



# WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

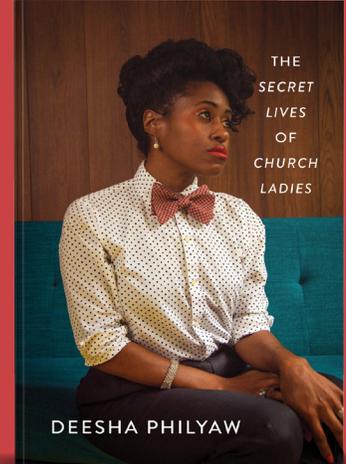
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*The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* by Deesha Philyaw  
 Publication Date: September 1, 2020  
 Paperback Original, 9781949199734  
 \$18.99, 192 pages  
 Contact: Jeremy Wang-Iverson, Vesto PR  
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*“A collection of luminous stories populated by deeply moving and multifaceted characters.... Tender, fierce, proudly black and beautiful, these stories will sneak inside you and take root.”* **-KIRKUS REVIEWS** (starred review)

## The Secret Lives of Church Ladies By Deesha Philyaw

*“These are stories about Black women that haven’t been told with this level of depth, wit, or insight before, so it will not shock me if Oprah gets around to selecting it before the end of the year.”* **-PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE**



Deesha Philyaw’s electrifying fiction debut – *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* – explores the raw and tender places where Black women and girls dare to follow their desires and pursue a momentary reprieve from being good. The nine stories in this collection feature four generations of characters grappling with who they want to be in the world, caught as they are between the church’s double standards and their own needs and passions. With their secret longings, new love, and forbidden affairs, these church ladies are as seductive as they want to be, as vulnerable as they need to be, as unfaithful and unrepentant as they care to be, and as free as they deserve to be.

*“Our new decade deserves a new literary force with major literary skills. Deesha Philyaw uses the comic, the allegorical, and the geographic to examine black intimacies and black secrets. Her work is as rigorous as it is pleasurable to read.”* **-KIESE LAYMON**, author of *Heavy*

Deesha Philyaw’s writing on race, parenting, gender, and culture has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *McSweeney’s*, the *Rumpus*, *Brevity*, *TueNight*, and elsewhere. Originally from Jacksonville, Florida, she currently lives in Pittsburgh with her daughters.

### Virtual Launch Events

**PITTSBURGH**  
**PITTSBURGH ARTS AND LECTURES**  
 Thursday, September 3, 6pm (with Khirsten Scott)

**BELMONT, MA**  
**BELMONT BOOKS**  
 Thursday, September 17, 7pm (with Adam Smyer)

**NASHVILLE, TN**  
**SOUTHERN FESTIVAL OF THE BOOKS TBD**

**ATLANTA**  
**CHARIS BOOKS AND MORE**  
 Tuesday, October 13  
 (with Tamara Winfrey Harris)

**WASHINGTON D.C.**  
**LOYALTY BOOKSTORE**  
 Thursday, October 22, 6pm  
 (with Adam Smyer)



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Early praise  
for **The  
Secret Lives  
of Church  
Ladies**

*“Full of lived-in humanity, warmth, and compassion.”*  
**–PITTSBURGH CURRENT** (cover story)

*“Triumphant...Philyaw’s stories inform and build on one another, turning her characters’ private struggles into a beautiful chorus.”*  
**–PUBLISHERS WEEKLY**

*“The church, sexuality, and everyday life come alive in each story bringing readers closer to experiences we can, or have, seen ourselves in.”*  
**–ELECTRIC LIT**, 24 New and Forthcoming Books That Celebrate Black Lives

*“The stories of these women and their friendships come alive, beating with tenderness and imperfection, and build upon one another to create a beautiful melody of female determination.”* **–AMAZON BOOK REVIEW**, 12 Must-Read Books by Black Authors Coming in Fall 2020

