as if the process of becoming a woman, of really experiencing life and living, were the keys that got her into that private room where your themes could resonate with her. Do your readers have to reach a certain level of spiritual development before they can connect with your work?

AW: Yeah, I think they do. And I think that, really, we all have to start somewhere. We don't always have all the stuff we need to understand people's art. But we can understand as much as we can and then we grow into it as your friend did, and that's perfectly fine. I think many people didn't understand ["The Temple of My Familiar"] because they assumed after "The Color Purple," I would only be writing about black people in the South or something. But that's really their concern; it's not mine. I'm really interested in what

everybody on the planet is doing — you know, how are people interacting, how are they living, what is happening with people in different cultures.

HB: Many of your books are concerned with the theme of ancestors. Why is this important to you?

AW: Well, we talk about ancestors and we don't necessarily mean just the people in our own bloodlines. You know, it's the people that you resonate with throughout history, who have your own spirit. Those are also ancestors. So Sojourner Truth is an ancestor and so is Harriet Tubman. So is John Brown. And Black Elk. All of these are ancestors. And we call on them when we read what they write. And the ultimate ancestor is whatever created the whole thing.

And again, many other cultures in the world understand this very well, and those people can relate to their ancestors. So it's so sad that other people walk around feeling like they don't have their ancestors; and they don't have a clue what that means, how rich it is to actually feel your ancestors in you, at all times. So I just can say that I've always felt them; I've always known that they were very real, as real as I am. They're not here physically in human form, but it's just part of the mystery because they're so present in every other way.

HB: What about the author Zora Neal Hurston? She was an "ancestor" who resonated with you so much that you set out to find and mark her grave.

AW: Very much so! She was very much an ancestor! She was also very much, I felt, maligned and abused and not understood. And I just delighted in shining the light over her so that people wouldn't miss that wonderful being that she was. This was someone who had written one of the most beautiful books in the American canon. And it was just embarrassing, really, that nobody knew who she was, where she was, how she died, where she was buried. And this was not acceptable.

HB: You wrote in your new book about experiencing an "intense house hunger" as an adult, because your family was too poor to own a home while you were growing up. What is your house like now?

AW: Well, I have many of them. That was the point, that I just bought many houses. For instance, the one that I'm in now is based on a 14th-century Japanese farmhouse and Shinto shrine (laughs). I had gotten some money because I had sold "The Color Purple" by then and I was able for the first time in my life to actually choose the kind of house I wanted and to build it, and so that's what I did.

HB: In another essay in the book you mentioned an organization called Heifer International that you support, and how it appeals to you as someone who grew up on a farm here in Georgia. Can you tell us about that?

AW: If you go online, you can find them [[www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org)]. And instead of giving people ties and hankies for Christmas and birthdays, you can actually, in their name, arrange to send big fat cows and water buffalo and sheep and pigs and chickens and ducks to people who actually need them.

HB: So you'd be sending a means of livelihood to poverty-stricken countries?

AW: Oh absolutely! I mean, I've never had a water buffalo, but we had cows and pigs and everything else. And what you send is a way for people to be solvent, economically viable. It's very different from sending people a care package that they're going to run through in about a week and then they have to be concerned with starvation all over again. It's about deeply understanding that we are on this planet together. And the very idea that people are starving because they don't have food is an obscenity. We have to change it by any means necessary and this is one of those means. As Katrina has taught us, you never know when you're going to be the one needing that sheep or that cow.

HB: Have you seen "The Color Purple" on Broadway?

AW: Oh yeah, many times. It's just having a wonderful run. Men, women, whoever — they're all very happy to see it and to understand it, in a way that many people just refused to understand it when it came out twenty-some years ago. I think it's an extremely durable story and translates beautifully [to the stage]. To me, there's just something about live theater, especially with that story. It's a workout; it's an emotional workout. Each time I've seen it, I've left the theater almost crawling because it's so beautifully done.

HB: You end "We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For" with an essay about being arrested while protesting the war in Iraq, and you make it sound like a peaceful and spiritual experience. Why did you conclude with this anecdote?

AW: We really have to try to learn to live in a way that we can actually survive as a species. People really have to wake up, really understand how close to 12 o'clock that clock really is. It would also be very helpful if the media, for instance, paid more attention to the activities of women against war. It's not as if it's only men involved — women suffer, women die, and children, too.

