

Conversation with Sandra Kitt

Julie E. Moody-Freeman

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About the Author: Julie E. Moody-Freeman is the Director of the Center for Black Diaspora and an Associate Professor in the Department of African and Black Diaspora Studies at DePaul University. She is the co-editor of *The Black Imagination, Science Fiction, and the Speculative* and *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative*. Her scholarly essays on Belizean writer Zee Edgell have been published in *African Identities*, *Macomeré*, *Canadian Women Studies/les cahiers de la femme*, and *Seeking the Self-Encountering the Other: Diasporic Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*. Her work on African American Romance has appeared in *Romance Fiction and American Culture* and *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*. Moody-Freeman is also the creator and host of the *Black Romance Podcast*, which is building an oral history on Black Romance writers.

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Julie Moody-Freeman: *I am absolutely excited to have Sandra Kitt here. I'm happy for you to be here. I want to go back to the beginning and talk about your reading romance. I have my story of how I started reading romance. How did you even get introduced to romance?*

Sandra Kitt: I think I began reading them probably when I was just segueing from junior high/middle school into high school. And I was always a voracious reader from the time I was a child and got my first library card from the age of six or seven. I just loved reading and lived in my local library. So of course, as I grew up, what I was reading began to become more mature. And I began becoming interested in romances when I started reading them, and at the time I was not reading Harlequins. I really wasn't paying attention to the

Mills and Boons, the English version. I was finding a lot of English – what they called at the time Gothic novels. And they were all historical. They all took place in Europe or England because most of the writers were English. And that was my first introduction to reading stories that were essentially about the relationship between men and women. And I became very fascinated in that because, as I discovered going down the road and beginning to get into the Harlequin books, what I was really reading about in the romances was the expectations of the woman in the romance and also of the man. And so it was giving me a really first-hand education into what I should expect for myself in relationships: how did I want to be treated; what did I think I was worthy of; and what did I want from a male – you know, boyfriend potential, husband, partner? What was going to be the give and take between us? And so, the romances really introduced me to all of that. And once I discovered the Harlequin books – I was interested in the contemporary ones – I was beginning to see what the relationships were, what the men were like, what the women were like. You know boy meets girl, boy/girl fight, boy/girl break up, and then boy and girl get back together for happily ever after. And it was those dynamics in the middle of beginning and end that truly truly fascinated me. And so that's what kept me reading the romances. I would have to say my favorite writer in the Harlequin line that actually was instrumental in me thinking about being a writer, or in knowing what kind of books I was going to write was the late Janet Dailey. She's been deceased now for quite a while, but she had gone on to write well over a hundred books for Harlequin. She once did a series where one book was covered in every state, all fifty states. But what she did was she wrote really believable love stories of the development and growth of love between a man and woman. The stories themselves – the setting, the backgrounds, their professions – were all really, really realistic. They were really grounded in what could potentially be real life, rather than the characters being too much fantastical. You know, fabulously wealthy, owned this and that, president of this company – to me those were fantasies. Not that it shouldn't be attainable, but I wanted to write stories that were immediately relatable and were about lives and neighbors and neighborhoods of people that anyone could see having in their lives.

JMF: *So around what age did you start actually writing them?*

SK: Well, I was working full time as a manager of a library, Scientific Library here in New York at the American Museum of Natural History. And I was still reading quite a bit. And one day I just literally out of the blue came up with an idea for a book. And it just sort of struck me – sort of a cliché – like lightning. And I literally went home after work that day and began writing this book. It was like it was just *whoosh* full force, fully developed in my head, and I sat down and I immediately started writing. It took me about six weeks, but I wrote the entire book. Well over 100,000 words in about six weeks. And so that was my first book. And I just kept writing after that. While I was in the middle of writing that one, I got an idea for a second, and then an idea for a third.

JMF: *So, what was the title of that first book and were they Black characters?*

SK: That first book was really a watershed for me and for the industry. Because it was an interracial story, and I had a very specific reason for why I wanted to write this story because the female lead in the story was African American. She was a book designer

working for a publisher. The hero was a white police officer. And, you know, I can hear the 'Oh my God, Oh my God' going out around the universe now because for the history of African Americans in this country that has always been a huge, huge problem in terms of lack of relationship, understanding, sympathy between the two groups: white police officers and the African American or community of color. So although I came up with the idea and immediately began to write, when I thought about it later, I realized that the writing fed into an idea that I was exploring to begin with. And that is this relationship between the Black community and law enforcement officers. When I began writing this book, the question I asked myself was 'Could I write a story about a growing relationship between a Black female and a white male who also happened to be a police officer, and have the reader believe it? And have the growing relationship be believable and they buy into the story, and they root for the characters?' Which was a pretty complicated theme for a first book and just *bam* coming right out of the chute. I also have to say that it was not my original intention to write romance novels. I wanted to write stories that had a lot of texture and complexity and multiple viewpoints and sub-plots and romance happened to have been one of the elements in the book. Because I kind of believe that no matter what kind of book you're writing, in some ways it's all about love and relationships and family and friendships. So that became just one element of the book. But ultimately that was not what the entire book was about – the romance. It was one of the top ones, but not the only one. So, I began writing this book and was very thoughtful about, and I started out by making the characters meet under unusual circumstances, and they became friends because of those circumstances. And then I think it was the hero who realized first that he was attracted to her and kind of knew unconsciously that he has to persuade her that he was genuine. Because as an African American female growing in New York, you sort of say 'wait a minute, what's your motivation? Where is this coming from? Can I trust you?' All of those questions. So, I really tried to be really thoughtful about how I brought them together, how I was going to make it realistic, and most important of all, could I get the reader to buy into this story that I was writing. So that was the very, very first ever book I ever wrote.

