

Conversation with Rochelle Alers

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Published online: May 2022

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

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Keywords: Black romance, publishing, Rochelle Alers, Romance Writers of America

This conversation with Rochelle Alers originally appeared October 13, 2020 on the *Black Romance Podcast*, created and hosted by Julie E. Moody-Freeman: <https://blackromancepodcast.libsyn.com/rochelle-alers>.

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Julie Moody-Freeman: *Good morning.*

Rochelle Alers: Good morning to you.

JMF: *I'm so happy to see you.*

RA: Thank you.

JMF: *Before we get started, I need you to see this.*

RA: Wow. Wow. Yeah. That's those *Hideaway* books.

JMF: *I'm not done. I have much more. I even have this one. My Lover's Keeper.*

RA: Oh!

JMF: *My Wainwrights.*

RA: Okay.

JMF: *I keep saying, 'are you going to give me any more Wainwrights?'*

RA: I don't know. Right now I'm on to a new series of four books and I already have the characters picked out. But if I could decide to continue the series, I might. I might.

JMF: *Yes.*

RA: You know, sometimes you don't know until you get into a particular novel, and you want to – maybe you'll bring somebody in and then you can spin them off and give them their own story.

JMF: *Yes yes yes and more – a few more – Living Large. I just have [them] all. And then I double up on my Kindle. So I just wanted you to know that I am just so pleased to have you here because from 1995, at least for me, I was introduced to Hideaway and I sort of followed you ever since. And then I've been – now I'm an academic. So my love for your books, and then the fact that I now write, and I'm doing this Black Romance Podcast on it, it means so much for me to for you to be here with me.*

RA: I'm honored. I'm truly truly honored. I'm sure if – you know, if you've interviewed some of the other Black romance writers, some of our experiences will overlap.

JMF: *Yes.*

RA: I mean, some of us started out a little bit later and others were sort of what we would almost call the trailblazers, but I think we all had similar experiences.

JMF: *So I want to talk about you. I want to go all the way back to the beginning to sort of when you're starting out when you're reading. What were the things that you like to read? And it could be romance or it could be any type of books?*

RA: I've always been an avid reader. Um, and I found out in high school and college, I always – I had read the required reading before I even took the courses. So, you know, I had jumped ahead. When I was in high school, I would read Zane Grey, which were the Westerns. I guess they were written to a formula. And to this day, I have most of them

downloaded on my Kindle. So, you know, I have to go back to *Riders of the Purple Sage* and, you know, I have to go back and reread them, because they were, like, they were the counterpart to romance, but only they were set as Westerns. I mean, they were written to a formula and it worked, and I read one I really liked it. I read the next one and I didn't realize just when I started reading romance that they were all the same. It's just that the characters were different, and maybe the settings were a little bit different, but, you know, they all ended with the happily ever after. You know, they, they went through those trials and tribulations, but in the end they, you know, the hero and heroine were together. And I started reading romances as we know it now around early 1980s. I had gone to a Woolworths, which no longer exists, and they had these little – thin little books on the shelf and they were six in a set and they were selling them for \$1 apiece. And I think at that time [they] were like \$1.50 and I bought all six, and I started to read them because I knew Harlequins was out, but I really didn't read the Harlequins because it was another culture, you know. The garage was – was not the same as, you know, what we say a garage is and an elevator is not the same, and I had to become more accustomed to their, um, I guess how they said certain things and because when I start reading, they're talking about a lift. What is a lift? And then I realized it was – it was – it was what, an elevator? Yes, and even to this day. Now, I love British drama. I'm just, like, crazy. Anything that's British, I watch. I love them. But during that time, I wasn't that familiar with them. So when Silhouette Romance came out, there were American writers, American characters, and I could relate to those, and I must have read at least the first two hundred. And then I realized this is so easy, because they were so easy to read, but when I got sat down to attempt to write, I didn't realize how hard it was, because it is a formula. And you have to know the formula. Certain things happen at a certain time. I mean, it's like a composition of music. You start out and then you have the melody and then parts of the other orchestra will come in and they'll go back to the melody and then they have the harmony and the different movements and that's – it took me a long time to learn that. And I think after I had published my fifth book it finally clicked. All before I was just doing it and praying that I got it right. And thank God I had wonderful editors who would, who would, you know, kind of tighten up a little bit for me. But it took my fifth romance before I really knew what I was doing.

JMF: *Can we talk about what that first one was? What was the story like? Why did you write it?*

RA: My first attempt at writing a romance was the book that finally came out in 1995, which was *Hideaway*.

JMF: *Yes.*

RA: Okay! I wrote that as a short story. 5000 words. I was gonna write it for, like, one of the confessional magazines. 5000 words, 20 pages. And then I realized the plot was just a little bit too involved to be a short story. So this is before computers and word processors. I had this electric typewriter. And I would type the pages. And I would use white-out and all the other stuff. And if I made a mistake, I would go with – have to retype the page, and it took me a year to type about 300 pages. But the fact that, you know, I finished it in 1985, the fact that I finished a novel, to me was an accomplishment, because I didn't think I could do it. I

