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Interview of Monique Hayes

Monique Hayes 00:00

Well, my project is a historical fiction novel. It's titled Sally Forth. It follows two brothers during the American Revolution, and they take two different paths to secure their freedom. One's a black loyalist. His name's Albert. He hears about [George] Washington's banning blacks from service in the continent army. So, he goes and joins Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment. And then the younger brother, he stays committed to the Patriot cause. His name is Brook, and he replaces or substitutes for his master's son.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:37

[Intro music fades in] Historians and Their Histories is a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society. It introduces listeners to our community of researchers. We learn about the paths they took to become a student of the past and the projects they are working on at the MHS. I am Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai, the director of research at the MHS. Today we are sitting down with Monique Hayes, an independent scholar and author who is also the recipient of support from the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium, which is sponsored and administered by the MHS. Tell us a little bit about yourself, your background, your education, and how you became interested in writing fiction about history.

Monique Hayes 01:25

I'm Monique Hayes. I'm from Port Washington, Maryland. I'm a freelance writer right now, but I got my BA from Sweet Briar College, my MFA from the University of Maryland, College Park. How I actually wanted to start off as a literary fiction writer because that's what I grew up reading. But then, when I was a sophomore in college, I read two wonderful historical novels. One was Jazz by Toni Morrison. Toni Morrison is still my favorite female writer, which explores the challenges of African Americans during the Great Migration. And that's when I learned I can write about black history in a fiction form. I can write from multiple perspectives. And then I also read Ragtime by E. L. Doctorow and I thought it was wonderful, as I can introduce original characters and team them up with well-known historical figures. I didn't know that was possible. So, at 19, I really got interested in historical fiction as a genre, and I've been doing it ever since. It's been very rewarding.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:25

Were you in college by this point?

Monique Hayes 02:27

Yeah, I was in college.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:28

Okay, any influential professors, teachers?

Monique Hayes 02:31

Yeah, sure. Actually, some of my most influential professors are in a totally different period from the Revolutionary War. I had a professor named Professor [Michael] Richards at Sweet Briar and he actually noticed I was very good at writing historical essays. It was really overlooked, I'd say, the first two years of my college experience, because you're a good writer, but you're not really finding your voice. And then he said, 'Oh, you're really good at writing historical essays.' So, we discussed the Cold War, Russia, which is completely different period from what I'm writing about now. And then I had a medieval Renaissance Professor Lee Piepho who was well known in his field, and he encouraged me to really embrace all kinds of literature. And I think that's really the start of when I decided I can be a writer that goes into multiple fields and looks at things, looks at film, looks at things, how they connect. And then so he really gave me a love of literature period. I still love reading medieval Renaissance literature, by the way, but I much prefer writing about things 1700 and on.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:50

Okay, so actually, you have sort of explored the gamut of history from medieval times to the 20th century. What drew you to write about primarily write about the 18th century, the end of the 18th century in the Revolutionary era?

Monique Hayes 04:06

I just love that so many things were happening at that time. And the more you do research on it, the more you really appreciate how many people were showing agency, and things were forming, and

different countries were interacting. I just love the whole combination of different fields coming together and growing, the birth of things, I would say, and I just love seeing our rebellious country coming together. And, you know, I write coming of age narratives a lot, so to see a country coming into their own, and then you put your characters, they're coming into their own, that's really exciting to have that dichotomy and see it flourish in the work.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:55

Growing up in Maryland, did you have any interactions with historical sites? Was history a of interest when you were growing up?

Monique Hayes 05:03

Yeah, I was very blessed, because in the D.C. area, it's all around. So, I went to all the Smithsonian museums. Philadelphia wasn't that far. Virginia wasn't that far. So I went to battlefields, museums, not so much, historical societies, but still it was all around. The monuments you go by the metro, and they're right there. So, I've always been interested in history. I loved citizenship classes out I don't think they still have this, but I loved citizenship class because you got to study all the documents and talk about what makes a government work. And I'm learning this at 12 years old and remembering it still so, yeah, you really gain an appreciation by living in that particular area.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:47

And do you think that you're learning about all of this at this young adult age has that influenced how you've thought about the characters that you are creating that they are young adults themselves, coming of age, learning about where they stand in society?

