



# *The Thread Collectors*

## BEHIND THE BOOK



Shaunna J. Edwards and Alyson Richman met over a decade ago, and their friendship began in one of the most unlikely of places: Las Vegas. Alyson had never been there before and felt like a fish out of water. She was standing in line for a drink at the bar at the reception and Shaunna came over and said, “I love your dress!” Shaunna then chided Alyson for letting so many men cut her in line. “I loved her energy, her big smile,” Alyson said. “And she made me laugh at myself for letting everyone stomp all over me. I guess that’s what happens when you’re the only writer in a room full of attorneys.”

The two became fast friends, and over the years, books were one of the many things they had in common. Shaunna, an English literature major at Harvard-Radcliffe, was always searching for good recommendations for her book club and even spoke of wanting to write her own novel one day in the future. “One of the things I loved about our friendship,” Alyson said, “was that Shaunna was always truly interested in what book I was currently writing. She was always curious and has an incredible memory for details. I could have gone without seeing her for over a year and when we met again, she’d recall every plot detail and historical fact.”

In 2012, Alyson watched Ric Burns’s documentary *Burying the Civil War Dead*, which was inspired by much of the research in Drew Gilpin Faust’s nonfiction book *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. One segment of the documentary highlighted that, during the Civil War, soldiers sometimes created maps to mark where they’d buried their fellow soldiers. It also spotlighted the Black soldiers who had enlisted to fight against slavery, but were often made to dig ditches to bury the fallen White soldiers. “I instantly had a vision of a Black soldier who creates a map during one of our nation’s darkest times and the connections that map brings to him later on,” Alyson noted.

One of the first people she shared her idea with was Shaunna. “For years, I’d mention that idea to her and we’d talk about it over a glass of wine.” One evening in 2017, when Shaunna was visiting New York City from her job at a consulting firm in DC, Alyson mentioned the idea again. “You know, I see the map sketched at first, but maybe he gives it to his beloved who stitches it in embroidery to preserve it,” Shaunna suggested. Shaunna’s mother is the founder of New Orleans’s Stella Jones Gallery, and from a very early age Shaunna was exposed to African American folk art and textiles created over centuries of history. “In one sentence, Shaunna had opened up a whole new doorway to the story,” Alyson said. “She’d not only introduced art into it, something that has always been a passion of mine and a feature in nearly every one of my novels, but also a love story. And who doesn’t love a love story?”

Still, Alyson didn’t start writing. “Something in me felt hesitant. I can’t explain it. It was as if it wasn’t yet the right time to write it. I always say when I look back at all my books, they had to be created at that time in my life.”

Then, early in the summer of 2020, as the world wrestled with growing awareness of racialized violence and inequality, Alyson reached for the phone to check in on her friend. Shaunna shared that she was looking for a way to sort through her emotions and put them in a place where she might find beauty in such darkness. Alyson asked, “Then will you write this book with me?” They decided they were going to make it a novel not only about the unlikely friendship between two soldiers, one Black, one White, but also the women who wanted to bring them home safely—and in so doing, tell the story of their decades-long friendship as a Black woman and a Jewish woman, each proud of their heritage. “We really tried to draw from our ancestors. We wanted to put their souls into it and make something that sends a powerful message of unity,” Shaunna noted.

Alyson had grown up hearing from her grandmother that there were two brothers (Alyson’s great-great-great-uncles) in her family tree—German Jews who emigrated in the nineteenth century—who fought on opposing sides of the Civil War. The brother who fought on the Union side, Jacob Kling, enlisted in the 31st Regiment of New York as a musician. In stark contrast, his older brother, who years earlier had moved to the South and founded a mercantile emporium, enlisted in the 29th Regiment of Mississippi. During the war, with its close proximity to the Vicksburg battle, General Grant’s army actually took possession of the family residence in Satartia, Mississippi (the Kling house is presently preserved as a historic homestead). Growing up, Alyson heard countless stories from her grandmother about how the brothers’ philosophical and moral divide irrevocably split the family up forever. “I wanted to add another layer to our book and explore what happens within a family when you have two opposing views on something as horrific as slavery, especially when you yourself are a minority in a new country,” Alyson explained.

Shaunna wanted to examine the diverging fates of African Americans within a single family. The character of Stella is partially inspired by her great-great-great-aunt Janie, a Black woman who managed to become a financially independent landowner while her relatives struggled to find economic stability. “My father’s side of the family ultimately came to own a sugarcane farm carved out of a plantation. My siblings and I own that farm to this day,” she said. Through the characters of Stella (who is of White and Black parentage) and her half sister, Ammanee, Shaunna wanted to explore how skin color and, in the case of William, musical talent afforded opportunities to some that would remain wholly unavailable to others.

The epigraph on the novel’s first page is taken from a Gullah Geechee proverb: “If you don’t know where you’re going, you should know where you came from.” Shaunna and Alyson couldn’t agree more.

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By Shaunna J. Edwards and Alyson Richman

On sale August 30, 2022

Trade paperback original

9781525899782

\$16.99 US | \$21.99 CA

