The Girl Who Fell from the Sky

An Interview with Heidi W. Durrow

Questions for Discussion

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As Heard on NPR's *All Things Considered*

MARCH 2, 2010

MELISSA BLOCK, host: From NPR News, this is *All Things Considered*. I'm Melissa Block.

MICHELE NORRIS, host: And I'm Michele Norris.

Like so many children of mixed marriages, the author Heidi Durrow has often felt like she's had to straddle two worlds. She's the daughter of a black serviceman and a white Danish mother. Her own personal search for identity inspired her debut novel. It's called *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. The story revolves around a girl who moves across country to live with her grandmother after surviving a family tragedy.

That preteen, Rachel, is also the daughter of a black GI and a white Danish mother, and as the story unfolds, you discover just how unfathomable her family tragedy was. Her mother, brother, and baby sister all died after leaping off a Chicago apartment building—a jaw-dropping turn of events that was actually based on a real story.

And Heidi Durrow joins us now. Welcome to the program.

HEIDI DURROW, author, *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky*: Thank you so much.

NORRIS: What was that event that inspired the tragedy in the book, the mother leaping off a building with her small children?

DURROW: It was a real newspaper story that I read about fifteen years ago. A mother went to the top of the building and the only survivor of this fall was this girl. I remember reading that and just being haunted by not the questions that the other people were asking about why this happened and how could we live in a world where this would happen, but I wondered: What would her survival look like? And I wanted . . .

NORRIS: What the girl's survival would look like?

DURROW: Yes, yes. I wanted to give her a future. I was hoping her life wouldn't be defined by a tragedy. And I really wanted to give her a voice to see how she might grow up.

NORRIS: How difficult was it as a writer to write about a little girl named Rachel whose life sounds a lot like yours, but also write about this mother and this cauldron of emotions that she must've been feeling that would lead her to walk her children up to the top of a building and then leap to certain death below?

DURROW: It was difficult in that what I learned when I was writing the book itself is that I missed my mother when I was growing up in a way that I didn't understand until, really, the last year or two.

My mom, like Nella, raised three kids on her own suddenly when we moved to Portland, Oregon, and she was busy working, providing for us, making sure that we would be okay. And I don't think she knew about the struggles I was having with biracial identity and living in this new place where I had to, like Rachel, identify myself in a new way that I wasn't aware of.

And I, as a kid, didn't have a language for her to talk about it, and I realized, as I was writing this story, that maybe one of the reasons I was so haunted by this event, this newspaper story of a mother who goes to the top of the building and thinks, this is the best way. It's just that I'm glad my mom didn't think those things. I'm glad that she actually gave us a chance to go through all the struggles that we did.

NORRIS: Nella is the mother. I'm wondering, is that a nod to Nella Larsen, the Harlem Renaissance writer?

DURROW: It is. She's hugely important for me, and she's half-black and half-Danish, and she's my muse in many ways. I wish that she could hear this story now and see if she finds herself in my story all these many years later, when she was writing about this back in the 1920s and early '30s.

NORRIS: She's the author of the books *Quicksand* and *Passing.*

DURROW: Yeah, I actually, in college, I was really enamored with the African American women writers that I was reading. And I read *The Bluest Eye,* and I thought, Oh, my goodness,

Toni Morrison gets me. She understands me because of Pecola Breedlove. And I don't think it was until much later, oh, I would say in my late twenties, that I read it again, and I realized, Oh, my God, Pecola Breedlove isn't me. You know, she was the little black girl who desperately wanted blue eyes, and that's what led to all sorts of devastation for her. And I'm the little brown girl who has blue eyes and is trying to make sense of the world.

NORRIS: Heidi, in the book, Rachel often feels like she has to choose, you know, either move toward one culture or hold on to her Danishness. Why does she have to choose? Why do children of mixed-race marriages have to make that kind of choice? Why can't they embrace both cultures?

DURROW: Well, I think they can if they're not faced with this question: What are you? The satisfactory answer usually isn't: I'm black and white. Other people want mixed-race kids to choose who they are.

You know, I started this book in 1997. It's taken that long to write it and to get it published, and the language has changed, definitely, about biracial identity.

Obviously, when President Obama began his candidacy and we started to talk about biracial, it suddenly didn't sound like a scientific term. Still, though, now I think people are uneasy with that. And I think we can see that in the fact that once there was the inauguration, President Obama became our first African American president, which I believe he is, but we stopped talking about biracial again. I think it's a little unset-

tling for people for—just trying to understand, what does it mean to be both black and white.

NORRIS: Heidi, as you well know, there's a long line of stories, books, movies, songs, folklore, about the tragic mulatto trope. Why does this continue? And do you in any way feel like you were pulled into that undertow?

DURROW: I hope I wasn't. I hope that people can read this book as a break from that tradition. I think that tragedies generally end with a tragedy and there's nothing learned. And my book begins with a tragedy and at the end I hope that people have learned something, that there's a note of triumph in that.

I wanted, especially in the story, to say, Yes, something really bad has happened to this girl. Yes, it's really difficult for her to deal with her mixed-race background in the world as it exists, but the tragedy is outside of her. It's not something that's part of her character.

I think that's the thing that's been frustrating about other stories about the tragic mulatto, that somehow it was an inherent difficulty within the character. For Rachel, it's definitely not true that the difficulties come from without and that she has this center, this core, this heart that really is—she's still able to be whole, ultimately, and I think ultimately triumphant.

NORRIS: One last quick question for you. Are you okay with the term *biracial,* or is there something else that you would like to hear as a label or a description applied to you?

DURROW: I like biracial. I say I'm mixed. I say I'm half African American and half Danish. If I have to say that I'm just black or I'm just white, then I'm not telling the whole story of myself or my experience, and I'd really like to be whole in my conversations with others. The thing I like to say these days is, I'm a story. I think that would be the very best label of all, definitely.

NORRIS: Heidi Durrow, thank you very much.

DURROW: Thank you.

NORRIS: Heidi Durrow is the author of *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*.