Monique Hayes 06:05

I just thought of a story that I wrote, I guess, about, yeah, five years ago, about a young black classical pianist. And of course, she is looking at Marian Anderson, that famous concert, and you know, for her to be in that same area and hear about how the prejudice, and then she's thinking to herself, well, where's my door? And even me as a modern person living in D.C. and surrounded by this history, you can't help but think you know, how far have we come? Where could we go further? So, I think, yeah, being a

young person causes you to reflect on, well, what's the future? And you just hope for the best. You just hope that each year, that there's more progress in terms of, like, where's my place.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:01

So, before you started writing historical fiction, you've published other pieces. Tell us a little bit about your earlier work.

Monique Hayes 07:11

My earliest works had to deal with more universal themes. Yeah, like my first published work had to deal with illiteracy a lot, because that's something that I'm very much passionate about, about ending illiteracy. So one of the things that came out that I'm very happy has gone into schools being read widely is about the son of a migrant farmer, and he has to take a driving test, but he has to learn to read in order to do that, and he tries so hard to go through the test with his lower reading skill, but he realizes that he really does need to go back to school and learn how to read. So that's one of the projects I'm happy about. And then other things, mother/daughter relationships, familial relationships. So those are more universal things I've tackled. And I always write from young adult perspective, because I think that's really interesting to have that naivete and then growing awareness, and that's part of their character arcs. So yeah, they were more universal themes before I explored historical fiction.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 08:19

And so first tell us about your project and then tell us how you came to that project, how you decided on pursuing this.

Monique Hayes 08:25

Well, my project is a historical fiction novel. It's titled Sally Forth. It follows two brothers during the American Revolution, and they take two different paths to secure their freedom. One's a black loyalist. His name's Albert. He hears about Washington's banning blacks from service in the continental army. So, he goes and joins Lord Dunmore's Ethiopian Regiment. And then the younger brother, he stays committed to the Patriot cause. His name is Brook, and he replaces or substitutes for his master's son, and he's guaranteed his freedom and some schooling at Anthony Benezet state school in Philadelphia for blacks. That becomes a point of contention later about the school, but it follows them from 1775

through 1799 Washington's death, and it's about the trials and triumphs they go through. And they go through a lot of things to attain their freedom, and there's a lot of sacrifice. There's a lot of passion and triumph too. So, I'm really excited about it. I actually did not want to do a war novel because that involves a lot of studying strategy and weaponry and things I'm unfamiliar with. So, I kind of held back for about a couple years, but then I went to the Smithsonian Museum, the African American Museum. I saw a placard, and I was really interested in a statistic that 20,000 blacks joined the British army as opposed to just over 5,000 for the patriot. So, I said, 'Oh, wow, that's an interesting difference.' And then at the same day, I heard someone say, 'I didn't know blacks served in the Revolutionary War.' I said, well, that's kind of what I thought. Most people know about Crispus Attucks and Phillis Wheatley, but they don't know about Salem Poor and Peter Salem, and they don't know about the Ethiopian Regiment on the other side. So, I said, 'Why don't I try it on?' There's a lot of wonderful Civil War narratives, but not as many black Revolutionary war novels. And I hope I do, you know, a wonderful job with it and inspires others. But yeah, I noticed that gap and said, 'Why can't I do it?'

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:44

So, in writing about historical fiction, you're setting these characters in events that did take place that people have some familiarity with. Do you find that limiting or not? Does it stifle your ability to world build in any way or not? I'm just curious.

Monique Hayes 11:02

I don't ever feel stifled, because it's the perspective is, you know, especially from a young adult, the way they see things is so different, and you get to use your imagination more like when they're looking at I'll give an example, [Marquis de] Lafayette, Brook, the Patriot character, sees him, is not the most flattering view. And it's kind of like, here's this person that showed up. He's kind of not too muscular, and he's young and but so that invites a lot of different thoughts that wouldn't be normally thought about. So, I just go with that perspective. And even though I have to pay attention to the facts what the event was, I'm very adamant about getting it right. It's not that limiting because the imagination just lets you, lets Brook or [Albert] Albie see things in a way that would probably not be seen through another pair of eyes. I think that's one of the wonderful things about historical fiction. You have the event, which you can read in a lot of different books, but historical fiction is through their eyes. It opens up my imagination, and I get to put my own unique spin on it.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:21

And are Albie and Brook based on any actual characters from real life? Are they composites?