JMF: The Color of Love.

SK: Right, and it became *The Color of Love*. I think my working title of the book was called *Barriers*, which was a single title, and then it was years later down the road when I finally found an editor who was seriously interested in the manuscript that I changed the title yet again, and it became *The Color of Love*.

JMF: *Who was that publisher or editor that changed it to The Color of Love?*

SK: She didn't change the title. I did. But the publisher who ultimately published the book – and it took fifteen years, I might add, from the time I wrote it to the time I got it published, publishing other things in between. But it was published by Signet as a mass-market paperback. And Signet was a division of Penguin Putnam at the time; that was the major house. And if you need the editor's name who purchased it and really championed the book, her name is Jennifer Enderlin. If she's still with the company, I'm not sure because it

was a long time ago. I think she eventually became a vice president, senior vice president, editorial president – again I’m not sure if she’s still with the company at this point.

JMF: *Yes, because I think as I was looking at the dates, I saw I think Serenade was 1994, but I think The Color of Love was 1995?*

SK: Yes, they came within a year of each other. I remember feeling like that may have been a problem because *The Color of Love* was issued as a commercial mainstream book. It was not released as a romance. But the Arabesque series was very definitely a romance series, and I was concerned about the readers getting confused about the two genres and what they were really reading. I didn’t want the significance of *The Color of Love* to be lost in the books that were coming out as romance novels. Because your focus and your emphasis and your depth of stories were really a little different.

JMF: *So, you didn’t want that, but what was the response?*

SK: Well, the response was that readers were able to make a distinction. What was interesting about finally getting *The Color of Love* published in 1995 is that it’s still available. It’s been selling for something like 26 years, which is extraordinary. Extraordinary. It’s been selling for a quarter [laughter], a quarter of a century. So it really validated my sense from the beginning that I was writing something that was significant, that was critical to changes in the culture, that there was an audience absolutely ready for what I was writing about and accepting of it and of course history in those 25, 26 years had proven me right. That it was absolutely possible for those kinds of relationships to be developed, to be seen, and be totally believable and become very, very popular.

JMF: *So, can we talk a little then about Serenade? I want to talk a bit about Serenade, but I also want to talk about how you even got published in that first line. How did you even find out about Arabesque?*

SK: Well, as you know, a lot of lines from about late 1970s to about early 80s that were beginning to develop romance lines were basically just romance lines that had primarily white writers. I mean, as I said to you in a conversation I was, as far as I know, the only Black romance writer publishing for almost ten years before other Black writers began to come into the field. So, I began publishing and writing as a Black romance writer in 1984. That’s when my first three books came out, two of which were Black romances, one of which was not. So, you fast forward to the early 1990s: I was known in the industries, I had a very, very high profile. Everyone knew exactly who I was and what I was writing. And then Kensington, which was a very, very large independent publisher and doing extremely well with their various romance lines – I happen to have known the publisher. Zacharius what his last name, I’m trying to remember the first one, his first name. I’m so sorry, it skips my mind at the moment. He was a real champion of the Black reader and the Black writers who were trying to get published. And he said this is just a matter of time before the industry realizes you have an untapped audience here that you need to begin addressing in terms of stories and writers that they can identify with. And basically, he was the first one who did it. He was the first one who decided, committed, put his money where his mouth

was and said I am going to develop an imprint where all of the authors are African American, and all of the stories will have main characters that are African American to appeal to that untapped audience of thousands and thousands of Black readers all across the country, in the Caribbean, in Europe, who were not seeing stories that reflected them. It's interesting, I thought the first name of the line was Arabesque, and then it did switch to Pinnacle – I'm not sure exactly when that happened but it started out as Arabesque. Walter, Walter Zacharius. And Walter came to me and told me what he wanted to do, and he says, 'I would really like you to be the launch author for the line.' And they also made the decision that it wasn't economically feasible or made sense to just release one book. So, they decided they would be releasing two books per month. And so, the second author on the launch, the first two books, was myself and Francis Ray. So, she became the other author on those first two books out of Arabesque. Yes, I did know Ebony Snow, who was also one of those early authors, she was the third or fourth author. And so that's how I got into it. Walter approached me and said I want you to be one of our launch authors, and he told me what he was looking for. And so what they did was to put me under a three-book contract. So, the very first book that I wrote that came out under Arabesque was *Serenade*. That was the first one. My second book for the Arabesque line was a book called *Sincerely*, which was a little bit of a mystery, a little bit of a suspense story. And then the third one, *Suddenly*, which apparently is one of your favorites and which you use in your classes. And I'm very thrilled and very pleased to hear that, that you've used that as kind of a social exercise for your students to look into. So that was the third one and of the three actually *Suddenly* was my favorite as well. So that's how I came to the Arabesque line which had a number of rebirths and iterations, because it eventually was purchased by BET, Black Entertainment Television, and then even further down the road it was picked up by Harlequin. The books were published as Arabesque books for a couple for years, and then Harlequin came out with their own Black romance line – Arabesque was the predecessor to it – which became Kimani Press. And I wrote for Kimani as well. So that's the story of Arabesque and how I got pulled into it.