*“To encounter Deesha Philyaw’s work is to encounter contemporary folktales. They are the stories of southern customs and mores and of voices over the back fence. The daughters and granddaughters of Toni Cade Bambara and Bebe Moore Campbell readers need this book.”* **–YONA HARVEY**, author of *Hemming the Water* and writer for the *Marvel Comics World of Wakanda* series

*“This is no mere collection of sappy romance stories. The love in Philyaw’s stories runs the gamut from sweet to bitter, sexy to sisterly, temporary to time tested, often with hidden aspects. The word secret in the title is earned, and some of the secrets are downright juicy.”* **–TARA CAMPBELL**, author of *Midnight at the Organporium*, from *Barrelhouse* magazine



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## Q&A with Deesha Philyaw

### ***When did you start writing this book?***

The first story I completed was *Eula*, and I started it in 2014. But at that time, I didn't think of it as the start of a collection. There were other stories, like "Jael," that started with just a name

or an idea or a line of dialogue that I sat with for a few years before developing them as stories.

### ***At what point did you know your focus would be on church ladies?***

In 2007, I started working on a novel in which the main character is a church lady, a pastor's wife. I worked on the novel off and on for the next 8 or 9 years, but I just kept stalling. From time to time, I'd turn my attention to short stories, and they all featured a church lady or someone who is what I call church lady adjacent, meaning there's someone she's close to who is heavily influenced by the church. I grew up in the church, and these were the women who informed my understanding of womanhood and how to be (or not be) in the world. Although I wasn't surprised that they showed up on the page, it wasn't intentional, at that point.

My agent had heard me read these stories, and after one event in 2016/2017, she suggested that I work on building a collection, while I was on (indefinite) hiatus from my novel. After that, I became intentional about writing a series of stories about Black women, sex, and the Black church.

### ***The collection centers on Black women's relationships—familial, taboo, queer, etc.—and all of the characters are Black. How did you set the boundaries, and expand the possibilities, in these stories?***

I'm most interested in the narratives that Black women share among ourselves, or with no one at all. I wanted the only gaze to be ours. Within those boundaries,

there's plenty of room to imagine and explore. I was inspired by Toni Morrison's rejection of her critics' suggestion that she move "beyond" writing about Black folks, and by August Wilson saying that he could write forever about the Black experience in America because there's no idea in the world that's not contained by Black life. They gave me permission to focus. And within that area of focus, I wrote stories that span decades and generations, and reflect a range of experiences. Some of the characters are struggling with the past, some with the future, others with both. Some have more agency than others. Some are grappling with forgiveness, whether to give it or seek it. Their relationships with God and the church vary.

### ***The book dwells in sensitive territory, while the themes range from sex to religion to caretaking. Were you afraid to write about anything?***

There were moments when it was challenging to write characters who did things that I wouldn't do. As a reader, I sometimes wonder how a writer's personal history and experiences inform their fiction. I think it's human nature to speculate, especially when it comes to really intimate topics. So I had to push past the worry that readers would think I'd done some of the

*I grew up in the church, and these were the women who informed my understanding of womanhood and how to be (or not be) in the world.*

things my characters do, or that some of the things that happened to them, also happened to me. Of course I did draw to some extent on my personal experiences in writing these stories. But I had to let go of the concern over what people might speculate. And once I did that, I was able to enjoy writing characters who break all sorts of rules.



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***Many of the stories vary in style, adopting the form of a letter, a Q&A, and an instruction manual. How did you approach experimentation as you wrote?***

Experimenting with form was another way to make sure the stories in the collection were varied. I'm a big fan of hermit crab essays, which are essays that take the form of every-



day things, such as an instruction manual. I wanted to try that with fiction. Focusing on the limits of the chosen form helps to wrangle the possibilities. It also helps reduce the stress over how to start, or how to end, because to some extent, that is baked into the form. *Dear Sister* is epistolary, but it's loosely based on a real-life phone call that wasn't nearly as dramatic or comical. And some of the other experimentation was born from a basic "what if"? What if a serial mistress held all the cards and wrote the rules of engagement for an affair?

