LaTanya McQueen's New Novel Shines a Light on the Horror of Plantation Weddings

McQueen talks to Shondaland about her latest book, "When the Reckoning Comes."

By Nylah Burton

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LaTanya McQueen's debut novel, *When the Reckoning Comes*, touches on a timely conversation about couples who choose to have plantation weddings. In recent years, an increasing number of people have been more vocal about how distasteful the practice is, especially considering plantations aren't monuments to the past or simply picturesque mansions — they are places where enslaved Black people were tortured, killed, and separated from their families.

However, the white characters in *When the Reckoning Comes* don't see it that way. In the book, Mira, who's Black, returns to her segregated (and fictional) hometown of Kipsen, North Carolina, to attend her white childhood best friend's wedding to a wealthy Southern gentleman. But when she gets there, Mira watches in horror as the wedding festivities unfold at the Woodsman plantation.

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In Gatsby-esque revelry, guests drink and eat happily, all while ordering around Black staff members, who are dressed as slaves in keeping with the plantation's antebellum aesthetic. It's hard to read, but even more so when you consider the twisted merriment isn't a work of McQueen's imagination. She's seen it up close during her own visits to plantations across the South.

But a reckoning looms on the horizon in Kipsen as the spirits of dead enslaved people plot their revenge against the guests, many of whom are descendants of the sadistic owner of Woodsman plantation, who once sold his slaves' skin for shoe leather. After tragedy strikes, Mira and her friends Jesse and Celine must unite to piece together the past so they can understand the future — and protect those in danger.

With an ambiguous ending, *When the Reckoning Comes* might leave readers feeling a bit confused — but that is McQueen's intention. She hopes the book sparks further conversation about the role of justice both in real life and in the Southern-gothic genre.

Recently, Shondaland spoke with McQueen about the concept of denied birthrights, Southern legacies of horror, and plantation weddings.

NYLAH BURTON: What inspired you to write this story?

LATANYA McQUEEN: As part of another book I was working on at the time, I went and toured a number of plantations in the South, particularly in Louisiana and the Carolinas. I couldn't let go of the experience. They're very much like I depicted them in the book. They're tourist attractions. Often, the people there are international visitors, and what they're getting is a revised version of history. They don't really talk about how these places came to be. Any conversations about slavery and the Black experience center on the slaveowners.

Also, I was interested in writing a book that centered on how a person's sense of self is affected by the white gaze. Mira, in particular, the way her sense of self has been affected by how white people see her. And how she treats other people too, how she treats her relationships, how she treats people in her job … to the point where she doesn't even know who she is anymore. Part of the premise is that there are these ghosts that are seeking revenge on the descendants of the slave owners that enslaved them.

It's a horror premise that is specific to white people. Historically, white people have always had this fear of Black people seeking justice and revenge for things that have been done to them. Then they've made policy decisions based on that fear. Part of the horror is how, because of that fear, white people have enacted violence on Black Americans, and we see that in the book throughout the past and present.

NB: The three central characters — Mira, Jesse, and Celine (who is white) — seem to feel that they've sort of been robbed of a birthright. You write, "Celine wanted the South she felt she deserved."

Celine feels left out of this genteel version of Southern whiteness. Jesse wants the freedom of movement, self, and expression that he sees a lot of the white people around him have. And Mira is sort of searching for answers about where she comes from. I think she sees knowledge as a birthright that has been stolen from her. Do you have any thoughts about that concept of stolen birthrights in the book?

LM: That's a hard question. I guess I was just thinking of it in terms of how each of these characters see themselves in the world. There are various levels of privilege. Celine is white, but she's also poor. So she, in some ways, recognizes that she has more privilege than Jesse and Mira, and she does things because of that privilege. But she also recognizes that, in terms of class status, she is lower than she wants to be, so she has this desire to fit in.

Jesse knows that people see him in a negative way, and he knows the unfairness of it. So he's daring himself and other people to go against them. But Mira is very much about respectability politics.

So, I don't know if I was thinking about birthright. That's such a hard question.

NB: That's just what I was thinking about, especially because Mira and Jesse are explicitly written as very light-skinned characters. But the book doesn't really talk about how that impacts the way they move in the world and how they see other Black people. So, I wondered if these desires were a manifestation of some longing for whiteness.