JMF: *Was it Monica Harris who was the editor at that time?*

SK: Monica Harris was the first, extraordinary, wonderful editor for the line. I think that she worked for them throughout her professional career. She may have started somewhere else, but she became an executive editor with Kensington, working with the Arabesque line. She was a very good editor, I liked her a lot, I like working with her.

JMF: *I want to jump ahead a little in my questions to talk a little about your relationship with the editor, particularly for Suddenly. Suddenly had, like Color of Love, social themes going on. In terms of Suddenly we're talking about HIV/AIDS. Could you talk a little about your motivations for writing Suddenly, and also what input the editor had in terms of what topic you did write about, if any?*

SK: Actually, the editor had no say in my coming up with the idea. And of course after she had worked with me on it – and of course she had experience with me at this point, she had read my books, so she knew exactly what I was capable of. And that if I said I was gonna write a book around the topic that may have been considered controversial, or really

serious, or a little bit out of the realm of romance, I think at that point in my career – ‘cause I had already been publishing for over ten years – I think she felt comfortable that I could handle it. So, she never questioned me on that theme. I have to say that at the same time that I came up with writing the story using an underlying theme of pediatric AIDS, I was also serving as a board member with St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital in Memphis. And I was on their multicultural outreach board and committee where we were trying to connect to the community of color, letting them know what St. Jude’s did for children and a lot of them, Black and Latino children. We wanted to try to get that community of color more involved in what St. Jude was doing and in terms of [inaudible] and also supporting them. So, it was under that guise that I came up with an idea for a story. First of all, I did want to spin off Christine, who was the youngest sister in the first Arabesque book *Serenade*. You would remember that even in that book Christine, who was about fifteen or sixteen, was this really beautiful young teenager who knew that she was beautiful and used it to wile her way to get anything she wanted. And I fast-forwarded her into *Suddenly*, so now she has become a very successful, very popular and sought-after photographic model. She photographs extremely well; the camera loves her. So that’s how she built her career. And along with her success as a model, of course her ingrained belief that she was really special, really beautiful and could use all of that to get whatever she wanted played into her essential personality. The other part of the story is I used pediatric AIDS – again, because of my knowledge and my connection to St. Jude – as very serious subject that I could use to counter with the hero in this story who was a doctor. And he worked, he was a pediatrician specifically with children. And he opened the special center in Harlem. I used Harlem Hospital as the model for his center where he chose to work specifically with pediatric AIDS babies. Because at the time the book was written, these children were largely rejected. They would come into the hospital very very sick. We were still discovering how to deal with pediatric AIDS and AIDS in general, particularly in the Black community where it was just rampant, it was just absolutely rampant. And a lot of them were coming in having been birthed by mothers who were infected with AIDS. So, I decided that I’m gonna stay away from the adult aspect of this. I’m just concerned about the kids because they needed special care. So I went to Harlem Hospital and told them what I wanted to do and found this extraordinary nurse and doctor who worked with me in explaining what happens to children when they get AIDS: some of the complications, you don’t save all of them, some of them do die. So, I factored all of that into the story. What I wanted to do was to have a heroine who was basically self-centered. She was only thinking about herself, everything she touched turned to gold in terms of materialism. What she wanted she got. But the hero was a doctor, dealing with children who were very sick, some of whom died. So, you kind of have a very frivolous side of the story and then you have a very serious side of the story. And not to get too much into the plotting, but the way they met was at a function, and she was being touted as being gorgeous and wonderful and she meets him, and he was totally, totally unimpressed with her. It’s like, seriously? And she didn’t know what he did, but she sort of tracked him down and was like ‘How dare you ignore me? I am gorgeous, I am a model, I’m successful.’ And she literally tracked him down wanting to know ‘What’s your problem?’ And then she slowly began to see what he was dealing with, what was important in his life. And she began to arc as a character. She began to grow because of what she saw he was doing professionally that had so much more meaning than what she was doing. So she began to figure out, ‘Well, how can I take what I do, the only

thing I really know that I'm successful at, how can I take that and help him and show him that I'm not brainless, I'm not heartless, I'm not totally self-centered? What you're doing is incredible, admirable, and I know that there's a way I can help you in what you're doing.' And that began to draw them together. First of all, he was really attracted to her because she was really beautiful, and she also was a good person. So that drew them together and she continued to try to find ways to help him, even as he remained skeptical. So, I picked another really tough subject and convoluted story track to bring these people together, for him to change his mind about her and for her to appreciate what he's doing. And it was one of my favorite stories because of that complexity and having her arc so strongly and having him realize that she was definitely somebody he'd want on his side.

