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Writing Literary History: Isabel Wilkerson and The Warmth of Other Suns (interview)

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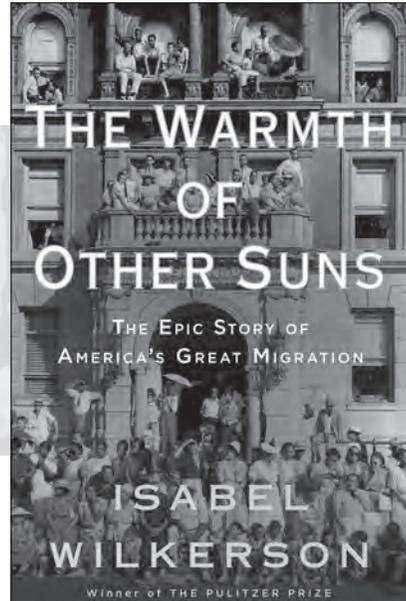
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Writing Literary History . . .



An Interview with
Isabel Wilkerson

Author of the critically acclaimed
*The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story
of America's Great Migration*

Kathy Roberts Forde
University of South Carolina, Columbia, United States

Writing Literary History . . .



Isabel Wilkerson, the first African American woman to win a Pulitzer Prize in journalism, spent fifteen years researching and writing *The Warmth of Other Suns*, which became a *New York Times* bestseller and was named to more than thirty Best of the Year lists, including the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, the *Washington Post*, the *Economist*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Boston Globe*. *Warmth* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction,

the Heartland Prize for Nonfiction, the Anisfield-Wolf Award for Nonfiction, the Lynton History Prize from Harvard and Columbia universities, and the Stephen Ambrose Oral History Prize, among others. It made national news when President Barack Obama chose the book for his vacation reading in 2011. In 2012, the *New York Times Magazine* named *The Warmth of Other Suns* to its list of the best nonfiction books of all time. Wilkerson won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Writing in 1994 as Chicago bureau chief of the *New York Times* and was awarded a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship for her research into the Great Migration. She has taught at Princeton University, Emory University, and Boston University, and has spoken at more than one hundred colleges and universities in the United States and in Europe.

*Kathy Roberts Forde is an American media historian focusing on the twentieth century with research interests in free expression, the African American freedom struggle, literary journalism, and the history of the book. Her book *Literary Journalism on Trial: Masson v. New Yorker and the First Amendment* won the Frank Luther Mott-KTA book award and the AEJMC History Division book award in 2009. She is an associate professor at the University of South Carolina, and will assume duties as chair of the Department of Journalism at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, Fall 2014.*



When *The Warmth of Other Suns* appeared in 2010, it quickly became a bestseller in the United States. A spell-binding and deeply researched chronicle of the Great Migration—from World War I through the 1970s, more than six million African Americans left the South to settle in northern and western cities—the book introduced many readers to an important episode in American history they knew not at all, or only dimly.

A work of both literary history and literary journalism, *The Warmth of Other Suns* dramatizes this poorly understood history by telling the stories of three people who migrated from different parts of the South to different parts of the nation—Ida Mae Brandon Gladney, George Swanson Starling, and Robert Joseph Pershing Foster. Wilkerson takes the reader on each character's journey into the great unknown and, along the way, shows how these journeys represent millions more in the great swath of a migration that changed the country.

In this interview with historian Kathy Roberts Forde, Isabel Wilkerson discusses the research and writing of her award-winning book fifteen years in the making. Forde and Wilkerson first met in March 2011, when the author appeared as the keynote speaker at the Media & Civil Rights History Symposium, which Forde directs at the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina, Columbia (to learn more, visit jour.sc.edu/mcrhs). As part of that visit, Wilkerson held a standing-room-only book talk and signing at the Richland County Public Library in Columbia—an event she references in the following interview. At both her keynote lecture and public book reading, Wilkerson received standing ovations.

This interview was conducted by phone on May 3, 2011, as Isabel Wilkerson traveled by train from Boston to New York City to accept the Mark Lynton History Prize for her book at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. *The Warmth of Other Suns* has received many other awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction and the NAACP Image Award for Best Literary Debut. *K.R.F.*

Kathy Roberts Forde: Can you tell me about the literary and journalistic influences in your career and writing life?

