

# A CONVERSATION WITH CYNTHIA BOND, AUTHOR OF *RUBY* A SELECTION FOR OPRAH'S BOOK CLUB 2.0

A NOVEL



**Q.** There are elements of *Ruby*—locations, characters, stories—that have come from real life. Can you tell us a bit about this?

**A.** HA. It's a bit like a pot of gumbo. There are moments, spices, that have been stirred in slowly—from my life and from the stories of others.

Some of my first memories are of listening to my mother tell stories about her childhood home, a small, all-black East Texas town. A stunningly beautiful and nationally recognized academician today, my mother grew up on a little farm in the piney woods. She has a collection of tiny scars on her body that illustrate her journey. Stepping on a rusty nail and having to wear a slab of salt pork wrapped around her foot for an entire summer. The elbow where a teacup was hurled at her as she bolted out of a door. As children, my sister and I would point to each of these scars, these “chapters” in her young life. In many ways, this is how *Ruby* began.

As my sister and I grew older, my mother shared more of her story. Of her beloved sister being murdered by the sheriff and his deputies, of so many other siblings who, because of their skin color and the dehumanization of racism, made the decision to flee up North and pass for white.

More than anything, my sister and I grew to love our grandfather, Mr. James Marshall, the son of a slave master and a slave, who became Mr. Bell in the novel. Mr. Marshall, who was so light in complexion, whose eyes were so blue and hair so blond, that he was mistaken for white. However, he always corrected the misconception. Upon stepping onto a bus, and being told by the driver that he did not have to go to the back of the bus, my grandfather would turn around and say, “No, sir, I’m colored.”

My own history of abuse informed this novel, as well. As a victim of human trafficking as a child, these stories and images filled my chest with horror, rage, and fear until I picked up a pen and placed it upon the blank page. Writing *Ruby* became my salvation. When I taught writing to homeless youth in Hollywood, I found that most of my students had themselves run from abuse. Somewhere along the way, living with my own abuse, and hearing stories of such pain and torment, I thought, *If you can bear to have lived it, I can at least bear to listen*. Ephram Jennings says that in some form to *Ruby* later in the novel. I asked that of myself while working on this book.

I read books about conjure and ancient spiritual beliefs, about both healing and destructive magic in the Deep South and throughout America in both white and black communities. I have, as a writer, taken all of the facts I have gathered and woven them together, along with images and voices, with the ephemeral thread of fiction.

**Q.** At its heart, *Ruby* is a love story between Ruby and Ephram. Which aspects of their characters do you think draw each of them to the other?

**A.** I think they both see the magic sparkling around the edges of the world. They both see life in all things and notice the unseen. They both have felt a hollow in their chests, deep, as if they were made of hardwood that had been carved through to the center ring. I suppose they are both so broken as well.

On a deeper, more spiritual level they are perhaps the only two people on earth who can truly see the other person. She will never be a whore in his eyes and that knowledge saves her. He cannot be his sister’s “child” when he is with Ruby. By taking one step onto her land, he becomes a man. They can be a salve to each other, but that same combination of ingredients can also be incredibly combustible.

**Q.** From the red East Texas dust to the crow in the chinaberry tree, the natural world plays a major role in the novel. What inspired you to ground *Ruby* in this imagery?

**A.** This is one of the surprises of writing. After moving from Texas as a child, I became a bit of a city girl—I have lived in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles—but I suppose I believe that nature is the truest, most empirical evidence we have of the force of life. Of hope. Life fights its way through concrete, barbed wire, and landfills. In time, it pushes beauty through any obstacle built to deny it. A seed never pauses and contemplates not taking root. It may not, that is true. But it will try, against all odds, in drought, in floods, in waste. It may live for only a second before getting yanked out, but it does not fear life—it reaches for the sun, or the moon, wherever it gains sustenance.

**Q.** You've been working on the story that became *Ruby* for over ten years. How do you feel about finally putting forth your novel into the world?

**A.** It's been in fits and starts. Working on scenes, a short story, then stopping to devote myself full-time to being a social worker, then working again, then winning a PEN/Rosenthal Fellowship while being pregnant, then having a child and learning to juggle writing with motherhood. I've often imagined how amazing it would be to have a little cottage somewhere and contemplate the horizon, while a sweet somebody gently knocked on the door, gave me steaming Yorkshire Gold tea with a pinch of raw sugar and milk, not cream. I would nod, then furrow my brow, focus, and begin writing once again. Virginia Woolf's quote, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction," is the ideal. I do believe that many beautiful books and poems and essays are lost to stirring oatmeal and trying to get the mystery stain out of a child's shirt. They can also be lost to working over forty hours a week, parent or not, and coming home too tired to raise one's hand to lift the remote, much less to perch on a chair, fingers poised to write. They can also be lost to mental illness and homelessness. To slavery and oppression. How many gifts spilled, bled out, and thrown into unmarked graves—it is too difficult to fathom.

The toughest thing is letting go—you can ask my mother, my friends, my agent, and my editor. More than anything, I am excited that my nine-year-old daughter will be able to see her mother achieving her dream. That means more than anything.