Monique Hayes 12:29

They are pretty much original characters, although with Brook in particular, I have to be he is a composite of different people that have substituted for their masters, their master's son. So, I pay very close attention to what their experiences were, but most of his life is original, but I always keep in mind how he got to the point where he is. I have to think about, I want to be accurate about that.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:59

All right, and so you are a recipient of a fellowship from the New England Regional Fellowship Consortium. For this project, you have visited several of the institutions in the consortium. Tell us a little bit about your journey and the sources you used at these some of these places.

Monique Hayes 13:17

Well, first, I'm so thankful for the New England fellowship because not all institutions support writers or offer fellowships to writers. So anytime there's more room at the table, I'm so grateful for that, and it's been wonderful to be in Boston at this time, not only for the resources but the experiences of 250th events. So, I thank the fellowship for even letting me walk in the same streets as the revolutionary war figures. So, some of the resources I've consulted at MHS in particular are the Continental Army orderly books, the Revolutionary orders of George Washington, [Friedrich Wilhelm von] Steuben's regulation for the order and discipline of troops. For Brook when he's first learning to read in his studies, I saw *The New England Primer* which I was really interested in, because I didn't know how popular it was. I didn't know it was first published here in Boston.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:15

Tell our listeners about what that is.

Monique Hayes 14:17

The New England Primer is basically it gets the foundation of reading and learning, and it's probably the, I think, the prime schoolbook for that period. So yeah, for Brook, he's actually learning at 13. That's when he's allowed to go to the school. So, it's been great to see like what he's actually first seeing when he sits down with Anthony Benezet. And then also I saw, I believe, as Alice Morse Earle's Child Life During the Colonial Days and they have hornbooks and psalters and different things Brook would have seen, and other children his peers would have seen. So, it's been really exciting to see what and I know Brook was excited, so I'm having that same experience to see those materials, and then the orderly books and the orders those are those are very interesting because Brooks is optimistic soldier when he first comes to Valley Forge. And then there's dead horses lying on the ground and all these sanitary conditions at the camp. So, it's like a very gritty personal view he has when he goes into Valley Forge. So, to read those materials, those primary documents, has been very helpful. So, you put Albie's character, the loyalist I read Marion Gilroy's Loyalists and Land Settlement in Nova Scotia and that was a comprehensive list of the land allotments. So, seeing the acreage they got, to their names, their ranks, that was also very helpful, because I hadn't seen it in a list form before. And it's heartbreaking too, because those land allotments, a lot of them were delayed. Upper black loyalists were delayed or not followed through. So, it's good to have those numerical facts. At the Boston Athenaeum I saw yesterday I saw Common Sense, George Washington's got to see his signature was wonderful, and then it was interesting to read it at this time, and then his account books. So, I'm not all the way through that yet, but it's that's been very enlightening to see that. While here at the MHS, I saw *Cato, a Tragedy* and I do have a scene in the book where Brook is watching that. And one line that stuck out to me, I hope that it moves readers in the novel when they read it, 'A life in bondage is a worthless thing.' And that's another great part of being historical fiction writer. You see these quotes from poetry, plays, and then you think, what if my character reacted to that. At the same time, you want your reader to react to it, and that means it makes it more immersive. It makes it more present that he's hearing that, and then the reader's taking in Brook, hearing that and feeling the same things, he is. So, you look for those human moments.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:20

What have been some of the biggest challenges of this project?

Monique Hayes 17:25

I was, have to say, unfortunately, and I knew it coming in, the lack of first-person narratives from African Americans. I mean, it's great. I can go to 10 different places and find Joseph Plumb Martin's memoirs, but then Salem Poor, who was in the same camp, I can't find anything from a first-person account. That makes me have to dig deeper write even more facts, like I left here with 100 pages of notes that has never happened before. So, thank you MHS, but yeah, it's kind of disappointing. You instinctively know you're not going to find as much, but at the same time, I'd rather collect all these facts and do my best to create portraits of the lives they live and try to honor their spirit. But it is difficult, but I like a challenge at the same time.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 18:18

So, all right, so the flip side of the challenges?. What about some surprises, something you had not considered?