LM: I made them light skinned because I wanted to make it clear that this area of North Carolina is one where there is this legacy of race-mixing from these slave-master

relationships. Mira has a lot of ingrained anti-Blackness that she has to sort of reckon with. I wasn't thinking about birthrights, but I see it now that you're mentioning it.

NB: The ghosts of the enslaved are there to represent justice and revenge for acts so atrocious that they sound unreal when you write about them. But everything that you mention in the book, like the wearing of enslaved people's skin as shoes, we know that it did happen. For acts so inhuman and atrocious, is the supernatural the only place this justice can be carried out? Like, it's so inhuman that only something non-human, something outside of the constraints and laws of this human world, can ever bring justice?

LM: Good question. That's something I struggled with while writing this book. There's this larger question of if these ghosts are real. I really struggled with that in terms of "How far in which direction do I go? Do I make it so that we actually see revenge, or do I ground these events in reality?"

I worried about making it a literal revenge ghost story of these slaves murdering white people and affirming stereotypes of Black people being violent and something to fear. On the other hand, if I don't do it, I've set up this premise and haven't delivered. My answer was to have things be able to go either way. At the beginning of the book, a body is found, and it could be the ghosts or a real-life reason. You don't really know.

It's interesting seeing people respond to the book. Some people really wanted revenge in the book. I think it touches on a real-life frustration in terms of how Black people never get justice for the violence that is enacted upon them.

NB: I hear what you're saying about not wanting to play into the stereotypes of Black people being dangerous and something to be feared. But I think it begs the question, "Shouldn't white people fear the Black people they've wronged?" If something of this magnitude has been done to an entire group of people, shouldn't the people who've done it — and their descendants who continue to profit off of it — fear retribution?

LM: I think in some ways you're getting at the difference between Jesse and Mira in the book. Jesse wants that revenge. He doesn't want to care about these people. But Mira, at the end of the day, doesn't really want to go that route. I think it's something that is a conflict in the book between the characters. I don't know my feelings on it.

NB: I'm not asking whether violence *should* occur. My question is whether the fear of violent retribution for slavery is logical or just a stereotype? Is it born from a place of no reason? For instance, if my ancestors wore the skins of the enslaved and raped them, it would keep me up at night.

LM: Do you think white people actually have that fear, or are they utilizing that fear as a means of power and control?

NB: You can't see into the soul of a person, so you can't know what their individual fears are, but I do think that many white people live with that fear. Especially if you're living in a segregated Southern town like the one in the book, where you write that the plantation and its legacy is the center of the town, with the economy dependent on the income from the plantation.

The fear would be more present there. That's why we have such a rich literary legacy of Southern Gothic literature, because it is a fertile ground for both white and Black stories about these atrocities.

LM: I'm not sure if I'm sold on the idea that white people are aware of it in the way that you're saying, because there is such a revision of history. Part of it is that ignorance. In terms of these plantations, they're not even presented as showing this history that people should be afraid of. They're these fun places that people want to go and have weddings and vacations. I don't know how many people really, *really* know that history.

Part of me wonders how much of that is real fear versus how much of that is like the pretense of fear as a means to maintain control.

NB: Can't it be both?

LM: Yes, that's true.

NB: Because it does seem like the white people in your book are genuinely scared, because they can clearly sense ghosts on the plantation, and they can sense that they're the ghosts of enslaved people. They're using it to scapegoat Jesse, but they are scared. Also, just as Black people have oral stories about how we've suffered, white people also have oral stories about what their ancestors have done. So I don't think white people in the South are that ignorant about the harms of slavery. Maybe, going back to what you're saying, domination and fear go hand in hand.

That said, why do you think that the impulse to have plantation weddings is still so present? Because I think ignorance can only be part of the equation.

LM: Have you ever been to one of the plantations?

NB: Yes, it was extremely creepy. My grandmother also went to one in Jamaica and said she'd never go back again, she was so disturbed.

LM: This is not to excuse it, but a lot of the places I went were like tourist attractions. They don't talk about slavery at all. There's a bar. You can sit on a little porch, drink, and look out on the water. You can sail on the river and look at all the different plantations. There's some reenactments where people will dress up.