JMF: *So really then the story was sort of shaped because of your experience in the hospital?*

SK: It's what gave me the initial idea. Because I saw that this was a very serious medical issue for St Jude's that they were dealing with, particularly in terms of children, the pediatric AIDS aspect of it. Adult AIDS was totally something else. And I just said, 'Gee, you know I think I can come up with a story around this subject and really put a romance into it as well.' So, I think I was successful.

JMF: *So you didn't start the romance first. You started with this sort of social issue, particularly in terms of health and pediatric health first, and then the romance came.*

SK: The romance came together around the topic. I had these two very distinct characters in mind. This woman who was on one end of the spectrum and the hero who was on another. And she had this carefree gay life, and he was a doctor trying to save lives. And so they had to come together, and the way I brought them together was around this topic of what he did professionally as opposed to what she did professionally. But what she did professionally, she eventually found a way of helping him: 'I can raise money for you. This is what I do. This is what I'm good at. I can do this fashion show, I can bring in people from the industry, I can get you press, and it will raise a lot of money and I will donate it all to your center.' So you begin to see how each of them really had their own strengths and how to use it together.

JMF: *That clearly comes out. So, I want to circle back. You talked a little about how you were writing in the early 1970s, early 1980s, and that you had about three books come out. Can we talk a little about those?*

SK: Yes. I actually began writing, literally began sitting down and writing, in 1981, and the very first book I penned turned out to be and ultimately was published as *The Color of Love*. But when I began showing that book to publishers, including the editor who first bought me at Harlequin, Vivian Stephens, the consensus and opinion at that time in history was that the market and the publishers, the industry, was not ready for an interracial story. It was very complex, a really, really big book. The one thing I will say that was really gratifying was that they all thought it was a really good book. They just felt, 'We don't know what to do with it. We don't know who, how we'd market it. We just think the time is not right. This is still considered a taboo subject.' I always believed in it, I just put it aside. So, I went

on to write three books before I ever thought about getting published. The first one was *The Color of Love*. Then I wrote another book. It was the very first book that I published with Harlequin called *Rites of Spring*. And it was a book that had white characters but what was also unique at that time for the industry was that my primary secondary characters were Black. That had never been done before. I figured this was a sneaky way for me to get in my Black characters because it was already very clear that I was going to have trouble publishing any books that had Black characters, so I said okay, so the secondary characters were going to be Black and that's what I did. Then I wrote *Adam and Eva*, which was a Black romance from Harlequin. That came out the same year as *Rites of Spring*, 1984. And the third book that came out that year was not a Harlequin book, it came out of Doubleday Starlight Series, and it was a Black romance called *All Good Things*. That was a book where I had to take out all sensuality, all intimate connection between the characters because it was a series that was built to high school libraries, and they couldn't have consummated relationships in the book, so that was a sweet romance.

Vivian Stevens purchased my first two books, *Rites of Spring*, and *Adam and Eva*, when I first decided I was ready to start getting published because, at that point, the stories were coming fast and furiously. As soon as I got halfway through one, I had another book coming into my head. And at the time Harlequin, which was a Canadian company, made the decision that they were going to set stories in the United States written by U.S. writers. They realized that there was a huge audience in America that they wanted to tap into, and they chose Vivian to be the person to establish their first U.S. office, which was going to be in New York. And she had come from a very successful career as an editor from another line, and it was very successful, so they saw that she was a good person to head it up. I read about Vivian in an article in the *New York Times* that was talking about this new office opening in New York City. And I called her. Just picked up the phone, found the phone number, and made a cold call, got her on the phone. Her office was so new she didn't even have a secretary. She didn't even have more staff. It was just her. And she invited me in to speak with her and I spoke with her for two hours. I said, 'I know nothing about publishing. I know nothing about really what you're looking for, but I think I have written two books that might interest you.' So, she gave me a quick two-hour tutorial in publishing – what she was looking for, what the industry was like. It was easy to talk to her. She was African American, so we were able to be very comfortable, and she could be very open with me. So, at the end of the two hours she said, 'You've said you've written three books – why don't you send me what you think are your two best ones?' So, I sent her *Rites of Spring*, and I sent her *Adam and Eva*, and she called me ten days later and says, 'I'm buying both of them.' That's how I started publishing. After that, everything I wrote for Harlequin sold. Everything I wrote sold for ten years. I was pretty much doing a book a year. I didn't have an agent. They were not saying to me, 'Give us an idea for a book and then we can put you out under contract and then you can go ahead and write the book.' I was just writing the whole book, and then turning it in to them. And they'd say, 'Great, we love it, we're gonna give you the contract, and we're gonna publish it.' I didn't know you could ask for a contract before you had actually written the whole book – no one had ever told me that. And, actually looking at it in hindsight I realize that it was important to me growing as a writer, building a career, that I didn't know any of that in advance, that I had to learn it as I went along. That's how I got educated in publishing. I learned it all as I was going along, one

contract at a time, one book at a time, one incident at a time. It was all just coming to me in real time.