didn't send it in because publishers weren't accepting manuscripts with the hero and heroine with people of color. At that point in time, I didn't know Vivian. If I would have known her and known she was out there in the industry, I would have sent it to her. And she said at that time, if a Black writer could just put the words down on the page, she would have bought them. But you know, I didn't know this until later on. And when I finally did meet her, at that time she was on her way out from Harlequin. But, you know, I had read Elsie Washington's, her book. Sandra Kitt had done her *Adam and Eva*. I think Vivian had bought Jackie Weger's *A Strong and Tender Thread* which was also – the characters were of color. But there were just so few, but I did manage to – through Sandra, I have to give Sandra Kitt the credit. She was living in that – she bought this beautiful Victorian house in Brooklyn, and she would invite editors and aspiring writers out to her house, so Vivian and I went out. And there was another editor, a Black editor, that worked for Doubleday. And her line was Starlight Romance and most of her titles, I think all of her titles, were geared to high schools and libraries and they were hardcover. And she was saying, 'We know there can't be any love scenes, you know, no, no open mouth, no roving hands'. So, you know, because they were targeted for high school students, so they wanted them to be, you know, kind of virginal. And I had met Veronica [Mixon] at Sandra's house and she said to me, 'will you write a book for me?' And I said, 'okay.' I said, 'what do you do?'. I said, 'send me what you have published.' So she sent me, at that time, I think it was Vivian's book, Sandra's book, and another one. So I read those. And I said, 'I think I can do this'. And I, and I called and I told her, I said, 'I'm going to marry this couple. Put them in the same bed. But nothing's going to happen because the conflict will be that strong.' So she said, 'let me see how you do it.' So I did it. It took me maybe about three or four months to write the book. I sent it in in December of 1987. Nope, 1986. 1986 I sent the book in and I didn't hear from her until December of 1987. And she called me. She says, 'I want to offer for the book'. She said, 'but there are problems with it'. And she says, 'I'm going to write you a revision letter'. I said, 'Okay'. You know, she sent me my little check, which meant I'm committed to this. And when I got the revision letter, it was like eight pages, single spaced, of what did not work. Oh, okay. And she says, 'why did you put this in if you weren't going to explain it, or if you weren't going to follow through with it?' And you know, when I just read the letter and I sat there and I said, 'I think I can do this'. So she says I need it by – she gave me, like, a March date, March 1. Meanwhile, my best friend's daughter was getting married and my daughter was in her wedding party, so we had to go down to Florida. And, you know, of course I did – we didn't have laptops. Right, so I wasted two weeks and I came back to New York and I was working at the time, and every night I would start – and I told her, I said, 'I understand what's not working. So I'm going to make it work.' I said, 'I'm gonna have to change it a little bit.' She said, 'Okay but don't change the plot.' And I said, 'okay'. So, you know, I put my head down and it took me about two, three weeks and I finished it. I called, then she says, 'come in and bring it in' – during that time we had to lug manuscripts in. And when I sat down with her and we went to lunch, and she told me, she said they are letting me go. I said no. She says, 'yeah, they're letting me [you] go. Your book is the last one in the line.' And I said, 'if you would have told me before this, I would not have killed myself to do it.' She said, 'that's why I didn't tell you.' So the book came out in December of '88. And I was a published author.

JMF: *What book was that one?*

RA: That was, um, oh my gosh, I can't remember the name of it, *Careless Whispers*.

JMF: *Oh, yeah.*

RA: That was *Careless Whispers*. Yes. Um, I had a book signing party. You know, I had like 200 people there. The mayor had given me a proclamation. I mean, I was, like, really flying high. But, you know, she was my last link, and then I had to wait three years before the next one came out. And there was a woman who had been a government worker. She took a pension, and she set up her own publishing company.

JMF: *Leticia Peoples.*

RA: Leticia Peoples, yes. So that was *My Lover's Keeper*. And that came out in 1991.

JMF: *Yes, so let me go back so that I have it correct. So Careless Whispers came out with who?*

RA: Doubleday Starlight Romance.

JMF: *And who was that editor?*

RA: Veronica Mixon.

JMF: *Oh! I see.*

RA: Yes, good Veronica Mixon.

JMF: *Yes. And then, and then My Lover's Keeper is with Leticia Peoples.*

RA: Leticia Peoples.

JMF: *Oh yes, all right.*

RA: And then, you know, as I was sending, you know – I was asking this woman to represent me. Because a lot of the publishing houses at that time were asking for, you know, agented work, and she read – she read *Hideaway* (it had another title at the time, the title was *Candidate for Love*). And she told me, 'I think I can sell this if you make your characters white'. And she says, 'we won't let anybody know that you are not white.' And I said, 'how can I deny who I am and what I am?'. I said I didn't mind, you know, changing the race of the characters, because that's what Sandra had to do at times because she did do, you know, a Black book, but she was writing white characters. I didn't mind changing the characters, but I can't change me. So I said, 'thank you, but no thank you'. Then, um, Kensington had put out a press release and they were talking about – they were looking, they were going to start a line of Black romances. And they sent their editor Monica Harris to an RWA conference. And Monica was giving her card out to all the little Black people, saying, 'meet me in my hotel room at this time' and everything. And so they said, 'okay,

okay.' So, you know, en masse you see all these Black aspiring writers going to Monica's room. And then you have some of the, some of the white ones, [going] 'is something going on we should know about?'. It was like, 'no, this is ours.' And thankfully, she – I by that time had already written quite a few manuscripts and stored them in, in the, in the file cabinet. I said, 'because one of these days, it's going to happen. And I want to, I want to be ready.' So, um, Kensington said they, they were buying, and I sent her one, I think one manuscript. And she said, 'um, the offer's for two books'. So the first one came out in September of 1994.

JMF: *Because Hideaway is 1995, right?*

RA: *Hideaway* was the second book in that contract. Oh, okay. I think, you know what, that – I've done so many, I know sometimes I just can't remember the titles, because he does some of them.

JMF: *It wasn't in a Hideaway series, was it?*

RA: No, it wasn't *Hideaway*. But then when I sent *Hideaway*, it exceeded the word count. And the secondary character seemed to overshadow the main character, the hero. So I called her and I said, 'you know, I want to have a lunch with you so we can talk about this'. And she says, 'well, I'm going to try to cut it 100 pages because it was that long. It was just too, too long.' And I said, 'you're gonna have to help me pull back the secondary character because he's going to get his own book'.