Isabel Wilkerson: I view myself as a journalist, as an ethnographer, and I am inspired by sociology and anthropology and, of course, literature. So it's multidisciplinary; the influences are coming from all over. Ultimately, what animates me most are the people whom I find to tell stories about. I spend

time with them, try to understand their world, as an ethnographer would, and then try to distill and translate that for a larger audience. I know that may not be answering your question directly, but the entire process and the way that I think about these things require the involvement of the characters I'm ultimately writing about. I immerse myself in their worlds. I am deeply inspired by them and what they do and how they think and how they feel and how they look at the world and the things that they go through. And my goal is to try to help the reader feel what it's like to be in their place.

With this book the goal was to be with my characters as they're facing whatever they're facing before they make that decision to jump off a cliff into the unknown, to ask the question the book essentially asks: What would you do if you were in this situation? I wanted the reader to be on the train as my characters were about to board. I wanted the reader to be with my character in his Buick crossing the desert and the mountains, not knowing what he was in for. I wanted readers to feel whatever my characters were feeling.

So it's a deeply intimate endeavor in which I have to spend so much time with them, and it's not just interviewing. It's spending time with them in their world until they get to the point where they feel comfortable sharing things that, in this case, they had not even told their children. They might have shared some of it with their cohorts, with the friends who went through some of this with them. But for the most part they had not shared this story even with their own children, so there had to be a great deal of time and comfort built up before they would be willing to tell me these sometimes painful, heartbreaking things that they had experienced. It was my goal to make their experiences come alive. It's as if you're going into the woods and you are exposed to all of the sights and the senses and the stimulation of whatever is in the woods, and you emerge from the woods wanting to tell people, this is what it was like in the woods.

So the inspiration is coming from everywhere. I spent a great deal of time reading works of the era, of the time that this was going on. I wanted to understand how people thought at that time. I wanted to immerse myself in that world of the 1930s and the 1940s—you know, the ethnography of the era, the work of the anthropologists, the work of the economists of that era. I read the industry newsletters and journals of the citrus growers in Florida. All of these things were sources of inspiration and material that I drew upon.

As for the actual literary influences, I'm greatly influenced by Eudora Welty, whose work I admire because of its spare and understated understanding of class and caste in the South and the psychological tensions that occur among and between people. For this book I was quite inspired by John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* because the Great Migration occurred in part when the

dust bowl migration occurred. In fact, Ida Mae, one of the main characters in my book, left Mississippi around the same time that Steinbeck was researching and writing *The Grapes of Wrath*. In other words, she was leaving Mississippi at around the same time that the dust bowl migration was getting so much attention, and yet there were not people following her and people like her, to the same degree and intensity.

Forde: When reading your book, I was captivated by the thick description, the detail. It was such an engrossing read, and reviewers have commented on that particular strength of the book. That's what ethnographers do, as you mention. They are trying for this thick description. Did you run into any ethical issues as you were working in this immersion form of journalism, this ethnographic approach to journalism?

Wilkerson: I have done it enough times to be very cautious before even going into a setting that is unknown to me, and I have such a sense of gratitude for the willingness of people to share their stories with me. And I try to be a really great visitor and guest.

Forde: The guest/host relationship.

Wilkerson: Yes, exactly. Appreciating that it is a gift that any individual gives to us and to me as the journalist, as a writer, and then to the world, ultimately, of sharing their experience. And so I try to be a really good guest and visitor. And I take my cues from my subjects. Again, that's an ethnographic perspective, as opposed to going in with the notebook and the tape recorder from the moment they sit down and begin to tell me this and that. Because I was working under a different timeframe—it's not a press conference in any way. I'm taking my cues from what they feel comfortable discussing, and it's the slow unfurling of their lives as it comes naturally and organically during the process of my getting to know them and their getting to know me.

The great challenge of this book, of course, was that people were up in years when I met them, and I began working on the project with a great deal of urgency because I knew that, well, I was trying to get the oldest people that I might find who were independent, meaning they were not in nursing homes, not in assisted living. And they were quite fit and healthy at the time that I met them, but over time, and quite rapidly in the case of one, they took ill. Of course, you know the story about how I had to interview, or I should really say audition, 1,200 people in order to narrow it down to my three main characters, but once I had identified the three, it was a great deal of effort to

just go out to see them. They were spread out all over the country. I had to coordinate with their schedules. If they were going to a funeral or if they were doing something else, that had to be taken into consideration. Maybe I'd be able to go, maybe I wouldn't. I'd have to take my cue from them. But the main thing is that it got to the point where I might plan to go and everything is all set and instead of being able to see them in their home, I'd have to visit them in the hospital. And that was just the way that it was; that's the way it had to be. And there were times when I just would have to be there at the hospital waiting, because that's just what you do when you're doing this kind of work. I guess the ethical dilemma would be at that point: Do you begin to charge hard to make sure you get what you are seeking, because they are ill, or do you step back and allow them space as human beings?