JMF: *Okay so I want to ask, you said Vivian Stephens talked to you for about two hours, and she talked about certain things they were looking for. I know it was a long time ago, but do you remember some of the things she talked about? When you say what they were looking for, was it certain characters, happily ever after...?*

SK: One of the things I still believe to this day about Vivian – and I said it to her, if not at that initial meeting then over the years that we had contact – that to me, she always had a very very clear understanding of what romances were, what it needed to contain in terms of a story, and what the readers ultimately were looking for. And she had already proven that she had understood that because she had success at a house before she ever came to Harlequin. And that’s probably one of the reasons why they chose her for their New York office as their U.S. office. It’s because she understood the dynamics and the elements of a good romance story. And so what she did was to talk to me about what she was looking for in the story. And there were certain things that were taboo, but it wasn’t even with Harlequin, it was just across the board in terms of publishing. You couldn’t write about religion. You couldn’t write about war. Things they didn’t consider ‘fell within the realm of romances.’ Oddly enough, fast forward about fifteen, almost twenty years, Harlequin did develop a line of romance that were called inspirational stories, which absolutely allowed the writer to touch on what they believed in in terms of faith or spirituality. So, things had changed. Everything changes. Everything morphs, and everything advances, because that’s what happens in life. So, she told me what she was looking for, and I thought that I had done that, and that’s what enabled me to say to her, ‘I think I have written a couple of books that will appeal to you.’ And to be perfectly honest I think she would have been genuinely interested in seeing what I was going to present to her because I was African American. And she was very clear on wanting to open up the industry and certainly the genre to welcome and include people of color who were writers and appeal to the readers who were people of color. So she knew what the books could do. She knew who was reading them. She knew very well. Even in the late 70s and early 80s, she knew there was an audience of Black readers out there who were reading these books by the millions, and they were reading them happily because what they were involved in was the romance of the story. The he and she meeting and coming together – that was the attraction. But she understood and was trying to be the forerunner in letting the industry know that if you write stories with Black characters, you will really draw in a whole other audience that you’ve been ignoring. And she didn’t use those words. Those were my words, but she said she wanted to open it up. She wanted to open it up to the industry and let them know about these untapped audiences, and she wanted to open up the stories so that Black readers, Black women could see their stories, their lives, their culture reflected in the books they were reading. It didn’t happen while she was with Harlequin, but it did eventually happen. And it happened down the road when Harlequin eventually acquired Arabesque, because by the time Harlequin got it, Kensington had been publishing the books for almost ten years. So, Harlequin came in after the horse had already left the gate, so to speak. But the books were selling. They were very very popular.

JMF: *We've talked about Vivian Stephens. I want to circle back to Walter Zacharius, because you said you picked up the phone and called Vivian Stephens. How did – and you might have said it – was it Walter Zacharius that reached out to you because he was familiar with the works you had been writing?*

SK: Well, he was familiar with me. He knew me. He was in the industry. Everyone knew who I was. I was very visible. So I was at all the conferences. I was at all of the special library programs. I was being interviewed on television and on radio. I was being profiled in newspapers around the country, magazines. I mean people knew who I was. I knew Walter from being in the industry. We'd run into each other at industry events. At the ABA show, the American Book Sellers Association, which actually just recently is about to end. It's a big industry publishing trade show that they hold once a year. They used to hold it in a lot of different cities, but in the last ten years or so it's been primarily at the Javits Center. It's a huge show. So, I'd see him at all the industry shows, all the fairs, and so he knew me. He knew who I was. He knew how long I was publishing. He was a publisher. He would have done his homework and say, 'Well who is this woman? When did she first started publishing? What are her sales numbers? What has she published? Who are her editors?' I'm sure he talked to people and then he eventually approached me. And actually, when he approached me it was at that point that I decided it was time for me to get an agent. I'd been writing for ten years without an agent. So I found an agent. Walter had approached me, and she stepped right in and took over the negotiations and worked out the contract, and it was a three-book deal – which was fabulous – and that's how I got into it. That's how it started.

JMF: *This was what, maybe around 1992, maybe sort of early 1990s?*

SK: I would say the contract probably came to me between '92 and '93, probably '92 makes more sense. And then they told me when they wanted the deadline. They gave me a deadline for submitting the first book, which probably had to have been some somewhere in early '93 because it came out in '94. So, at that time in the history of the industry it was a year between when you turned in the book and when it was actually released. So that makes more sense to me that the book was published in '94. I probably turned in the manuscript in '93, got the contract in '92.

JMF: *And you didn't have many changes in terms of plot or themes?*

SK: No. My editor, Monica, changed the title of my book, the first one. Because my title for it would have been *Love Songs*, and I don't know if she didn't like it or didn't feel if it was strong enough or I don't know. I no longer remember her motivation. She says, 'I really would like if we changed that.' I don't remember if I came up with the name *Serenade* or if she did. It was long time ago. But they changed it from *Love Songs* to *Serenade*. And it's not the first time that one of my books was written for either Arabesque or when I was writing the Black Romances for Harlequin, that they changed my titles. Once it became very confrontational with a book down the road that they insisted on changing the title on and to this day I think they made a huge mistake in making me change the title. The title that it

was published under was just awful and the one that I wanted it to be would have been much more understandable but that's another story [laughter].