Monique Hayes 18:25

Yeah, well, I did not know that this MHS had the Thomas Jefferson's farm book before I got here, and one character I've been clinging to is part of the Hemings family was probably not the one people are thinking about Robert Hemings, who was a valet in the declaration house where Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration [of Independence]. And the reason I zeroed in on him is because he's Brook's exact age 14, when Thomas is Thomas Jefferson is writing that Declaration. So I really appreciate looking at the farm book, because just getting into Jefferson's mind and then seeing Bob, that's what he's called in the farm book, you know, it's very hard because, you know, he's actually related to Jefferson through marriage and then, but he's also a possession, and then, you know, just thinking about, what would Robert or Bob be thinking about when he's hearing about the Declaration? So my goal is to have Brook, his peer, talk to him about it, and I think that'd be great to explore, you know, the wording of the Declaration when it means to two black teenagers at that point in time, and then they both get freedom after a while, after the war. So, they follow both their paths. So, when I saw also Annette Gordon-Reed's Monticello book to learn more about Robert and the farm book along with it, those are two great sources that I was surprised to find, not so much Annette Gordon-Reed but definitely the farm book to see Bob's name. I wasn't anticipating that, and also Lafayette's memoirs when he loses his daughter, Henriette. I wanted that to be a part of her novel. I was not expecting that he was mourning her during the war. I

knew he lost her, but I also wanted to put that in the novel, because Brook's an orphan, and he doesn't know what it's like to have a father see a father mourning a child. So that's another human moment I wanted to put into the novel. So those are two scenes I walked away with from the MHS.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:38

Very good, and you alluded to this a little earlier, but you are doing research here in the city of Boston in April of 2025 so that's the 250th anniversary of the start of the American Revolution here in Massachusetts. You've gotten to go to some of these sites, seen some of the programs and reenactments. How does this help you as you write the novel being in these locations, these environments?

Monique Hayes 21:07

It's a surprise I'm grateful for, because I was not expecting to be here in 2025 but to walk these streets, go to the same church as Phillis Wheatley, who's in the novel. And then I stood where Crispus Attucks the Boston Massacre happened. That is the inspiration for Albie and Brook. They hear about Crispus Attucks. They want to be soldiers. Unfortunately, Albie, he has a change of heart and goes with the loyalists. But yeah, Brook is committed to Crispus. I want to be Crispus Attucks. I want to be a patriot. So, I got to stay in that same space and think about that and just other things as well just keep popping up. And it's one thing to read the materials in Washington D.C. or the D.C. area Library of Congress, but then to actually be in the spaces as these historical figures, and it's just been extraordinary. I can't even describe it. I also went to Concord for the Patriot Day ceremony, and the Concord museum saw those artifacts. So, it's been very surreal and wonderful at the same time. I can't believe it's happening, but I think it feeds you remember the ideals when you're in the place, sometimes better. You remember the sacrifices, like standing, you know, in Boston Massacre site, and also, unfortunately, the prejudices, like at the Old North Church with the galley. I got to go up there. So yeah, it just makes it more of an immersive experience for me as a writer.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:46

You saw reenactors in period clothing. Does that give you a sense of how to add detail to what you're writing?

Monique Hayes 22:54

Yeah, I've seen about three reenactments now. I saw Monmouth, I saw the Lexington Concord, and then I also saw Yorktown, I think it was. So, it gives you a it definitely gives you a feel for the noise and the placement of the soldiers, the heat at Monmouth that it was hot that day during there in the battle. I was like, oh, okay, this is what it was like, and then also some wonderful things, like seeing these soldiers with such pride, walking across the bridges and going through the battlefields being fearless. So yeah, the reenactments are just a great visual tool, and also the feeling of them as well, and they're very proud about being reenactors.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:43

And so, what would you like your readers to take away from reading this novel when it comes out? Who do you want to read it and what do you want them to get out of it?

Monique Hayes 23:54

I want everyone to read it truthfully, because even scholars that have been studying this, they may not know one or two facts, but particularly, I've always thought about the young adults, Brook and Albie. I want them to really see their sacrifices, their desires and that their stories matter. We should be just talking more about young black soldiers, black soldiers during the Revolutionary War. We are not and not as much as I would like, but I also want them to walk away with empathy. That means a lot to me, because when you open a fiction novel, this is not and I love scholarship and scholars, but when you open a fiction novel, people immediately connect with that character. This is their story. So, all these moments in Brook and Albie's lives, I'm hoping they're very empathetic when they're reading about them. It makes them more curious about both sides of the black experience during the Revolutionary War, and if I did even if they have a small moment of empathy, I'll feel like I did my job.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 25:08

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