JMF: *Ah! Was that Joshua?*

RA: That was Joshua. It's funny, because I started writing Joshua's book [in] I think 1990. I did the first 100 pages and I couldn't finish it. I couldn't go any further because I really didn't know who he was. So, you know, I was, I wasn't that familiar with characterization, how to actually build a character. So his book was another ten years in the making. So she, she said, 'I'm going to cut it 100 pages,' and she made some suggestions how to pull Joshua back so that Martin became the hero, and I thanked her for that. You know, it's like I'm learning on the job. So, and then a lot of writers – readers – by that time, the internet was up. And you know, we had, we had computers and I was getting feedback. I said, it's going to be a series, it's going to be four books. I knew it was going to be four books. I knew it was going to be Martin, Matt, Joshua, and David. I knew that, but everybody wanted Joshua's book next. And I said, 'no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Not yet. Not yet.' I said, 'he's gonna appear on page in the next book, but he's not going to be able to say anything.' So, you know, I did. I did Matt and Eve, which – they're my favorite couple because Matt was such a soldier for such a warrior. I mean, it's like when you see the guys, like, that are the Navy SEALs now. That was Matt, and he was strong. I like Eve because she was a strong woman without losing any of her feminine and femininity. And then I was able to do Joshua. And it's like this man just spoke to me. He was such a tortured hero because of his background and, you know, and when they realized in *Hideaway* that he had some connection to Martin's father, okay, and then they say, 'oh my god, that was his, that was Joshua's father,' and they – and they were talking about, oh, what Joshua's father did to his mother. I said, 'whoa, no, no, no,

wait a minute. Wait.' You know, Theresa was okay, but one of these days I will write the story and –

JMF: *And you did! Samuel Cole.*

RA: Samuel Cole. Yeah. You know, and then I did David's book and I was done. I was done if I did David's book. And I decided I'm going to do a prequel, because everybody wants to know what happened with Joshua's mother and father, and that's when I did – was it *Best Kept Secrets* or *Secrets Never Told*? One of them, because I did two books with best and secrets. So I, you know, so I think that was *Best Kept Secrets* and, I mean, I did a lot of research because it was a period piece. Right, I did, I had one hundred pages of research and probably used ten because I had to go back to the 1920s and 30s and what was happening in the world at that time. So everybody said, 'Oh, now we know what happened with Joshua's mother and father,' and then they asked me for the kids. So I said, 'Okay, I will do the sons and daughters.' I did, you know, Matt's daughter, I did Joshua's daughter and decided to do David's daughter. Yeah. David started it and then I did the sons. So, that was six books in the second generation. Then I went on to do this character, some of the cousins, the *Hideaway* weddings, and I think altogether I did about seventeen books in that series. And even now, they ask me about one of the characters that appeared in – I think it was *Secret Vows*. No, it wasn't *Secret Vows*. It was the last book about him because I said I was going to pair him with a *Hideaway* heroine, one of the Coles. And I haven't thought of, I can't think of a storyline for him yet. Yes. Maybe I'll go back once I get a storyline. But you know what, if it's, if it's not coming to me and I can't really flesh it out, I can't. I'm not going to do it as much as the readers want it. I just don't want to throw anything together. You know, I want to give them something that's substantial, right? But I've had wonderful, wonderful editors. I had Monica Harris, who unfortunately has passed away. She was my first editor at Arabesque. Of course Veronica Mixon is the, is the queen, because she put me in print. I also had Karen Thomas, who was at Arabesque. I had Yvette Porter, who was at Arabesque. I had Glenda Howard, who is at St. Martin's and she did the little anthologies like *Rosie's Curl and Weave*, and she is now over at Harlequin. I have to thank her. Um, I had LaToya Smith who is, that, who was at Grand Central, and she bought my Cavanaugh Island series. I have to thank her for that. I mean, she was a very young editor, but very bright, very good. And, you know, she's an agent now, and she's incredible. I had Selena James over at Simon & Schuster. I did two books for her plus a short story, and she finally went over to Kensington. And then I had, at Harlequin, I had my first white editor, Tara Gavin, who had, who had worked for Harlequin for many, many, many, many years, and she was very good. And they, and she, they accessed her and she went over to Kensington Books and she was responsible for buying my *Innkeeper* series. I did the – [it] was a four books for [the] *Innkeeper* series, *The Inheritance*, *Breakfast in Bed*, *Room Service*, and *Bridal Suite*. And I have a young white editor over at Harlequin now who edits my special edition, Megan Broderick. I mean, she's just, I think the same age as my granddaughter, but she's very good. And the fact that I don't have to justify who my characters are when it comes to, you know, their racial makeup. And with Harlequin now, they'll always be looking for diversity. So I was able to pair – you know, I could I could do the interracial very easily, and the readers were receptive to it. You know, regardless of their racial makeup, they were receptive to it. And I guess, you know, you look at, you look at television now and Madison

Avenue, when you look at ads, you see, you know, blended families, mixed race couples, you know, it's like, who cares anymore? So, you know, I have the freedom to write and make these characters whatever I choose to, and there was a time when I couldn't even get in print with characters of color. But now, everybody, everybody wants them, you know, and it's nice. Yes, it's really nice. I also wrote for Genesis Press. I did a couple, I think I did two original titles for them. I have since gotten my rights back to those two books and I'll probably do – make some revisions and put them out, you know, independently. Okay, but I've, I've done a lot, I've been on a lot of houses, I've had a lot of editors and I've written so many titles and characters I can't even keep up with them, you know. You know what, the only thing I can say, I've been blessed.

JMF: *Definitely yes.*

RA: You know. It's 32 years this coming December, and I'm still at it and God has been good, you know. I'm living the dream.

JMF: *I want to go back to talk a little... I was talking to Vivian Stephens. She told [me] about the Women of Color writing group that you all had in New York. Was this happening around the time you were trying to put together Hideaway and Careless Whisper? Could you talk a little about that group? Who was in it?*

RA: I think what I... I'm almost positive I was already in print. I think I had, I was writing for Kensington which meant I was – I had written a *Hideaway*. And it happened, so happened that, um, the Friday after Thanksgiving, I got a telephone call from a young woman who lived in Arizona, and she was practically in tears because she had gone to a conference, and she had asked a question about why publishers weren't buying Black authors. Because, you know, she wanted to write a romance. And the, I guess the moderator at the time said, 'no one wants to read about grits and greens.' And, you know, and if I said, 'if I had been at that conference, I would have told them grits and greens aren't Black folks, it's regional food'. Okay. Because that people in the South eat grits and greens, so you know that's, that's how ignorant she was. So she called me and I said, and I said, 'what we need is probably our own group'. And I said, 'you know what, give me your name and number. I'll get back to you.' And that's when I called Vivian. Vivian, and I were on the phone for about two hours. And we said, 'it's time for us to start our own group'. Because at that time, I think I still belonged to RWA. And I said, 'if they're not meeting our needs, why am I giving them money?' And they're kind of like shutting us out. So we talked about it and talked about it. And so I was working for a company that had a law firm and I went to one of the lawyers and I said, 'I want to start a group'. 'Can you think of something?' he said. And, what, this is back in 1995. He says, 'how about Women Writers of Color?' And I said, 'thank you so so very much, Ken,' and I told Vivian we were Women Writers of Color. So, you know, we contacted some of the writers and invited them. We made up, like, a newsletter. And I ran them off at my office. Yes. And we mailed them out and I asked Steve Zacharias at Kensington, I said, 'we want to put on a conference'. And I said, 'we want to do it at Club Med,' because it was all inclusive at that time. And he said, he said, 'if you put it on,' he said, 'I will sponsor it,' because he loved to party. He loves to party, and he was willing to underwrite the cost. Yes. So I told them, you know, send me money orders, because I didn't want to set up a bank account at