JMF: *We won't say the name, right?*

SK: Thank you [laughter].

JMF: *So maybe we can talk a little about what you're currently working on.*

SK: Okay so I was very fortunate again in that last year I got another three-book contract with Sourcebooks. I had met the editor in 2018 at the very very last Romantic Times Conference – because they were discontinuing the Book Lovers conventions and they were also discontinuing publications of *Romantic Times* magazine, which I had known since way back in the beginning with Kathryn Falk who was a big champion of mine. And so, they had me come out to Reno where the conference was to give a testimony to Kathryn, and at the conference, I met the editor from Sourcebooks. She says, 'I'd like to talk to you.' We sat down and had coffee and we talked, and she says, you know, 'I really wanna work with you.' And I said, 'that's great,' and she told me a little about her lines and what her company does, and I said, 'Well I'm very interested.' I said, 'Let me give you the name of my agent and I will give your information to my agent. And I think at this point you two need to talk and you tell her what you're looking for.' So that was in May 2018. When I got back to New York sometime around the middle or end of June, my agent contacted me and said they definitely want to put you on the contract and work with you. I said, 'That's great, it's nice to know that I'll have another book to write.' And she said, 'Oh no, they don't want you to write one book. They want you to write a trilogy.' So, I said 'Ah!' I was thrilled. I happened to have this idea that I had worked out a couple of years ago – a number of years ago – that I sort of just put into a drawer and didn't pay any attention to, but it was intended to be an idea for a trilogy. So I pulled it out and wrote what I had written at the time and I said, 'This is totally workable. I could do this. I just need to change a couple of things in the premise, but I think this could work as a very good idea for a trilogy.' So, I literally spent about five months polishing the concept, the overall concept. And then I also came up with three fully developed ideas for three books for the trilogy. So that the editor could see this is what I had in mind, and this is how I intend to tie the three books together under the common theme. So, my agent and I went back and forth, back and forth for months polishing it, making sure that we were both happy with the language, with the development of the theme, with development of all three stories, and we turned it in to her. And she got back to me about six weeks later and said I love the theme and says, 'this is a fresh idea. I've never seen anything that's taken this angle before.' And she loved the concepts, the synopses that I had given her for the three books. So, they put me on the contract and the first book which was called *Winner Takes All* was turned in last October. Both my agent and editor suggested some changes, which I proceeded to do and incorporate into the story, and turned that in this past January. The book is now being copy-edited, and after that I get to see it again, it goes into production, the whole nine yards. And it's due, at least now, to be released in at least March of 2021.

JMF: *Can we get a little teaser [laughter]?*

SK: What I'll do is I'll tell you what the theme is without giving too much away. The overall title of the theme is called *The Millionaires' Club*. And my thought was again – because this was the way I think about society and life – is you have in the three stories, someone in each of the stories comes into an enormous amount of money – we're talking millions – that was totally unexpected on their part, and not really earned. So I had to think of well what are the ways that people get a lot of money that make them millionaires that they haven't earned. And I thought, well, the top one was, you win the lottery. That's sort of obvious. Second one is you're left money in someone's will. You've done something, or you're a relative or whatever, but someone leaves you in their will an enormous amount of money. In the third one, the character actually finds money in a house, an enormous amount of money, and turns it in to the authorities. And there's a whole story about where the money came from, how it got into the house, but she turned it over to the authorities, she was being totally honest, and then found out there was an enormous federal reward for having turned in the money. That's how she becomes a millionaire. So the editor read these three synopses and said these are fantastic, and I told her I'll figure out how to connect the stories to the theme, not one story to the other but to the theme. And so that's what I did, and with the first book, *Winner Takes All*, it was in that book that the hero had won the money in the lottery. The heroine was somebody he knew in high school and they reconnected. And she came up with the idea, you know, 'I know you have a lot of money and you're really struggling, what do I do with all this money?' Plus people are coming out of the woodwork, relatives he never knew, friends, everybody has their hand out. She says, 'Why don't you establish a foundation?' She says 'Clearly you don't object to giving money to causes that are really worthwhile.' So, she says, 'Work with a financial person and split your assets. There's your money, and then there's the money that goes into the foundation.' She says, 'And then you think of the parameters: what kinds of things do you believe in what do you wanna give to? What kind of people you feel are worthy, or you consider helping?' Sort of like the MacArthur foundation. You know they give money to creative people. He loved the idea. So, he says 'Would it be too much to ask if you have any ideas of what I could call it?' And she says, 'Oh let's keep it simple, let's call it the Millionaires' Club.' And he says, 'That's very catchy, I love it.' And so that's how the Millionaires' Club came to be in the first book. I'm working on the second book now. I just started it. The title of the second book is called *A Million to One*. And you notice that the word 'million' occurs in both of the stories. So, the second one is called *A Million to One* and I've already figured out how the theme gets connected to the Millionaires' Club that was developed in the first book. I won't go into what the third book is about. I didn't tell you anything about the second book really. But I'm having a lot of fun with it.