We talked about the owners and stuff. It's pitched that these slave owners were important because they were wealthy, and you should admire them. So people want to have these weddings there because, to them, it's signifying a status symbol. They don't have the same connection to it in the same way that I do when I go see places and think, "Oh gosh, look at all the slave labor that was put into building something like this." I think about my own ancestors and how they died in these places.

But, for a lot of people, they have no idea, and they're being presented with it as this thing that should be worth admiring. It's interesting too because it reminds me of the way we all can have different connections to places.

Nylah Burton is a Chicago-based writer. Follow her on Twitter @yumcoconutmilk.

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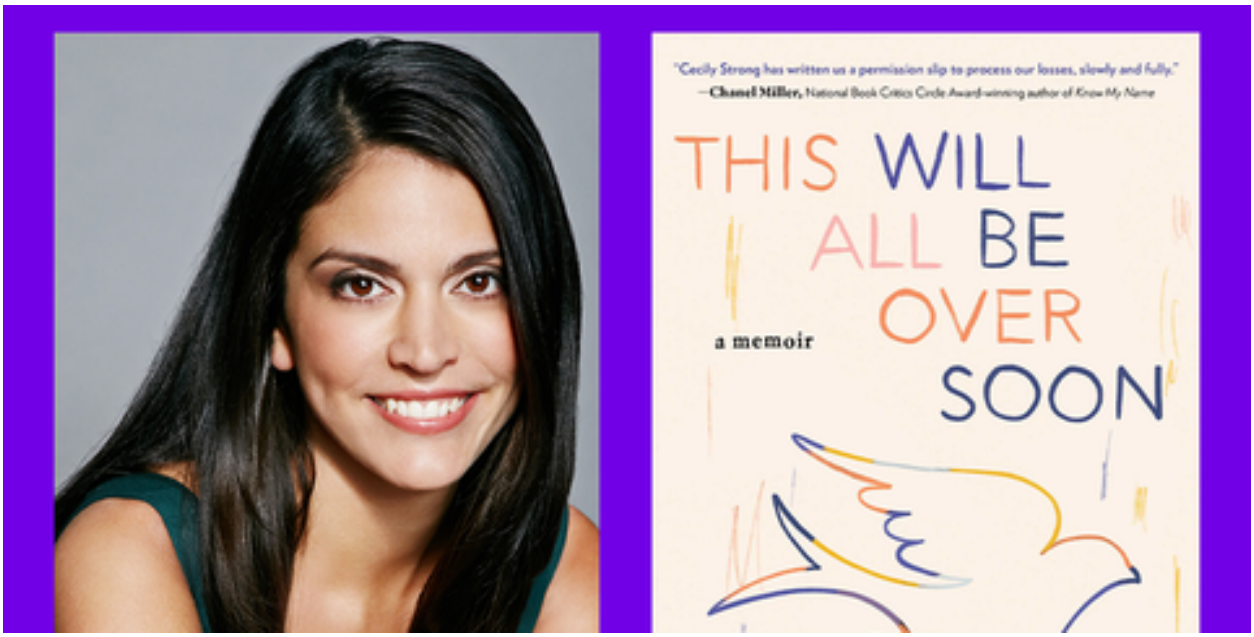