that time. I said, 'send me money, money orders for \$45,' and I think we're gonna, we were going to charge them \$90. And then they would have to pay for their own transportation and whatever the cost was for the resort. And I, I don't think I got six responses back. What they wanted, what these writers wanted: they wanted RWA. They wanted to knock down that door and say, 'take us'. But if you have a group of people who don't have enough with themselves, they're not gonna let you in. They're not gonna let you in. You know, and, and I kind of equate that to when after the end of slavery and when these Black people built up their own Black towns where they didn't have to rely on anybody else but themselves to take care of themselves within the town and those towns were burned down, and that was the same thing. These people didn't have enough. But they, they fought Vivian and I tooth and nail, these [people], because they wanted it to be a rubber stamp of RWA. And we kept saying, 'if RWA is not working for you, why do you want the same thing for us?' So I wound up sending everybody's money back. And, you know, I think it went on for maybe six months, and we just didn't get the response. We did not get the response. And it wasn't until years later that Romance Slam Jam, that's when we really blew up, and I went to one, but the one - I think it was in Orlando, Florida. It was incredible. I mean, they took a group picture. They were just so many of us. The, the readers came out, um. They gave us awards. And I think sometimes it - giving the awards made us a little competitive. Because all before, like, if just say, like, Donna Hill, if she was doing a book signing, she would tell them, 'why don't you call Rochelle Alers? Why don't you call Viveca Carlisle? Why don't you call Doris Johnson?' And then there would be three or four of us. That way the readers could come out and they can see more than one author. They can pick up different books to find out whether they really like this particular author. But once the awards came out for Slam Jam, the writers became extremely competitive. They were fighting each other. And it was a bad thing. It was really, really a bad thing for me, as far as - I got the first Vivian Stephens Career Achievement Award because my peers voted for me. It wasn't the readers. It was my peers that gave that to me. My book won quite a few awards and, you know, I was... but after that, it just became a popularity contest and it became - instead of being a readers' contest, it became a writers' conference. And years later, I was invited to go to the Barbara Vey Appreciation Weekend. Shirley [Hailstock] and myself, and maybe a writer from India and last year was another Black author, they were just - we weren't, you couldn't even count us on one hand, and it was a real appreciation. And the writers came in and as writers, we sat at a table with seven readers and we had to buy gifts for those readers. And we had - we spent a lot of money, but it was worth it because I think she had 600 readers come in. And it was just, we, we had to give, we had to do a submit for door prizes and for raffles, and it was wonderful because we were thanking the readers for supporting us. And that's what Slam Jam should have been. Instead of the readers coming in, we are sitting back, and they're paying homage to us, we should have been paying homage to them, because that's how it started initially. And then when Barbara had that, she would bring in the booksellers, usually Barnes and Noble, and the readers would line up, and they would make \$20,000 in two hours. That's how many books were sold. Meanwhile, if I go to RWA, and they had the literacy signing, they set us up by tables and they come in, they'll look at my books and keep moving. Keep moving. Keep moving. You know, maybe the Black ones will buy me. But the other ones will not buy me. But when I went to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, those ladies bought my books. They said, you know, my table would sell out first day they

advertised it, and they would read my books and come back and said, 'well, I'm glad you came back this year because I loved your books'.

JMF: *And again, who organized that?*

RA: That was Barbara Vey.

JMF: *Yes. Okay.*

RA: And last year, she had a cruise. It was, it was her first cruise, I think. I can't remember how many authors were there. And again, it was a, it was a reader appreciation. It was just like, we have to thank you for supporting us because you know what, you don't have to put your money down. It's not food. It's not shelter. It's not medical care. It's not childcare, it's, it's a hobby and they will, you know. I would send in cartons of books to go into the, to the gift bags, you know, the swag bags, and – and that's how you get to meet... for readers to find out who you are because when I started reading romance, I knew the characters were white, but it didn't make a difference to me because I got into the characterization. You know, it's like you go to the movies and, you know, Denzel is Black, but he's playing a character that has no color, but you still love him. Okay, you still love this man. But because you can play in the same thing with Samuel L. Jackson. It's not about a Black actor. It's about an actor. And when you read these books, it's not about a Black character. Sometimes you have a few nuances that Black people, you know, relate to. But other than that, they're just, they're just people that you really, really come to identify with and you like and for those two hours that you're reading this book you're into their lives and you're cheering for them. And that's what's important. I mean, there was an RWA conference that I went to in DC. At that point in time, I wasn't a member of RWA, but I did go because BET owned us at the time, BET had bought our best books. Yes. And they were doing a lot for us at that time. And when I walked into the hotel, some of the Black authors came over to me and she said, they said, 'they don't have our books for the literacy signing.' I said, 'what are you talking about?' you know, because when you register and you give them two titles for the literacy signing because all those proceeds go to a literacy fund. So they came up, they said, 'none of our books [are here]'.