JFM: *And you've definitely teased us enough. When is it coming out again?*

SK: March 2021. And at least months prior to that I'll begin promoting and advertising it on my social media platforms. I'll begin putting together clever things I can do on my website to get the word out. And I like doing stuff like that – just a little bit of a teaser again. One of the ideas that I came up with was telling the readers in advance who the characters are, who these people are, who's the heroine, who's the hero, how do they meet? Just to stimulate their curiosity about these two people. And then maybe down the road I'll tell a little bit about what happens in the first chapter. I don't want to give them the whole book.

You want them to read the book. But tell them a little about the first chapter because that almost always how the characters meet. So, you want sort of just want to whet their appetite and tease them, 'Gee, I really wanna know what happens after this chapter.' You have to read the book to find out. I really wanted to make it creative and fun enough that they move forward. So that's what I'm working right now.

JFM: *Wonderful. I'm seeing when I'm reading a number at least five or six African American romance writers, I notice that sometimes the love stories are set in centers and institutes that help disenfranchised communities whether its HIV/AIDS or domestic violence. I see that happening. I don't want to call it a trend because I don't see that showing up in all of your work. I think particularly for me because I come from Belize, and at the time I lived in Belize it was sort of a majority Black culture. And we're very political, but in terms of what I see as racial uplift, these ideas of these centers and institutes, I think it stood out to me a lot when I read African American novels. When I taught at an HBCU I constantly kept hearing about, 'You have to give back to the community, you have to give back to the community,' and I'm like 'What is this?' I couldn't understand that. So I think I'm pondering whether or not that's a conscious thing that's within African Americans in general, Africans Americans think about that or writers thinking about that when they're writing, or is it just come naturally?*

SK: I can't really speak to what the other African American writers, what their motivation is, and what drives them and their stories or where they came from. I have two things to say about my ideas and why some of them were driven socially. Number one, I have always said this from the beginning, I consider myself in a way a very selfish writer. In that, I wanna write what I wanna write about. I don't wanna write about what's being driven in the marketplace, I don't wanna write about what's popular this year because by the time you jump on the bandwagon it has changed to something else. I've never done that. I have always followed my own North Star. So the stories initially that I began writing, those were absolutely stories that I came up with that were very important to me to write. These were the books I wanted to read. Certainly, the first go 'round of *The Color of Love* was absolutely that way. I'd never seen a book like that. I'd never seen an interracial story that wasn't just about a Black guy and white woman getting together, but exploring the hesitations, the difficulties, their fears, everything to make it real, to make it a real story. And I give a lot of thought to that. Though I did not consider it a social-based story at the time, looking at it in hindsight I would say it definitely is and it definitely was for a purpose. I wanted to basically show that when it comes to love – and I really just went all at it, I just threw the kitchen sink in there – that when it comes to love there are no rules. You can't make rules, assumptions, or hard and fast beliefs. Because you're dealing with an emotion. Not your intellect, you're dealing from here. When people fall in love, it's from here – your heart. And so I had to remember that ultimately that's what I'm put into the story. I may intellectualize it in terms of how I want to develop the story but not in terms of what happens within the story and what happens between the characters. They're gonna fall in love. So ultimately one of the rules is how are you gonna bring them together. You gotta figure that out. So that's what I do. I think as I began to write more and more and I always remember an editor, I can't remember her name now, but an editor at Harlequin, and she was never my editor she was just someone I knew from the staff and – again, you see them all over the industry. And she said to me, 'You know, your books really sell really well but we sort of

know here in the office that you're not strictly writing romances, your books are really different.' But she says, 'They're really popular, they're really selling.' Because I was breaking every single one of the rules that they had for romances. You're not supposed to write from a male point of view. You're not supposed to put in subplots. Every single one of my books are written from a male point of view and have subplots. My feeling is, I don't want to write about a woman falling in love unless I know about what the hero is thinking as well. What's bringing him to her? What is he thinking as he interacts and sees her? That builds the believability of the relationship. It's not just her point of view and what she sees is wonderful in him, I wanna know what he's thinking as well. So I began to just break all the rules and I wrote my stories that I believed in and my feeling was: I turn them in, if you don't want it, okay, give them back to me. I'll wait on it a little while, and I'll go and I'll write something else. Because I really was just coming up with ideas constantly. I really had no trouble coming up with ideas. So, if one editor says, 'well, I don't know...', I say, 'Okay, that's fine, I'll pack it up.' I've had that happen, where I've had to set a story aside for three or four years and then a new editor comes on the scene and says 'you have anything I can look at right now?' and I give them that book and they say 'Oh! Great, we wanna publish this one.' So, I had never written anything that hasn't gotten published at this point. The other thing about the social issue is they were social issues that I was interested in. It wasn't as if I sat down and said, 'I really should try and write a story about how the community is affected by children with AIDS.' I didn't sit down and say 'I really should write a story about' – let me think about one of my other books – 'a guy who served time in prison, and he was championed by this woman, and his daughter is the one he fell in love with.' And so, it's not like I sat down and said 'I'm gonna write about this type of story and it's gonna touch on this issue.' My stories were always 'What if? Suppose?' So, one of the ideas was what if the hero had served time in prison, and it was for something that was totally benign, no one's life was threatened, no one got hurt, but he ended up going to jail. And he comes out and it turns out he's an artist, and he's matured, and he's turned his life around and he's actually working and all of that. Would the reader believe that they could champion and really root for someone that was an ex-con? That book became *Family Affairs*. That was another book. What if you have two best friends from childhood, one white and one Black, and the Black woman is godmother to the daughter of the white woman, and then the two women fall in love with the same man? How would you work that out? And to me that was the challenge of writing. I wanted to see if I could write that story. Then if I put it out into the universe and a reader finds it and they love it, that's like icing on the cake. But I first have to write my story. It's my story cause that's the book I want to read. So, I have to pull that off. 'Can you write it, can you really do it and put it out there?' So that's pretty much how I do it. Every now and then I'll come up with an idea that has social context to it, but not all the time. I don't even know if I would consider *The Millionaires' Club*, the trilogy I'm currently working on, necessarily having social context at all. In the first book, as I'm talking to you and thinking through the story and the plot, there really wasn't. There were aspects of both characters' personalities and as characters in the book that in some way touched on social issues, but the social issues were not relevant to the story at all. They did not play into the story at all. And I like switching up. I like doing different things. Someone once said to me, 'If you had kept writing the same kind of stories, your career might have been bigger.' I said, 'Well, you know, it's big enough.' I'm very happy with where it is. It feeds back in again to me writing the stories that I believe in, not to fill some form or prerequisite by readers.

