

September 2021

Book Review: Understanding Alice Walker

Cindy E. Garcia-Rivas

University of South Carolina - Columbia

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Recommended Citation

Garcia-Rivas, Cindy E. (2021) "Book Review: Understanding Alice Walker," *South Carolina Libraries*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51221/suc.scl.2021.5.2.8>

Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/scl_journal/vol5/iss2/6

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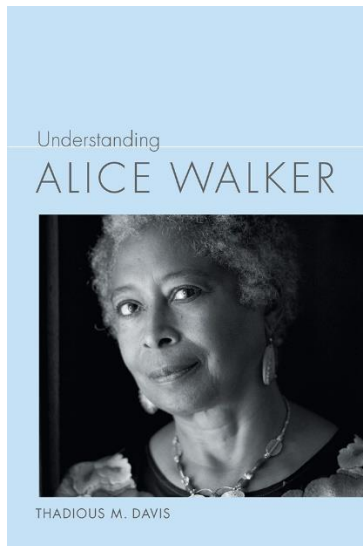
Book Review: Understanding Alice Walker

Abstract

Cindy Garcia-Rivas reviews *Understanding Alice Walker*, written by Thadious M. Davis.

Keywords

Southern literature, literary criticism, African American, feminist

Understanding Alice Walker

Thadious M. Davis
The University of South Carolina Press, 2021
ISBN 978-1-64336-237
Hardcover \$59.99

Understanding Alice Walker is a discussion of the works of Alice Walker and her life as it pertains to those works. Walker is best known for her novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), popularized by the major motion picture of the same name. She is, however, a prolific writer, who has received numerous accolades for the poetry, essays, short stories, and other novels which she has published over the decades. Her frank discussions of the intersectionality of race and gender have made her a prominent figure in feminist and queer literature.

Davis is a professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania who specializes in African American literature and Southern literature. As Walker is a Georgia native who centers many of her early writings on that experience, Davis is particularly qualified for this discussion and refers to the writing of this book as “an exercise in remembering my own path as a daughter of the South” (p.xi). She has written several well-received books discussing Southern literary traditions and lectures internationally on the topic.

This book is slight, coming in at just under 150 pages and divided into four parts. The first part covers Walker's early life. Davis deftly weaves the major themes of Walker's work into the defining moments of her life. For instance, Walker's traumatic childhood injury, transformative recovery during adolescence, and unwanted pregnancy during her college years are all influences on her debut novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1976). The novel deals with power imbalances due to race and gender, pregnancy as subjugation, and transformation of the self. While summarizing the key plot points of this intergenerational novel, Davis clearly lays out burgeoning perspectives and literary devices that we will continue to see in Walker's later works.

In the second section, Davis teases out the semi-autobiographical nature of *Meridian* (1976), whose title character rejects traditional feminine roles in order to actualize herself as a political activist and artist, much as Walker distanced herself from the role of wife and mother to pursue her craft. The third section of the book tackles Walker's best-known works: *The Color Purple* (1982) and *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Davis provides insightful commentary that allows those unfamiliar with Walker's work to understand the literary relevance and impact of each work. The rhythmic dialogue of *The Color Purple*, for instance, is a "unique aesthetic achievement," while the coining of the term "womanist" allowed African American women to discuss women's rights without focusing on the political history of White women (p.65).

The last portion of the book discusses Walker's essays, poetry, and ever-evolving relationship to the world. Throughout the text, we see her definition of family expand from immediate relatives to her "historical literary relatives," such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, to now include all people and the earth (p.54). Davis breaks down Walker's writings to show us themes of ecological activism and spiritual awakening, which emphasize healing, a connection to Mother Earth, and

forgiveness of the self. Overall, Davis' text creates a cohesive narrative from decades worth of Walker's writings.

As part of the *Understanding Contemporary American Literature* series, the text is meant as a primer and reading companion for students and non-academic readers alike. While the writing is strong, clear, and flows beautifully, it may be more suited for upperclassmen and readers more familiar with literary analysis. Davis uses many literary terms that are not easily accessible to younger readers.

Cindy Garcia-Rivas holds an MA in Sociology from Fordham University and is an MLIS candidate at the University of South Carolina, School of Information Science.