

LANDRIEN MORISET

Q & A WITH BERNETA L. HAYNES, AUTHOR OF *LANDRIEN MORISET*

Q: Give us an insight into your main character. What does she do that is so special?

In *Landrien Moriset*, the main character is Landrien, a withdrawn and emotionally closed off Philadelphia attorney. She has a personality about as lively and warm as Daria, the title character from the 90s MTV show of the same name. Landrien is the kind of woman who, just after sex, smokes a cigarette and then nonchalantly leaves to run an errand. She approaches life, including people, as if it's all just a routine. As quiet and cold her as personality is, it still flares up in random moments and makes you wonder what the heck she's thinking half the time. I think what makes Landrien special is the fact that she starts off genuinely content with her emotional distance from people. She doesn't feel lonely or unhappy, like we would expect someone like her to feel. I don't think we see characters like that often enough, women who don't have a cadre of friends and who are perfectly happy not having a cadre of friends. But Landrien quickly realizes it's not possible to live among people and remain so shut off from them. This realization, especially as it relates to her relationship with her mother, really pushes and drives Landrien throughout the story.

Q: Who is your favorite character in story and why?

My favorite character is Reggie, a friend of Landrien's mother. Reggie is sort of a spin on the "gay best friend" stereotypical character. He's a best friend, but he's so much more than that. I see him as this awesome combination of James Baldwin's political-intellectual intensity, Jussie Smollett's swag, and Alan Cumming's wit. Reggie is everything.

Q: Do you work to an outline or plot, or do you prefer just seeing where an idea takes you?

With *Landrien Moriset* and two of the unpublished novels I wrote, I drafted general plot outlines and character sketches. But my plot outlines fell to pieces every time I sat down to write, so I ended up working mainly off the character sketches. After some trial and error, I developed a system: I draft one overarching plot idea, sketch out the characters thoroughly, and then let the characters guide the rest of the plot development. For me, a good story is less about the plot and more about the realness and depth of the characters. Sometimes I think a lot of writers sacrifice character development for plot development. It's a tricky balancing act.

Q: When did you decide to become a writer?

I remember having a blank notebook, a pencil, a head full of stories, and a compulsion to get it all out onto paper. I was eight or nine years old, I believe, when I wrote my first story. I hardly remember the story, but I know it had something to do with bunnies and a princess. I never stopped writing afterward, but I don't think I had made a decision to be a writer at that time. I think the decision came later. If I had to say there was a moment when I made a conscious decision to become a writer, I'd say it was the moment I finished reading Roald Dahl's *Matilda* in third or fourth grade. It was the first novel I had ever read. There was something about that book. I don't think I'd ever been so absorbed in a book before I read *Matilda*. I knew I wanted to do exactly what Dahl had done. So I wrote, and I never stopped writing. I kept a piece of that joy that I had upon reading Dahl, and I tried to bring that joy to my own writing. *Landrien Moriset* is my first published novel and writing it brought me the same old joy I felt when I was a child writing stories about bunnies and princesses.