JMF: *And what time period are we in? The 1990s, or we were in the 2000s?*

RA: We are in the 2000s. And I said, 'what do you know?' And I said this, and they, and they, they knew I had been around a while and they figured, you know, they're going to come to me because maybe [I] have a voice. And I said, 'I can't say anything to you, cuz I'm not a member of RWA.' I came here, and I didn't pay for the conference. So I'm not going to the workshops. I came here for BET. So, um, they went to talk to the woman. Shirley [Hailstock] double checked. She said when those, when they, when their request came in, I double checked to make sure they were on the list, but they did not put those books in to be sold. And I told them, I said, the only – I said, if I was a member of RWA and had paid for this conference, and I had submitted my name and the titles of my books. And I said – this is not nice to say – I said, 'what the DC police would have been here because I would have turned this place out'. You're giving them money for dues, you're paying hundreds of dollars for

conference fee, hundreds of dollars, thousands of dollars for the hotel. Who knows how much for your airfare, because when I go to RWA and I'm paying for the conference, I drop two grand off the top. \$2,000, because the conference fees, like, between three and \$500; [for] my airfare, as well for \$500; my hotel is almost \$1,000 and then my meals and everything else, you know, ground transportation. I'm shelling out \$2,000 and I said, 'you're gonna sit here and complain to me'. When you shouldn't you – but they would, they, they did not make a big ruckus about it. And that bothered me so much. I said, 'that's like taxation without representation'. You're paying the taxes, and they're refusing to acknowledge you. So – and that was that was one of the times when RWA refused to acknowledge an imprint that Kensington had put out. It was called Precious Gems, and they paid the office a flat fee. No royalties, just a flat fee. And they refused to recognize Precious Gems. So what Kensington did, because they used to underwrite the cost of the awards dinner –

JMF: *Yes.*

RA: They pull their money. Okay. And they decided that night they were going to give us a dinner at the Four Seasons in DC. So we got on a bus and went to the Four Seasons and had a wonderful, wonderful time. And from that time to this time Kensington will not underwrite the cost of their dinner, and they wind up with, like, a dessert or chocolate. I can't eat chocolate. Okay, even if I wanted to go, I cannot eat chocolate. And last year was the first year – in all the years I was a member of RWA – because I was a member, I left them. I went back to them. I left them and I went back to them for a third time, because it was here in New York and they was – for the first time, they acknowledged all the books that were written by people of color. It was a wonderful thing. And, um, I mean, they did a whole montage going all the way back to, like, the 1980s with Elsie Washington's book. I think it was it called *A Strong and Tender Thread*? I think it was.

JMF: *Oh, Elsie Washington/Rosalind Welles' Entwined Destinies.*

RA: *Entwined Destinies.* Thank you. They went all the way back and came forward. And I was a presenter. And it was the first time that people of color won Rita awards. Three of them won awards, and I said, 'thank God I'm here to see history in the making'.

JMF: *Yes, yes.*

RA: It took them to 2019. And there was a time when Shirley Hailstock would tell us, 'enter your books in the Rita awards!' and I said, 'why should I pay to enter when I know I'm not going to win?' Here you have other readers reading my book, and just like, 'oh, no, no'. Even if it was the best, they're not gonna, they're not gonna nominate me as a finalist. They're not going to do it. And, you know, and then I have, I have, I have problems with RWA, and I had problems for a while with RWA, because I think one year, a Black woman finalled [but] her book was white. They didn't know she was Black. And then the next year, they decided if you're a finalist you have to send in your photograph. When I was in high school, and when, if I wanted to apply to a college, especially in the South, that wasn't historically Black, I had to send my photo with my application. And if they saw that I was, you know, a Black girl,

they would reject me. And I said, 'this is shades of 1960s'. Okay, this is before the Civil Rights Act, this is shades – and because they're not telling these colleges, 'if you're getting federal money, you can't discriminate'. But when I saw that, I said, that's when I dropped out again. I mean, and it took them, what, 30/40 years to acknowledge that a [Black] woman was their founder. How dare you? How dare you?

JMF: *Yes.*

RA: It was, I mean. But you know, I always look at people who feel they don't have enough for themselves aren't going to give away anything

JMF: *Why do you feel that they don't they believe they don't have enough for themselves? What is it that they don't have enough of?*

RA: Well, you know what, it goes back to a colonial mentality. Okay. When people left their homeland and went someplace else where they were given the opportunity to get more than what they had or get more than what they left – it wasn't enough to share with the people in those particular countries. They wanted it all. I mean, you look at Africa. They carved it up, took the best, and subjugated the people who live there. Whereas you, like – you have the African who's living in his homeland. He doesn't have to worry about food because he can go out and hunt. If he wanted to build a house, he had, you know, lumber, twigs, straw, whatever he built his home from, mud, you know – because if you look at the African civilizations, they build gorgeous. I mean, they built the pyramids, that still stand to this day. If they wanted to adorn their bodies: ostrich feathers, jewels, all kinds of, you know, animal skins. I mean, you have these big game hunters going are killing animals for what? For sport, not even to adorn their bodies. And it's like the Africans that come in, we have enough for ourselves. But you know what, with, with them, it was like, 'we want it all'. And that's the same with RWA. Vivian Stephens started them, started the organization, and they pushed her out. Because, you know what, this, this is mine, this, and we're not going to share it. And for years and years and years, they refused to acknowledge that she was their founder. They would have been nothing without her. And now when you're just about losing members and going down the tube, now you say, 'okay, Vivian is the founder. It's no longer the Rita award. It's the Vivian Stephens award'. What took you so long? The pressure and the fact that you were out of it, you know, in social media, you know, even, even newspapers were writing about the stuff that was going on last year. But, you know that – it's that colonial mentality. And when I comment, I got to take it all. I cannot share this. And, you know, then you have to ask yourself, when is enough enough? And it's never enough. You – these writers Vivian has put some imprint [on] have made millions of dollars millions of dollars. Do they acknowledge her? No. And that you know their thing is, well, you know, that was your job. You were supposed to, you know, recognize my talent. So I just, you know, I have, I have mixed feelings when it, when it comes to RWA. And I'm just hoping that they will, they will be better and do better in the, in the end.

