

Jewell Parker-Rhodes - My Personal Connections to *Ghost Boys*:

I was born a year before Emmett Till was murdered and I still recall seeing images of his mutilated body in *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines. I grew up with images of men lynched—one, in particular, I recall had screwdriver holes all over his body. Raised in a segregated ghetto in Pittsburgh, no one shielded children from racist actions and images. I watched Civil Rights battles and cheered Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech. I, too, believed a time would come when people were judged "not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

I married Brad, a white man, in Maryland (a state that didn't recognize interracial marriages until 1967). We had a son with brown skin and a daughter with white-toned skin. And within our own family we experienced how the world treated our children differently. Our daughter was given the "privilege" of being white and I was considered her nanny. Our son, the older he grew, was seen as more suspect and his father was presumed to have adopted him. Dozens of strangers declared there was no way our daughter and son could be siblings.

Rodney King was battered when our son was two. I wrote an essay, "Evan," for [Between Mothers and Sons](#), that spoke of our family's anguish that one day two-year-old Evan who loved Legos and ants, would one day as an adult, be stopped and attacked by police. When the officers who beat and hog-tied King were acquitted and Los Angeles rioting began, our family drove North—as far as Monterey Bay—to find a refuge.

As an an adult novelist, I always wrote about race, class, gender, and religious discrimination. A high school student when Obama was elected, my son received “walking...talking...driving while black” speeches, however Evan believed his mother, in particular, was too traumatized by past racial woes. As a graduate student at Columbia University, stopped almost daily by police, Evan learned how some systematically devalued him and doubted he knew “his lowly place” as a black man. The constant harassment was horrific. More horrific were the numerous contemporary media examples of police officers who brutalized and killed black men across America.

I thought the world had gotten better, more tolerant. Now as a grandmother, I worry that racism is again tearing our nation apart. I worry that my generation lost the battle for more tolerant hearts and minds. I worry that my children and grandchild have to fight and struggle on.

I write for children now. I believe they are our best hope for a better world. The young are curious and have such open hearts. I write challenging stories not to embitter them but to empower them to “be the change” -- to remember always the sense of justice and fairness they knew instinctively as children, when they become adults. Writing stories about citizenship and social justice, I hope will be my legacy—my own personal attempt to “bear witness” beyond the grave.