Forde: In your acknowledgments in the book you mention that in the process of researching and writing you were transformed “out of necessity from journalist to unintended historian.” I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about this transformation, why and how it happened, and perhaps even how the transformation may have shaped your narrative.

Wilkerson: Well, the transformation occurred when my first character died, and that forced me to figure out whether I could go forward with him as a protagonist. At that point I clearly did not have the person I had depended upon in order to tell his singular story. I had to figure out how I was going to proceed, and that meant my project had changed from journalism to biography, from reporting to history. And I then had to turn to archives. I had to turn to the newspaper stories that might have mentioned him. There actually were quite a few in this case because he'd been married to someone prominent, a socialite, the daughter of a university president in Atlanta. I had to turn to his relatives and friends, who might have been initially reluctant, partly because they were grieving themselves, and partly because it was considered in some circles inappropriate to discuss someone who had so recently passed away. So that forced me to become a reluctant biographer and historian because I was then left with the things that only an historian might have access to.

And the work began anew in a different way. It took on a different shape and a different form, and it meant courting all these new people whom I had not had the opportunity or the need to meet at that point. That transformation meant that I ended up having to spend a great deal more time. That's one of the reasons why the book took so much time, because ultimately it's a full-blown biography of three different people, requiring all of the work that that

entails—the actual sitting down and spending time with them ethnographically, one might say journalistically, and making arrangements to go back to their original homes with them to recreate their journeys. Recreating Dr. Foster’s drive took a lot of time. That was the journalist/ethnographic part.

But the historian’s obligation was going through the archives, the local papers, for each of my main characters, for the many years from their childhood to the time of their departure. That’s where the history came in. That’s not something journalists really are called upon to do, and I had to do that. It got to the point where I actually began to enjoy, and in fact became obsessed with footnotes and endnotes from different books that I was reading because they were a treasure trove of material. All kinds of amazing things were tucked away in these endnotes, and one endnote would lead to a paper that I might have otherwise missed, and that would lead to a dissertation, which would lead to yet another source. I found that there were many, many, many dissertations, unpublished dissertations, particularly on the lesser-known migration stream going west. There were many WPA [Works Progress Administration] papers that were not widely known. Getting hold of those would be a moment of great joy and anticipation. I couldn’t wait to rip them open to look at them. It was like being an archeologist making a discovery of things that maybe had gone unnoticed. That was one of the joys of the historian part of my work. I had no idea that that would actually be as rewarding and fulfilling as it was. Who would imagine that a journalist who spent most of her time talking to real people could get so excited about receiving a paper from 1883 written by an historian in England? He presented this paper at the Royal Historical Society, his name was E. G. Ravenstein, and the paper was titled “The Laws of Migration.” His theories stand to this day as the seminal way to understand why people do what the people in my book did. And I just could not wait to get my hands on that.

One of the decisions I made that was crucial in getting this book done was talking with my subjects before working in the archives. One approach is to immerse yourself in the archives first so that you know what questions to ask the people when you do go out into the field. But what you risk in doing that is that you may not be able to get to certain people, especially when you’re dealing with people of a certain age. And when do you know enough? When have you spent enough time in the archives to really be able to ask all the questions that might possibly be necessary to ask? The other option is to just throw, hurl yourself into the world of the people you’re trying to write about and get to the archives later, and that’s what I chose to do because I knew that the archives would always be there. In fact, the archives were continuing to grow as I was spending time talking with and getting to know the

people who became the main protagonists of the book. That decision became critical because I otherwise may not have even met Dr. Foster had I spent that first stage of the work buried in the archives. I tend to be the kind of journalist and writer who works from the ground up anyway. I mean, essentially I don't go in with a lot of preconceptions. I just wanted to make this experience of leaving the only place you've ever known for a place that you've never seen come alive for the reader. I wanted people to feel that for people of this Great Migration, given that it was a major tectonic shift in our culture and in American history in the twentieth century.

Forde: I think of your book as a work of both history and literary journalism, and I'm wondering whether you think of it in those terms. If you do, what do you think are the commonalities and differences between the two genres?

