

# Reader Views

Book reviews, for readers, by readers.

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## **Interview with J. Everett Prewitt**

### **Author of *Snake Walkers***

Reader Views is very excited to talk with author J. Everett Prewitt, winner of four first place awards for his debut novel, “Snake Walkers.” Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us today.

Juanita: J. Everett, please tell us the meaning behind the title of your book, “Snake Walkers.”

J. Everett: The title is based on a mythical African tribe that teaches its children from birth how to walk through a nest of poisonous snakes without being bitten.

Juanita: Give us a little insight into the main character, Anthony Andrews.

J. Everett: Anthony comes from an upper class family of Blacks that are more concerned with maintaining the status quo than seeking justice in the turbulent fifties and sixties. Through no fault of his own, he is book smart but naïve about life. Because of his new job, Anthony is thrust into life threatening situations where he meets people he learns to respect. They have a different viewpoint about dealing with racial injustice and life in general, and Anthony's perspective eventually changes.

Juanita: Is Anthony based on anyone you know?

J. Everett: I didn't have any friends like Anthony, but I belonged to a social group of upper class blacks when I was a teen because of my mother's status as an elementary school principle. I quit after a year. Some of them were as close as I got to someone like Anthony. There are some Anthony's in the world today, so it wasn't too hard understanding their thoughts about issues like civil rights.

Juanita: How does Anthony make peace with his childhood trauma by attempting to solve the mysterious abandonment of a small town, and disappearance of fourteen white men?

J. Everett: To Anthony's credit. He confronts his demons head on. He works out and runs hoping that somehow this will alleviate his problem. Although he is a little gun shy

at first, he continues to confront the violence that unfolds because of his discoveries and eventually becomes a stronger person because of it.

Juanita: “Snake Walkers” is a refreshing new look into the racial conflicts of modern American history. How common was it for ‘white people’ to go missing?

J. Everett: I'm not sure how common it was, but once I wrote the story, I began to hear numerous accounts of blacks in the south fighting back. One person told me that his family had a farm that was attacked by the Klan. His grandfather in telling the story simply said "They came on the property, but they didn't leave the property". I imagine there are quite a few stories like those out there. I'm hearing more and more as I give talks around the country.

Juanita: I would imagine you will continue to hear stories like this as your book reaches more and more readers. Who have you seen to be your audience, and what else are they saying about “Snake Walkers”?

J. Everett: My audience is as varied as the characters in the book. I've spoken to all white audiences, black book clubs, library groups and was even the keynote speaker at a real estate installation banquet. I've received only positive responses to the book thus far. Some questioned whether there were any people like Bobby Joe Byrd, a white man who fought for the rights of black people. I ask them if they remembered John Brown. I've been approached by both black and white members of the audience who say they could identify with something that happened in the book. I'm hoping that I can eventually address young adults, especially young black men.

Juanita: Tell us about the research you did for “Snake Walkers.”

J. Everett: I visited the cities I wrote about (except for Evesville), talked to a number of people there and others that were from there, read news articles and searched online for a lot of my historical information. An Arkansas writer was very helpful in referring me to books about Arkansas. The most helpful person however was a little old white lady who was in the library in Wynn, researching her ancestry. She told me more about the area than all of my other sources combined.

Juanita: How important is the need for a voice regarding this unacknowledged aspect of history?

J. Everett: It is very important. In portraying a minority culture or race, there needs to be balance. I can find a thousand books on hangings, beatings, castrations etc., but very few on families that confronted physical violence and won. Without balance, both those inside and outside of the culture or race tend to see that group as victims and act accordingly.

Juanita: What is/are the underlying theme of “Snake Walkers”?

J. Everett: There are a few. No one is "above the fray" when it comes to fighting injustice. Your strength comes from within. A strong, supportive family is essential when confronting insurmountable odds. Persistence and an open mind are necessary to navigate the treacherous mazes of life.

Juanita: You graduated from high school, went on to Lincoln University, was drafted into the army, all throughout the turbulent 60's. What was your experience coming of age in these historic times, and how has that influenced your writing?

J. Everett: Ever since I was young, I felt compelled to fight back against all the injustices I encountered. Although I was prepared, fighting was seldom physical. It did however require a mindset that color does not make a person inferior or superior. During those tumultuous times, this belief was challenged, but subsequently reinforced so many times that it was no longer a question. Because of that, my writing is based on telling stories of people with similar mindsets resulting in triumph and victory. That is the life I lived during those times and that was the life my family lived. My father, mother, uncles, aunts and cousins were great mentors in that respect since they repeatedly overcame barriers and went on to become very successful people.

Juanita: What was your inspiration for writing "Snake Walkers?"

J. Everett: I remember hearing stories in my youth about retribution, rebellion and confrontation by blacks in the south from different elders, and those stories stuck with me. A Mr. Johnson put it most succinctly when he observed that "They didn't all win and we didn't all lose." I also videotaped my father, an uncle and an aunt about their history growing up in Arkansas and I often wondered why nobody ever wrote the stories I was hearing. I decided I would. There is an African proverb that states, "Until the lions have their own historians, tales of the hunt will always glorify the hunter".

Juanita: "Snake Walkers" is such a stunning, debut novel, receiving many awards and high recognition. Will you be writing another soon, and if so can tell us a little about it?

J. Everett: My next book will be called *Two Wolves*. It will be a sequel to *Snake Walkers*. The setting will be Cleveland, Ohio in 1969 after the Glenville Riots. Anthony, the protagonist in *Snake Walkers* is a reporter at a small newspaper and Raymond Williams (the heir apparent as family patriarch) has just come home from the Vietnam War. There will be a number of subplots, but Raymond's girlfriend, Myra, is missing, and although he graduated from college, it will require all of his street knowledge to find what happened, and deal with the consequences.

Juanita: Thank you for this enlightening interview J. Everett. Are there any last thoughts you'd like to share with your readers?

J. Everett: I've been a little overwhelmed at the response to the book. I started writing to fill a void due to, in my opinion, the inadequate representation of strong, solid black families and the positive outcomes some experienced when they resisted injustice. I guess this has resonated with a lot of people and I'm grateful. I'm only sorry that my father who passed a few years ago at 95 could not share this experience with me.