

Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with E. Lynn Harris

PERSON

Harris, E. Lynn

Alternative Names: E. Lynn Harris;

Life Dates: June 20, 1955-July 23, 2009

Place of Birth: Flint, Michigan, USA

Residence: Atlanta, Georgia

Work: New York City, New York

Occupations: Fiction Writer

Biographical Note

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.

Related Entries

Bush Elementary School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Booker Junior High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Westside Junior High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

Hall High School [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

University of Arkansas [STUDENTOF]
[from ? to ?]

AT&T [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from ? to ?]

IBM [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1977 to 1981]

Sales Representative

Hewlett Packard Co. [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1981 to 1983]

Sales Representative

Wang Computers [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1983 to 1985]

Sales Representative

Delete [EMPLOYEEOF]
[from 1992 to ?]

Author