Wilkerson: I generally use the word narrative journalism or narrative nonfiction because of the emphasis on the structure of the work, the idea that you have protagonists who are following a certain path. There's a narrative arc, there's conflict and tension that have to be resolved somehow. You know, those touch points of narrative—I thought of my book in those terms. It is history by definition because it deals with something that happened in the past. History to me suggests a temporal thing. How you choose to present it is where you get into the literary or the narrative aspect of it. So I think that I agree with you that it's both, but the history part means that this history could be written in any number of ways. You know, history could be the letters of a famous or not-so-famous person through whom we learn and understand the past. I view this as a way to understand the past, but by using real people through whom we experience what they experience. I'm more concerned about the experience that the reader has than anything else.

In my book, you have these three protagonists who are characters unto themselves. If you were on a page with one, I wanted you to know with whom—Ida Mae or George or Robert. Each was distinctive enough in his or her own right. But their experiences, their journeys, only have meaning in the larger context, which is why there are these inter-chapters, which was a way to give meaning, weight, and context to their decisions and their journeys. Their decisions have greater meanings beyond themselves, even greater than my characters might have realized at the time. And those inter-chapters serve as a way to get at those meanings without intruding upon the narrative itself. So, in other words, it's a literary device for imparting the historical aspect or nature of what the protagonists were doing. It was a way to handle that material.

Forde: You teach narrative nonfiction at Boston University, where you're the director of the narrative nonfiction program. In *The Warmth of Other Suns*, in exploring the lives of your three protagonists, you use a limited third-person point of view that gives you this rich, deep access to the interior lives, perceptions, motivations of your characters. Some journalists who are used to writing in the third-person objective voice tend to be uncomfortable with that technique. And yet it's such an important device in narrative nonfiction and narrative journalism, especially in immersion works like yours. Did you have to put a lot of thought into the narrative perspective you chose to use in the book? Did it come naturally?

Wilkinson: That's a great question, and I really appreciate the discussion about the process of decision making about point of view because point of view is something that fiction writers think about more than we tend to. Thinking about point of view can help answer a lot of questions as the writer goes about doing the work. In other words, figuring out what the perspective will be guides the writer through the entire narrative so that she knows what to include and what not to include and when to include it.

At certain points, the reader knows only what the character knows. You don't know, during Dr. Foster's drive, what is going to happen to him. You know only what he knows. And yet you know a little bit more if I choose to share that with you, if it's relevant to helping prepare you for what comes next, but no more than that. The goal was to have the reader on the train seat with this person or in the car with this other person. I wish I could say that there was some great thought that I was giving to it. It just seemed very natural that if readers were going to be there with this character, they could know some things but they could not know everything. And that allows them to have the experience with the character. It deprives readers of knowing what it's like to be this person if they know too much at a certain point in the narrative. And yet they need to know enough to be able to experience the thrill of discovery as life unfurls for the character.

Forde: Do you find your students who have been trained as journalists and then attempt to write narrative nonfiction have a difficult time in shifting from the objective, third-person voice to this other way of storytelling?

Wilkinson: It's an adjustment. I think some people naturally are inclined to want to see the world this way, and they gravitate toward it. On some level, of course, it's a choice to take up narrative nonfiction, to take it as a course, for example, to choose to concentrate on that. So you're in some ways attract-

ing people who are naturally drawn to this kind of writing anyway. I think that it is an adjustment because it's a different way of seeing the world. It's a different way of connecting with the individual whom you're interviewing. It's a different way of imparting what you've learned to the audience. I think the adjustment begins with the reporting. A lot of times we talk about the writing, but it begins with the reporting. You have to have that rich detail, that knowledge.

You know, narrative actually comes from a word that means "to know." We use the term "narrative" so much. You might think it would mean to tell a beautiful story, and that's not what it means. The cognate is "to know," which means that in order to do this kind of nonfiction, you need to do the work to understand it first, and then all of it falls into place.

Forde: Your book includes an enlightening section in the back matter called "Notes on Methodology," which I appreciated a great deal. As an historian and someone who likes to read this type of narrative nonfiction, I find this kind of discussion of methodology so important.

Wilkerson: Thank you so much. Do you know how many people tell me they read that? I wrote it as a way of giving insight into what it took to write the book, but I had no idea how many people, people who are not in this industry or not in the field, would read it.

Forde: I think many readers are curious about how long works like yours, or even just a news article, get put together. In your "Notes on Methodology," you discuss the range of sources you used. I'm particularly interested in how you used other sources to verify your subjects' recollections when they were uncertain. And of course that's what historians do all the time. They triangulate sources, especially when they're using oral histories. I'm hoping you might comment a little bit more about your use of interviews, or oral histories, in researching and writing *The Warmth of Other Suns*.