Saying 'Well, we wanna see you do more stories and do this kind of a theme to it.' No. That's not how I write.

JMF: *I want to ask a last question and it has to do with your readers. Who are your readers? Because your books sell very well, so who are your readers?*

SK: I'm very happy to say that they cross all over the map, all demographics. I even have men who are readers of my books. And what was interesting about that is – there was no way for me to anticipate who was gonna read the stories and who was gonna like them or not. But when *The Color of Love* was published, I started hearing from a lot of white police officers. Which was very totally unexpected but very gratifying. They got in touch with me because they said, 'Somebody told me I should read this book, and I read it, and I gotta tell you, you got it down correct the way police officers were at that time' – 'cause, you know, it was written a long time ago. They said, 'You really got the voice, you got the whole culture down. I see a lot of research too.' They wrote me to say 'This was a really good book. We really like what you wrote about cops, and we really liked what you wrote about bringing the couple together.' They said, 'We found that totally believable.' They contacted me and I really loved that that was appreciated. I also found out that many – I can't say equally this many as that many because I don't know what the percentages are – but I do know that I have white readers who read my books as well as Black readers who read my books. And I've had extremely few complaints from readers about any subject that I've written, I have not gotten hate mail or 'This is a terrible story.' I've had people who didn't like it, but that's different. That's on you. You're not supposed to like everything I write, and if you don't like it, you don't like it. You know, you have your own criteria. That doesn't affect me, and it doesn't affect my writing, and it doesn't make me say, 'oh my god, somebody doesn't like this story. I better not write that kind of story again.' That's not gonna happen. I'm always gonna write the book I feel I should be writing at any given time. So, my readership spans all over genders, racial groups. I have readers in England. I had readers in the Caribbean, all over the country, so I'm very happy with that. And I had to kind of fight for that. What I did have to fight for was: when I started publishing, I became very clear that there wasn't a specific publisher or line that spoke to the kind of books that I started writing. If you were female, and you were writing books, and if the books had romance in it, you were a romance writer. So, I had to accept that. Early on for a number of years there was no place else for me to go within the realm of the publishing industry because my books weren't literary, and they really weren't for the most part romances except for the ones I did for Harlequin. But what I began to fight for when I did my mainstream novels – I did six books under Penguin Putnam that were listed at mainstream or commercial fiction – I began to fight for that label of fiction on the spine of the book when they used to do it. They don't do that anymore, you know. I began to fight the label of being considered just a romance writer. The only thing more I would say about a couple of years, people were asking me to do a sequel. And I really didn't want to do a sequel because that was never my intention. When I wrote *The Color of Love*, it was the book that I intended, it ended the way I expected it to end and I was very happy. It was several years after that, quite a number of years after, that I came up with an idea for a spin off where I took another approach to the story that would reintroduce the reader to the hero and heroine to the readers and to the audiences, but it advanced what had happen in their lives as a couple and it continued the controversy

of relationships between white police law enforcement and people of color. And so, I actually had started writing that and had gotten into about three or four chapters, and I had to put it aside because of familial things that were happening in my life at the time. And I haven't gotten back to that book yet. So, I still have that on my agenda as a story that I definitely want to finish, but it's just not happening right now.

JMF: *Right because we have those other three that we are waiting for [laughter].*

SK: Correct. Absolutely.

JMF: *I want to thank you. This has been such a pleasure for me. Thank you so much and I look forward to those books that are coming out.*

SK: Well, I'm thrilled. I'm so happy that you reached out to me and invited me to do this. It's been a lot of fun. I really appreciate your thoughtful questions. Again, I remain very in love with the idea and impressed with you using one of my books as part of your teaching curriculum. So, it was good. Please reach out to me at any time. I'm happy to continue the conversation.