***What books do you count among your influences?***

Although *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon and *I'm Telling the Truth But I'm Lying* by Bassegy Ikpi are memoir, both are told with the kind of deep, deep intimacy and candor that I wanted

to capture in my stories. In terms of short story collections, I looked to the unapologetic Blackness and subversiveness of Rion Amilcar Scott's *The World Doesn't Require You* and Nafissa Thompson-Spires' *The Heads of the Colored People*. And for writing restless, unapologetic Black women, of course I look to the master, Toni Morrison, particularly *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Jazz*.

*I'm most interested in the narratives that Black women share among ourselves, or with no one at all. I wanted the only gaze to be ours. Within those boundaries, there's plenty of room to imagine and explore.*

***All of these stories seem to take place in the same world, and some (Peach Cobbler and Instructions for Married Christian Husbands) directly echo one another. Did you need to revise or curate the stories so that they would fit together?***

At first when I decided to write a collection, I thought about having all the stories connect in some way to the same church, placing all the characters in the same unnamed Southern town. But about three stories in, I realized that the physical church and town weren't really central to any of the stories. What was central was the Southerness of the girls and women and their world, and how the church impacted that world. That all happened organically because this is the world I grew up in and that lives on in my imagination. When I started writing



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*Instructions for Married Christian Husbands*, which is the last story I wrote for the collection, I didn't have the connection to *Peach Cobbler* in mind. When that character says the thing she says that connects her to *Peach Cobbler*, my reaction was what the reader's probably will be: "It's HER!"

*..about three stories in, I realized that the physical church and town weren't really central to any of the stories. What was central was the Southernness of the girls and women and their world, and how the church impacted that world.*

***This book is quite a departure from your previous book. What parts of the process were the same, and which were distinct to short fiction?***

The co-parenting book was actually a departure from my fiction writing life. Fiction was my first writing urge, and I published two short stories before I co-wrote *Co-Parenting 101*. I took a detour into personal essay writing and writing about parenting when I became a columnist for *Literary Mama*.

The processes for writing both books involved the discipline to write consistently and to finish, despite the uncertainty of whether the book would sell, despite not knowing if anyone would find it useful, interesting, or resonant. Both books required me to believe in what I was doing, even if no one else did. Both books also required me to engage and hold my own interest. If I didn't feel moved in some way by what I was writing, why would anyone else?

Even though my co-author and I established a narrative voice and played with form, the co-parenting book required more structure. We also had to think about our audience

first and foremost because we wanted our book to speak to the needs of the thousands of co-parents we'd heard from through social media. With *Church Ladies*, I didn't write with any overarching sense of responsibility to anyone. The process was more fun, more indulgent, because I had more freedom to imagine and create.

***What are you reading now?***

I'm always reading multiple books at once. I just finished *Think Black* by Clyde W. Ford, a combination father-son memoir/social history by a man whose father was IBM's first Black systems engineer. Currently on deck: *The Age of Phillis*, a collection of historical poems by Honorée Fanonne Jeffers; *The Empath's Survival Guide: Life Strategies for Sensitive People*; and *Wow, No Thank You*, the latest essay collection from the inimitable Samantha Irby.

***Can you say what your next project will be?***

I'm working on two things. One is writing a TV pilot, a totally new form for me. No church ladies involved, so far. The other is that novel I started in 2007. It's changed a lot since then, but literally the moment after I hit "send" to submit the draft of *Church Ladies* to my publisher, I had a lightbulb moment; I figured out how to revive the novel. So stay tuned for more experimentation with form and more church lady drama and comedy.

***What was your journey to publishing these stories – how did the book find its way to West Virginia University Press?***

I'm fortunate to have a very savvy, hands-on agent, Danielle Chiotti. She shared *Church Ladies* with large and small publishers where she felt it would be understood and fully supported as it made its way into the world. She'd met with WVU Press the previous year, and she knew they were committed to supporting and elevating the voices of regional authors. So they immediately came to mind when it was time to pitch, and their positive response was swift. I'm thrilled with the care and attention they've given the collection.