

Leila Mottley



By Eman Alami

On October 6, 2022, the MFA Writing program went to City Arts and Lectures to hear the debut American author and poet, Leila Mottley. She is a New York Times best-selling author for her book *Nightcrawling*, which celebrates African American life, social justice, and victims of sexual violence. The novel takes place in Oakland, where Mottley is from. She wrote the novel at the age of 17 and published it in July 2022, at the age of 20. She gave excellent advice on how to write a successful novel. After attending her reading and conversation with Michelle Lee, I reflect on important quotes from Mottley and share the takeaways I find valuable for all my CCA peers to hear (italicized quotes are from Leila Mottley's talk, lightly edited for clarity).

"I learned to write—honestly I wasn't good at it. The spelling was not there. I mean I had my little notebook and I kinda just started writing poetry. I think I have access to poetry books through my grandmother. She loves poetry and dated a poet once."

There is something here about perseverance to do the craft through self-knowledge and self-curiosity. If one has the desire to be skilled in a medium, there has to be no fear of making mistakes or exploring further. It is the ability of the self to read and pick up knowledge through this act. Don't think about making mistakes and the work not going the way you planned. It's essential to continuously learn through trial, error, and experimentation in order to produce amazing work.

"Authors come up with explanations in the aftermath of writing. That is part of the process. We cross out things we don't know we are processing. Later we can connect one thing to the next. When I wrote it, one image popped in my head, then the next."

It is okay as a creative person, to experiment and not know how something is going, with a vague idea in mind. Approach inspiration from a color, an idea, a word, a photograph, a news headline, etc. There is beauty in exploring creativity further to create something new. It's also okay to combine a variety of observations, notes, and inspirations to come up with something new. Many writers do not know what the next scene will be until they keep rewriting, rereading, and reassessing their work.

"I think I wanted to show a different side of Black girlhood that we often neglect, something we often fear, and fragility and softness the world does not often want to see us as. A lot of this book came out of 2015 uprisings and organizations, such as Black Lives Matter, Say Her Name, Me Too, founded by Black women organizers who have worked to center Black women and to see us as people who are harmed in this world... What I see from that

kind of dismissal from movements that are designed to witness us. I wanted to look at what it means to fully look towards what people don't want to see in Black women and the particular ways we are harmed. Through sexual violence, family systems continue to take from us without ever giving. I think that through looking at police sexual violence and looking at how this girl has taken on everything and is still once again rendered invisible, it became a mission to look at us in a different way and give my teenage self something to feel really seen."

Create with a mission in mind. With a mission or movement in mind, there is power behind the craft. Artists are not inclined to be political with all the works they produce. However, the key thing to remember is having a mission. With a clear mission, the project is created with a big overarching theme and goal to accomplish in mind. The mission does not have to come from as big of a social movement as BLM; it can be something as intimate as someone's personal experiences and reflections or a comment in the local news or challenging an established artist or artistic genre to bring more nuance.

"I had someone who was familiar with sex work read the book."

No matter the type of narrative or art the artist is creating, if there is a field you as the artist are unfamiliar with, it can be extremely important to look up to someone who does have the experience and the maturity to collaborate and review your work for accuracy. In order to understand another human experience, it's important to trust someone with that particular human experience and gain their trust.

"I did a lot of journaling through [the main character Kiara's] perspective. It took me two and a half months to come up with the first draft. Normally, I take a little more time than that... there wasn't a lot of plot. I did not outline this book. This happened through revision. The first draft I went through every five minutes with her—what did she have for breakfast?— as a way to know her. I didn't know how to structure the book. Later, I put the bones in the book. Then from there, I figured out: who does she need in her life and how does she become who she is? Other characters come in because of that and get formed through her perspective of them."

Don't be afraid to work as you go. It is okay not to know the direction of a story in the first draft. It's perfectly fine to have multiple drafts, multiple ideas, and characters. It is a multi-step

process that requires time to complete and requires a lot of thinking and experimentation with possibilities through different plots and characters. Try to get inside the character's heads; if you can figure out how they react when they're happy or angry, what their favorite foods were for breakfast, what they're like on a bus ride, etc., then the tone of the novel and the roles of every character will come through. It's all about nailing the tiny details to capture the essence of the storyline and creating more empathy for readers to like the protagonist and antagonist.

"What does it mean to have a headline extend beyond the article and how do we look at people as people and people of full worlds that are changed entirely by events that will run through our news cycle and we'll never hear again."

To be an artist means in part to alter reality and challenge our current world. If there is something that compels you, it is key to respond to it. It is a craft that helps change the world.

"I write plenty of characters I am not ready for and cannot reach. I know pretty soon after I start if I can't access them or part of them they wouldn't show first, and so it takes figuring out and sitting with the character. Time is really important. I always sit with my characters for a couple of months before I write them to make sure that I can get to know them and that they stick with me. It's a commitment to write a book. It's a long-term relationship, it's three to five years with this character. Especially for novel writing, I slow down to get to know them and see if I can figure them out. If I can't, then maybe they are not the right character."

It is essential to learn how to be patient and maintain a long-term dedication of time to the project you are doing. If you are truly dedicated, the project will not leave your mind. It will stay there and become a daily routine to keep writing, drawing, painting, recording, and much more. It takes discipline to create a final project, because it will require many afterthoughts and daily concentration to create a successful end result.

"When writing fiction, you do a disservice to limit [characters] by placing yourself on them."

As a writer, it is natural to put yourself in every character you write. It takes time and exploration of the characters for them to grow to become their own. There has to be a level of patience, purpose, and experimentation to figure it out. The characters will always be with you and become like friends.

“With publishing, honestly I had no way to prepare for it. I googled it. I am serious, I googled it and that is how I made my way through the publishing process. There is just so much gatekeeping, like we don’t even know what we don’t know. I learned as I went and there is a lot I wish I had known to help me navigate it.”

Don’t be afraid to learn as you go. Google and the internet are our best friends. The internet offers us a whirlwind of information and it is up to us to take advantage of it. The internet can provide us with our next contacts, a contract, an exhibit, a new skill set, and more. It is up to us to be active to seek and create opportunities for ourselves by finding platforms to contribute our work to. It is our responsibility and our inner courage to share our work with the world. It is a gift when the world responds back with care and enthusiasm. An artist never truly knows how long it will take until another student, future creative, or established creative is inspired by their work and the meaningful impact on their lives and practices.

To listen to Leila Mottley in conversation with Michelle Lee at City Arts & Lectures, visit www.cityarts.net/event/leila-mottley.

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