HB: Someone once wrote in an analysis of your work that it contains "a sense of someone writing not simply to be writing, but because she wanted to make people see things." Do you feel this is especially true of your latest book?

AW: I do. I want people to see that they live in incredible magic. They live in incredible beauty and richness and gloriousness. Don't miss it — WAKE UP!

**A Literary Life**

Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Ga. in 1944, the youngest of eight children. Her parents were poor tenant farmers who didn't own a house or land. When Walker was 8, her brother inadvertently blinded her in one

eye while playing with a BB gun. The teasing she received from other children about the scar caused her to turn inward, and she spent much time in solitude, reading and writing poetry. Six years later, a doctor removed the scar tissue and Walker

went on to become valedictorian of her high school class, which earned her a state scholarship to Spelman College in Atlanta. After two years, she transferred to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. A teacher there showed Walker's poems to her own agent, who in turn gave them to a publishing company that produced them in a book.

Walker had been involved with the Civil Rights Movement since her days at Spelman, and in 1967, she married Mel Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights lawyer. They became the first interracial couple in the state of Mississippi, where their marriage was considered illegal. Two years later, their daughter Rebecca was born, and a year after that, Walker published her first novel titled "The Third Life of Grange Copeland."

While continuing to write novels and short stories, Walker moved to Massachusetts in 1972. At Wellesley College, she taught a course on African-American Woman Studies, the first class of its type in the country. In 1974, she returned to New York, becoming a contributing editor at Ms. Magazine.

Walker had long been fascinated with the writings of Zora Neale Hurston, a black novelist and anthropologist. In 1975, she published an article in Ms. about a pilgrimage she had made several years prior to find Hurston's unmarked grave and place an engraved monument on it. Though Hurston

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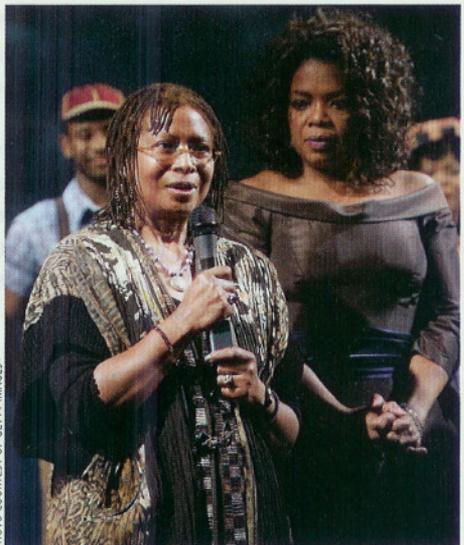


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Alice Walker and Oprah Winfrey at the 2005 Broadway presentation of "The Color Purple"

had died penniless and in obscurity, Walker's attention revived interest in her work and as a result, Hurston's books are back in print today.

Walker and Leventhal divorced in 1976, the year Walker's second novel was published. Titled "Meridian," it had been inspired by her involvement with the Civil Rights Movement. Shortly afterward, Walker moved to California, settling in Mendocino, where she lives today.

"The Color Purple," Walker's signature work, was published in 1982, plunging the author into fame nearly overnight. The novel had an unusual structure, consisting of letters that two sisters, Celie and Nettie, had written to each other. Though it received biting criticism from certain groups for its negative portrayal of black men, the book was a literary success and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1983. Steven Spielberg translated the novel into film in 1986, and though it was nominated for 11 Academy Awards, it failed to win in any category.

Several best-selling novels followed. In 1989, "The Temple of My Familiar" was published. In 1992, "Possessing the Secret of Joy" explored the topic of ritualistic female genital mutilation. And in 1998, "By the Light of My Father's Smile" carried a message about father-daughter relationships.

In 2004, a musical stage version of "The Color Purple" premiered at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, receiving positive reviews and opening on Broadway the following year, co-produced by Oprah Winfrey.

Over the years, Walker has accumulated a number of prestigious literary awards and is considered one of the leading voices among American writers today. ✦

#### MEET THE AUTHOR

The Center for Southern Literature presents an evening with Alice Walker Tuesday, Nov. 14 at the Margaret Mitchell House & Museum

Reception: 6 to 7 p.m.

Author Talk: 7 to 8 p.m.

Book Signing: 8 p.m.

Advance ticket purchase required;

call 770-578-3502 to make a reservation

Tickets: \$15 for non-members; \$8 for members