JMF: *What was it that you had hoped that the Women Writers of Color group would do? What was your mission?*

RA: We were just hoping that we would act as a, almost like a sorority. You know, we have an agenda or we have a... just, you know, we had a focus where we would actually support and help each other, or one another, or the ones that were in print would mentor some of those that were trying to get in print. Um, because right now, I kind of mentor another author who, who's published and, you know, she's, she doesn't have the confidence that she really needs to say that, 'I am a writer. I am a good writer'. Because when she'll talk to me, she'll talk about, 'I don't know, they don't, they don't accept it.' I don't want to hear. I don't, I don't want to hear. No, and I will tell her, 'send me your proposal, because I know what this what this house wants when it comes to proposals'. And I don't change her thought processes. I said, 'but you put this down, but why? You have to explain this – because, you know, you don't want them to reject your proposal'. And so, you know, I've helped her along that line. And that's what I wanted for Women Writers of Color: to, to help and to be kind of beacons of light for the other ones, the ones you want to get into print. And then we had a, like, a side group called Readers Plus. These are people who just want to be readers. They didn't want to write, alright. All they wanted to do – and they would support us as readers and we would give back to them as writers. You know, it would be for us to say, 'we're going to give you swag bags filled with, you know, our books and other little things,' because, you know, I would do mugs and coasters and candy and sometimes, you know, pieces of jewelry and, and books and, and bottles of wine and it is just, it's just a token of appreciation, and that's what we wanted to do. Our *raison d'être* is, you know, we were going to write about people of color in a positive light. And we were going to make sure that when a writer writes about characters of color, that it was a positive light. There were certain words which we weren't going to use, you know, we didn't want to use the word ghetto. I said, 'because if you really know the true meaning of the word ghetto, it started in Europe, it's when they put the Jewish people in ghettos. So, you know, it was just certain – and, you know, now they're using the word marginalized. And then they talk about minority. I am not a minority, there are more people of color in this world, than, than, than, than white people, so I am not a minority.

JMF: *Yes.*

RA: So, you know, there were just certain words we would try to tell them, 'don't use this in the books because you perpetuate the stereotypes,' but unfortunately it didn't happen. And... we'll see what happens in the future. Yes, we'll definitely see what happens in the future.

JMF: *Were there anybody who at least stuck with you all for a couple, you know, a couple weeks or a couple of months in terms of that group?*

RA: Yeah I know there was some, like Patricia Vaughn, who writes –

JMF: *Yes.*

RA: Wonderful historicals. Um, I think Sandra Kitt was with us for a while. Layle Giusto, who also wrote, she was with us. Shirley Hailstock, yes, definitely was with us. Yeah, and, you know, there were a few others, but I can't remember, because it's been so long. And,

you know what, I think Margie Walker was with us for a while. And there was another writer who lived in Illinois. She was with us for a while.

JMF: *Was it Barbara Wheaton?*

RA: No, Barbara Keaton.

JMF: *Keaton. Excuse me.*

RA: She came afterwards. I met her at a BEA conference in Chicago. That's where I met Barbara for the first time and we became friends. Yes. Um, I mean, and we're still friends. But you know what, I think, but I think if we would have had Romance Slam Jam – and I was talking to the woman who had taken over Slam Jam, and I was trying to get her to start a Women Writers of Color and a Readers Plus. And, you know, she, kind of, she was resistant and I told her, 'you need your own, you need your own group, you need your own group with their members who pay dues,' and I say, 'because once people pay dues, then they're vested', but they were more, they were more interested in just putting on the conference. Yes, so, I mean, I wasted a lot of time and a lot of energy, but you know, people do what they what they choose to do, and, and there's nothing you can do about that. Yes.

JMF: *So when you are writing your books, what is it that you want people particularly – I mean, because they have Black characters, what do you want people to see, to understand in terms of Black characters?*

RA: That we are human with human emotions. We're not perfect. Um, but I try to write for the positivity, because I keep in mind – because a lot of younger readers, people who were in high school, would read my books, and said, 'I really like this hero,' and I, like, tell them that, that the hero has the qualities that you should look for in a man if you become involved with one. He's not perfect, but look for the positive qualities, because you come first. And the thing is that your life is wonderful. Your life is good. Don't get me wrong, but, you know – and then if you want that man, he's got to be worthy. If he's the hero, he has to be worthy of you, and to treat you the way you, you deserve to be treated. I mean, some, some of my – I mean, when I wrote *Hideaway* Martin wasn't the quintessential hero, as far as I was concerned, 'cause he was selfish. Yes, you know, and he was just after himself. And there was a certain scene in the book that bothered me, but I had to write it, is when the daughter was kidnapped. And the kidnapper wanted to exchange the daughter for the mother. And he was almost willing to do it. But she said, 'save my child,' but for him, he didn't know that daughter for nine years, it took – I mean, when he didn't even know he had fathered a child. But meanwhile, this woman had her life was threatened. She ran away to save not herself but her unborn child. And she carried his child under her heart for nine months, gave birth to it, and she was to protect her. And his thing was, 'we can have more children'. See, and that's the way a man thinks, well, but for even when – a woman, when she miscarried, she's still grieving the loss of that child, and his thing is, 'it's all right, baby, because we can have some more'. It's different for him. A man thinks differently. It's only after he has probably raised a child and been with the child... but she nurtures that child before it's born and even after it's, even after its birth. And, you know, it's reasonable to

say, 'oh my god, he is terrible'. I said, 'but that's – you have to look at this personality'. Once he was tapped to become a candidate, his thing was, 'I got to look at my image'.

JMF: *Yes.*

RA: And that's why he hired Joshua to find her.

JMF: *Right.*

RA: Because he knew this woman would have enhanced his image, because, you know, the thing is, he had been – he fell in love with her after she was beat up.

JMF: *Right.*

RA: So the connection was there. And if she would have, she would have told him that she had been threatened, he would have protected her.

JMF: *Yes.*

RA: But then, you know, then I couldn't have written the story the way it was written. But you know what, what, you know, I had to soften Martin. I really, really had to soften him. Yeah, to the point where – even when I wrote Regina's book, when she said, 'Daddy, come and get me,' he was there. Yes, he was there for her and he would kill for her. And, and the thing is, like, when I, when I was – like, with Joshua. And I said, 'how do I create a character that doesn't smile, that, that doesn't show his emotions?' And I, I, the thing is, I had to get to him through a woman. Okay, here, he meets this woman and, and, [in] what five days, he marries her. And she softens his heart.

JMF: *Right. But he had – in, but in, in the first one he had been with Sable.*

RA: Yeah.