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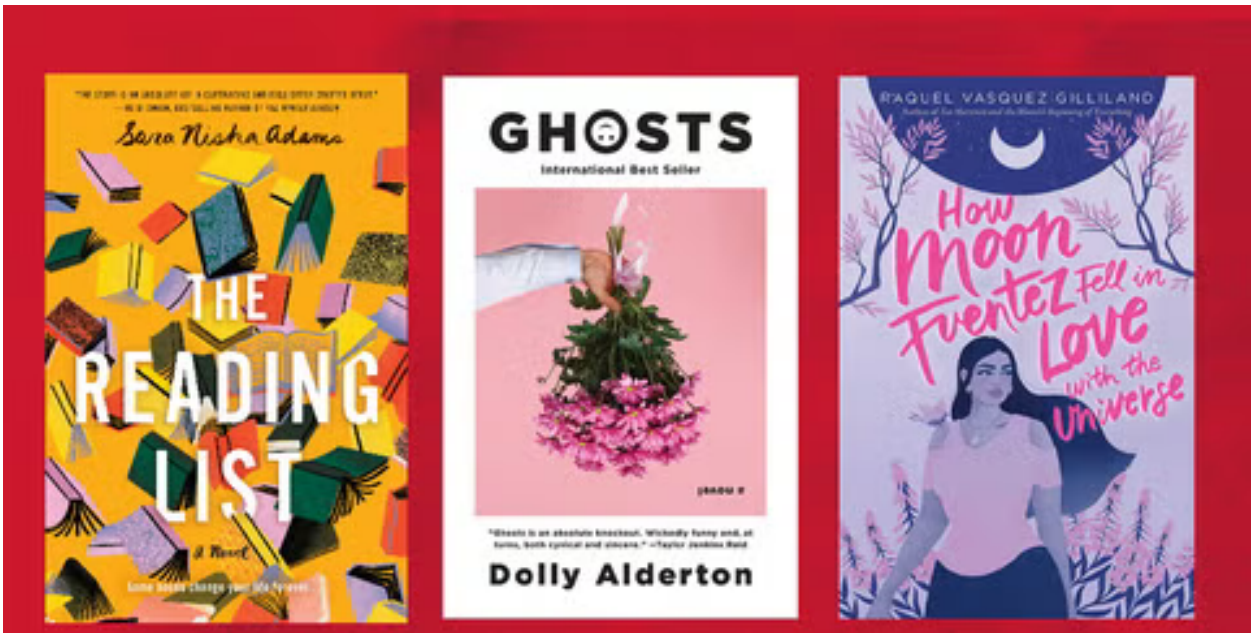

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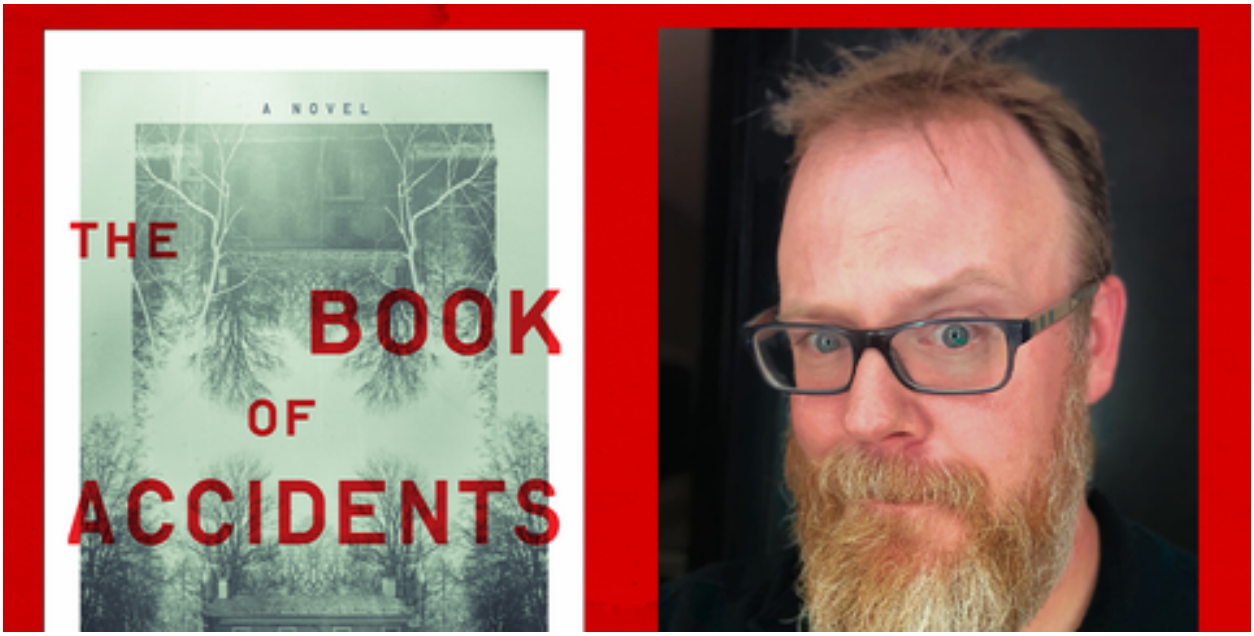

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