Wilkerson: What's interesting about it is that the process meant doing the oral histories as an ethnographer might do them. And then because it's narrative nonfiction or literary nonfiction, the process requires taking it to the next step, which is where the synthesis of all that material comes. I mean, I could have written a series of blocks of text from the transcriptions, based upon a particular area or aspect of my characters' lives. That would have been one way to do it. But because my goal was to actually put the reader in that train seat with these characters or arriving with them in that big city for the very first time, it

was necessary for the reader to be able to experience it as scene, S-C-E-N-E. When people passed away, that meant that I had to interview other people. The way you characterize people classically is what the people say, what the people do, and what other people say about them. And so that's the bedrock of corroboration, triangulation, and characterization in general.

What was interesting about this process, and actually encouraging for anybody doing this kind of work, is that, believe it or not, every single one of these people, even though they were all ordinary people, left a record beyond the census. There was a newspaper article that mentioned them or was about them, that corroborated things about them. You think of someone like Ida Mae and her husband—they were sharecroppers from Mississippi. It's astounding that they actually made the newspaper. There were obituaries. There were references to Dr. Foster, of course; there were many, many references. There were newspaper stories that talked about his preparing for this drive to California. I mean, who would have thought that that would actually have made a newspaper? That was the *Atlanta Daily World*. Of course, his wedding was in the newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, for example, and the *Atlanta Daily World*. There were references to his father in the newspapers, so that that was a part of the journalist becoming historian, looking for that documentation.

Forde: That's fascinating.

Wilkinson: And actually encouraging for anybody embarking on this kind of work. There's more out there; there's more out there than you might think.

Forde: In accessing these newspapers, I imagine you had to work with the microfilm of local libraries.

Wilkinson: I did. You know, one of the things about this is that when I began the work, microfilm and microfiche were what you had—that was the technology. And over the course of working on the book, the technology caught up with my needs; the digitization of newspapers made a huge difference by the time the archival work had to shift into high gear. Suddenly there were newspapers being digitized and made available. So the decision to go with the people first and then the archives worked to my benefit.

Forde: Do you think of Nicholas Lemann's book *The Promised Land* and yours as complementary? They tackle a similar subject, the Great Migration, but they do it differently and tell different stories.

Wilkerson: I think that there cannot be enough written about this migration. I think it's stunning that there is not more written about it. One of my first book talks was at the University of Mississippi, Ole Miss, and I was honored and surprised and had a mix of emotions to be in one of the states that had been a sending state. One of the history professors there, upon hearing more about what this book was about, said there should be volumes upon volumes upon volumes about this migration. And that's sort of how I feel. There can't be enough written about it in my view.

Forde: I couldn't agree more. I've been astonished at how little my students, and many of them are southerners of various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, know about the Great Migration. They are hungry for this information and have enjoyed learning about your book.

Wilkerson: Isn't that fascinating? I've been meaning to tell you I had a fabulous time there [in Columbia, South Carolina, as the keynote speaker at the Media & Civil Rights History Symposium at the University of South Carolina in March 2011]. A wonderful, wonderful time. That library response was just magnificent and so heart-warming. It was just so beautiful. The people were so deeply engaged in the meaning of this history, these stories.

The reception in the South has been absolutely overwhelming. I had the occasion to go to Eustis, Florida, where George Starling was from. They wanted me there, and that shows you how far we've come as a country. I was met at the airport by a daughter of one of the characters in the book and by the mayor of that town himself. They drove me the hour from Orlando to Eustis. The crowd was a beautifully mixed group of people, and many in the audience and ultimately in the signing line were actually relatives of people in the book. I was almost brought to tears. The response in the South has been overwhelming because it seems that they feel that this is an opportunity to connect with a piece of southern history that has not been explored. And it also is an opportunity for healing.

Forde: What fascinates me about the book, beyond the story and history it tells, is its role in furthering this public discussion of an important part of American history many people don't know much about. Your book is helping a lot of people from different social groups think hard about our history and also, as you said, heal.

Wilkerson: Something that connects people to this story, perhaps in an unexpected way, is the similarity between this experience and an immigrant's experience. I was speaking at a library on Long Island, and it was a miserable rainy night where you wonder if anyone will come out. And the room was actually packed, which was so encouraging and wonderful, but the first person in the signing line was a grandmotherly woman with three copies of the book in her arms. Her eyes were red, she was tearing up, and she said, "I can't talk about the book because if I start talking about the book I'm going to cry for sure." She said, "I can't talk about it because the book tells my story." And then she said, "I'm an immigrant from Greece." She was first in line, and we had our picture taken together. My book tells a universal human story of longing and a search for a better place to be. And I think that is part of the power of narrative.