

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with E. Lynn Harris

Overview of the Collection

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| Repository: | The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com |
| Creator: | Harris, E. Lynn |
| Title: | The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with E. Lynn Harris, |
| Dates: | October 15, 2004 |
| Bulk Dates: | 2004 |
| Physical Description: | 4 Betacame SP videocassettes (1:56:22). |
| Abstract: | Fiction writer E. Lynn Harris (1955 - 2009) is a best-selling author whose novels explore middle-class Black America and break down taboos like homosexuality and bisexuality. Harris set up his own foundation called the E. Lynn Harris Better Days Literary Foundation, whose mission is to provide new writers with guidance and assistance in getting their work published. Harris was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on October 15, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview. |
| Identification: | A2004_207 |
| Language: | The interview and records are in English. |

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Best-selling author E. Lynn Harris was born Everette Lynn Harris on June 20, 1955 in Flint, Michigan. Harris grew up and attended elementary and high schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. He attended the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and graduated with honors with a degree in journalism. While in college, Harris became his school's first African American male cheerleader and editor of the school's yearbook.

After earning his degree, Harris started his career as a computer sales executive. He spent the next thirteen years selling computers for IBM, Hewlett-Packard, and AT&T in Dallas, Washington, D.C., and Atlanta. In 1991, Harris quit his computer sales career and decided to write his first novel, *Invisible Life*. He initially failed to find a publisher for it, so he used \$25,000 of his own money to publish and distribute it. He sold his book mostly at Black-owned bookstores, beauty salons, and book clubs. The popularity of this book caused Anchor Books to publish and "officially" launch *Invisible Life* to the country. His second novel, *Just As I Am*, made Harris the first male writer to have a number-one hardcover book on the Blackboard list. Harris has written five novels that have appeared on the New York Times Bestseller list, and six of them have sold more than one million copies. Three of his novels have been optioned by Hollywood production companies to be made into films.

Harris' novels weave tales with candid portrayals of pain and passion about middle class professional African Americans in today's society. His works broke down taboos about Black sexuality and the lifestyles of gay and bisexual men. He created realistic portrayals of individuals struggling to define their sexual identities.

Harris won numerous awards, prizes, and accolades during his writing career. In 1996, his novel, *Just As I Am*, was named Blackboard's Novel of the Year. In 1997, *If This World Were Mine* was nominated for a NAACP Image Award and won the James Baldwin Award for Literary Excellence. In 1999, the University of Arkansas

honored Harris for outstanding professional achievement, and in 2000, he was inducted into the Arkansas Black Hall of Fame.

Harris set up his own foundation, called the E. Lynn Harris Better Days Literary Foundation, whose mission is to provide new writers with guidance and assistance in getting their work published so that society is exposed to and enriched by the works of these new authors. In 2003, Harris was invited to be a visiting professor in the English Department at his alma mater, the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. Harris passed away on July 23, 2009 at the age of 54.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with E. Lynn Harris was conducted by Larry Crowe on October 15, 2004, in Atlanta, Georgia, and was recorded on 4 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fiction writer E. Lynn Harris (1955 - 2009) is a best-selling author whose novels explore middle-class Black America and break down taboos like homosexuality and bisexuality. Harris set up his own foundation called the E. Lynn Harris Better Days Literary Foundation, whose mission is to provide new writers with guidance and assistance in getting their work published.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Harris, E. Lynn

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Melnick, Coy (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Harris, E. Lynn--Interviews

Authors and publishers--United States--Interviews

African American literature

Child Abuse

Little Rock (Ark.)--Social Conditions

African American gay men--Interviews

Fathers and sons

Vacations--Michigan--Flint

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville

New York (N.Y.)--Social life and customs

Fiction--Authorship

Chicago (Ill.)--Social life and customs

Washington (D.C.)--Social life and customs

Drug addiction

Atlanta (Ga.)--Social life and customs

Self-publishing

Authorship--Marketing

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Fiction Writer

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with E. Lynn Harris, October 15, 2004. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with E. Lynn Harris, Section A2004_207_001_001, TRT: 0:28:19 ?

Author E. Lynn Harris talks about his family's background and shares his feelings about being brought up by an abusive stepfather. He recalls his childhood in Little Rock and then discusses his elementary and high school years. Harris comments on the social climate of Little Rock.

Authors and publishers--United States--Interviews.

Child abuse.

Little Rock (Ark.)--Social conditions.

African American gay men--Interviews.

Fathers and sons.

Vacations--Michigan--Flint.

University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

New York (N.Y.)--Social life and customs.

Fiction--Authorship.

Chicago (Ill.)--Social life and customs.

Washington (D.C.)--Social life and customs.

Drug addiction.

Atlanta (Ga.)--Social life and customs.

Self-publishing.

Authorship--Marketing.

Video Oral History Interview with E. Lynn Harris, Section A2004_207_001_002, TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Author E. Lynn Harris talks about his relationship with his father and stepfather. Next, he describes summers spent with family in Flint, Michigan. He gives insight into his personality during his junior high years and talks about how he came to the decision to better his grades in order to eventually get into college. E. Lynn Harris tells of experiences dealing with his sexual orientation and how being gay has affected his life.

Video Oral History Interview with E. Lynn Harris, Section A2004_207_001_003, TRT: 0:29:19 ?

Author E. Lynn Harris recounts some of his high school experiences and then discusses colleges he wanted to attend. Next, he explains how he decided upon entering the University of Arkansas. Harris talks about his involvement in different activities while in college and then discusses his reasons for wanting to leave the state of Arkansas after graduation. Harris tells of various jobs he held and his numerous changes of residence. He explains his love of New York City before talking about an inspirational friend who led him to the career of writing novels.

Video Oral History Interview with E. Lynn Harris, Section A2004_207_001_004, TRT: 0:29:05 ?

Author E. Lynn Harris discusses the environments of Chicago and Washington D.C. during his years there. Next, he talks about his struggles with addiction and describes how he beat the problem. He explains his move to Atlanta upon where he began his writing career. Harris details his experiences of self-publishing and marketing his first novel *Invisible Life* and then talks about how it eventually led to his book deal with Doubleday. Harris reflects on his identity as a gay man and talks about his second novel.