JMF: *I thought that was going to happen, but then Vanessa.*

RA: Yeah, you know what, he felt Sable was too needy. Yeah, Sable was very, very needy and Joshua wasn't the type to deal with a needy woman. He needed somebody that was a little bit more independent. Yes, that's why I did not give him Sable, you know. And I know initially I was going to give him to her 'cause she moved in with him and he really didn't move in with him. Okay. He wanted her to have her own, and he would have his own – and then if you felt the relationship reached the point where he said, 'you know, I think I want this woman in my life,' he would have made the overture. See because he was a, he was a control freak, because he was a – number one, he was a soldier. He went to West Point where everything is controlled. And then he went into the army intelligence, and he was like, tunnel vision, single focused. Yeah. And the thing is, when he, when he saw and when Vanessa said, he said, but I am a soldier. He was a soldier first but she got to him. Yes, that's the thing. She got to him. Yeah.

JMF: *So then. Okay, so we've talked about your, your heroes. What about your Black heroines? What kind of personality, what do you want people to see?*

RA: I want to see Black women who can make it with or without a man. My heroines are truly independent [in] their lives. Okay. They're not so needy that they have to go out and pick up somebody just to have them in their face. They have full lives. They have – I try to give them careers. Mm hmm. Because you know, Black women I know have careers. Very few of them have jobs. And my mother's generation, either they worked or they didn't work, or they had a job, and then, you know, the next, next generation, you know, they, they were career women, and the next generation, even more so: CEOs and CFOs and running their own businesses and – I want my women to be independent. And that their lives are full. They may have social, they have social lives with friends and family, so when the guy comes into their life, he's a little bit extra and he's like, he's a gift that she can choose to accept or reject. And in that she's had a bad situation in the past, her antenna goes up immediately. Because she knows what, she knows what she doesn't want, because... I'm doing a manuscript now that I have to finish, where the heroine had married a man who was a lot older than she was. And she was so taken with him that she dropped out of college. He was one of her professors and she became his little wife. Okay. And she didn't realize she had – she was young, she was twenty, she didn't realize she had surrendered her will to this man. So when she, I mean, she finally decided, because she had dropped out of college to be his wife and his hostess, because he was very social, he was considered an expert in his field. So when she finally got rid of him, it's like, 'I know the antenna will go up if a man tries to control me'. And, you know, the hero knows she's been married and she glosses over, because she doesn't want him to think that she was just so gullible that she allowed this man to run her life. But the thing is, she has to accept blame for that 'cause she gave him control. So when the hero does something, you know, she's ready to throw it all in, I'm sorry. And he doesn't understand why she goes off on him until his sister tells him, 'she didn't tell you what happened in her marriage?' He said, 'well, you know, what she told me she had married a much older man, and, you know she had dropped out of school. And the thing is, he was a little obsessed, obsessed with her and he didn't want a divorce and she had to fight into a divorce and she finally got her freedom'. That's what she told him: she didn't tell him this man monitored every place she went, men – he caught her talking to man, he, he went after her and stuff like that. So, you know when the hero accuses her of quote unquote flirting with someone, and he said, 'you're spending too much time' – because he's, actually he's her boss. He's hired her for a project, even though he tells her independent, you make your own hours, and this man when he finds her talking to this particular person too often, he's jealous. Because after all, she's single and he's in – the guy is single, okay, so he's, 'I don't know what's going on'. And when he says something, that's when she flips out. So my, my heroines, I don't think I have ever written a weak heroine. They're vulnerable, yes, to certain things, but not a weak one. She may have been weak in the past, and have allowed men to do things. But, you know what, they can't do anything to you that you don't allow them to do. That's what people fail to realize. So, but, you know, once they get out of that situation, they're not going back into it and they're not going to deal with it. Yes.

JMF: *When is this book coming out?*

RA: In April. April 2021. It's called *A New Foundation*. She's an architectural historian and he's a structural engineer. And what they're doing is restoring his father's ancestral home. So, and, you know, I'm enjoying it. It beat me up in the beginning. And it wasn't the characters. It was the plot that was fighting with me, and I was having a problem with the pacing. So I had to go back and change that and now, you know, I'm – I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, so it's good.

JMF: *I'm looking forward to that. I know from our conversation it's important, it seems like it's really important to you that your readers are important to you. And so, who, who are those readers?*

RA: I don't, you know, these are people that I have... I think I have like 3000 followers. Um, I've got readers that go all the way back. I mean, twenty, twenty-five years.

JMF: *Yep, that's me.*

RA: I was, I did a Facebook chat on Saturday and the names that popped up were people I [had] almost forgotten. So they're very loyal and you know what, I'm – I always say, 'I hope I have given you what you've come to expect from me'. That's why, you know, even after so many, so many titles, I don't want to rubber stamp a book and just, you know, like, drop these characters into another new situation and give them something where they say, 'didn't I read that before?' I want each one to be brand new. I'm – even when I deal with a family, I try not to introduce everybody in that family in that first book. You know, maybe I'll give them a cameo role and make them interesting enough, so the reader says, 'oh, I want to read about him,' because I think I did that in the first Wainwright. Because I – Jordan came when I did the *Best Men*. Remember I introduced Jordan as, as, as one of the partners in the – he wasn't, yeah, he came became a partner in the law firm and they called and he, and he dealt with the tenant/landlord situation and they called him gangsta. Remember that?

JMF: *No, no, I have to go back and look at that again.*

RA: I can't remember the title, but he – he didn't work, he didn't want to work in his grandfather's company, which was the real estate company. Yes. And he went and got a job in Harlem at – with one of the guys in the *Best Men*, I think, it was the first guy in the *Best Men* and um... You know, the readers didn't realize his mom was Black until later on and he never denied it. He – but he didn't, he didn't advertise it, but he never denied it either. And when they saw him televised and he was – I think he had, he was representing this renters' group and they said, 'yo, man, you gangsta,' so, you know, when he was walking down the street. And he accepted it. So, but – he was the sheriff of, what, of Harlem, but... Yeah. And then people say, 'we need this book, we need this book.' So that's what that's what I did. I started the Wainwrights.

JMF: *It's been – I, as I was reading over your books again, it just took me down memory lane, waiting by Waldenbooks all the time for them. You have brought me so much joy and continue to. This – I appreciate it.*

RA: You know what, I just, I love writing. I love the whole creative process. Um, and you know, when I, when I finish and submit it, I just still cross my fingers and hope that the readers will like it. Um, you know, I've had a few, 'oh, I didn't like this character,' and, you know, it's okay, it's okay, it's okay. Um, I just, I want to show my people in a positive light. And I want to give women who read the books, um, a window into what they could have. You know, if they're willing to be patient, because I've known a lot of women who marry the first guy that, or they they become involved with him, or they live together, and half the time he's not worthy. And I keep saying, 'is this hero worthy of this heroine?' Because she has so much to offer. You know, she's offering her intelligence. She's offering her, her, her spiritual support, her physical support, and, and, you know, and dreams for what they could do together and who they could be. And what I don't want to do – because I find myself sometimes writing less and less love scenes. And more, um – because I always say, once I reach the point in the relationship where I put them in the bed together, this is a commitment. There's a commitment, you know, physically, emotionally, psychologically, and then I can have her fight about, 'oh, I gave you my body and, you know, you did this to me,' and I don't, I don't want that. And if I'm dealing with couples that are not of the same race, I never make race a conflict. If they are vision, if they were visually impaired, that's one thing. But if they can see, you know, they're sighted – he sees what she is, and she sees what he is. And I do not allow outside people to talk about, 'how can you take this white man?' or 'how can she go, she go, he go with this Black woman? I know that's, that's, that's a no-no for me. Right. Because number one, they're mature enough and know who they are and know what they want and they're not going to allow somebody on the outside to interfere, because you know what, that's, that's like: you're making a conflict. You created a conflict that that shouldn't be there. And what I do like, now that I'm able to write about characters of a certain age when I do my women's fiction, they're not, they're not, they're not girls. They're full-grown women. Yes, some of them are grandmothers. And you know what, the *Innkeepers* and that – really the *Cavanaugh Island* was the first one, when I had a heroine that was like forty years old. And I could not, to save my neck, sell that to Harlequin. Because... it wasn't Harlequin, it was the editors, they just felt she was too old. I said, but she has a, she has an eighteen-year-old and a fifteen-year-old, she can't, she can't be 32, right? So, um, but they just felt, you know, she was too old. So that's why she wound up going over to Grand Central And then when Tara left Harlequin and went to Kensington, and I'm... My editor approached her, she said, 'I have something from Rochelle, because, you know, you worked with her over [at] Harlequin, with a heroine that's 58. Will you take it?' she said. He said, 'of course'. So, you know, I had the heroine go to her fortieth high school reunion and she had to be at least 58. And the, and the readers loved it. Yes, because when I go to, when I go to book clubs, and I ask the women, 'what do you want to read?' And they say, 'we want to read about women like us'. Yes, women, because these women have grown older as the genre has aged, [say], 'we want to read about women who may be never married, divorced or widowed. And we don't want to read about the twenty- and thirty-somethings. we want forties, fifties, sixties, and if you can make them seventy, okay.' Yes, that's so, you know, I have a cross-section of readers who are older and want to read about women and men within their age group. And then I had the ones that want to read about the ones in, in the, in the thirties. I don't think I have too many heroines right now in their twenties. I had one, I think. This one, this last one, *A Winning Season*, she was 28, because she was eighteen when she became the guardian for her two younger brothers. So

I mean, she's one of my, my younger heroines so... But other than that, I'm having, I'm having a good time writing and, you know, because I have the option now of writing about women who are older, women who are younger. *The Book Club*, the first woman, I think she's 46. And the next one will come out in next May – it's called *The Beach House* – she's 48. And then the third one, I'm not sure when it's coming out, I think she's 34. And even though these three women interact, it's a different age group, because the, the, the 48-year-old has adult children. The 46-year-old never had any children, and the thirty, thirty-something-year-old had a child, but she's not married, and her thing is she's very jealous of the 48-year-old, 48-year-old, because she's married with children. But she doesn't realize what that woman has gone through in her life... so, you know, all that glitters isn't gold, and that is the perfect adage for *The Beach House*. You think her life is wonderful. She's married to this judge and she lives in this big historical mansion in Richmond, Virginia. She's got two sons that are lawyers and, I mean, she's got diamonds on her hand and diamonds in her ears and her life is a mess. It's a mess. So that's, that's one of the morals of a story that I want to – especially for young girls when they see some guy that's flashing, you know, fancy cars and jewelry and stuff like that. And he's talking, 'I can do this with you'. Be careful. Right. Be careful, because, you know, I've seen it, too, and too often, too many times. Yeah.

JMF: *Well, thank you so much for being on the Black Romance Podcast.*

RA: Thank you. Okay. Well, you know, I just, I just have to say that I wouldn't be where I am, or do what I do, if it hadn't been for Black women. Veronica Mixon, Vivian Stephens, Monica Harris, Yvette Porter, Glenda Howard, LaToya Smith, Selena James, and Karen Thomas. I take my hat off to them. They have, they've all, they've given me what I need to get to this, this juncture in my life, and they should be applauded. And I don't know how many people have mentioned their names, but I'm mentioning their names. See, when Veronica sent me that revision letter, yes, that was my bible for every book that I wrote thereafter. That's how, that's how good she was, because she was able to... I was like, I'm going through a tunnel and it was like, 'this, yeah, this is what you do. And this is what you don't do,' because she told me what did not work, and I, as the writer, I had to fix it. And that was my basis for every other book I've ever, ever written. Right. So I – not only did she put me in print, she made me a writer.

JMF: *Wow, that's –*

RA: She made, she made me believe I could write. So, Veronica, you're the best. Like Tina Turner says, just simply the best. Better than all the rest. Yeah.

JMF: *That is really nice to know that history. Thanks so much for sharing that.*

RA: You. Thank you.

JMF: *All right, I'll let you go. But thanks again.*

RA: Thank you for having me. And I really appreciate this.

JMF: *I appreciate it too. Take care.*

RA: All right. God bless. Bye bye bye.