

**Rita Williams-Garcia 1957-
American Author of Young Adult Novels
Winner of the 2011 Coretta Scott King Award for *One Crazy Summer***

BIRTH

Rita Williams-Garcia was born (as Rita Williams) on April 13, 1957, in Queens, New York. Her father, James Williams, had a career in the army and served in the Vietnam War for two years. Her mother, Miss Essie, was a domestic servant who volunteered with an anti-poverty program during the Vietnam War era. Williams-Garcia has an older brother, Russell Williams, and an older sister, Rosalind Rogers. Rosalind is the primary caregiver for their elderly grandmother, Edith Lloyd Williams, with whom Williams-Garcia has a close bond.

YOUTH

Rita's early years were spent in an apartment in Far Rockaway, a neighborhood in the Queens borough of New York City. Because of her father's military obligations, the family moved eight times before she was 12 years old. They lived in Arizona, California, and Georgia before eventually moving back to Jamaica, New York, a predominantly African American neighborhood in Queens.

Rita had few toys when she was young but remembers playing with wooden alphabet blocks frequently, which contributed to her early interest in words. She also engaged in imaginative play and told herself stories to pass the time. She was a very observational child, teaching herself to read at an early age by looking at billboards, cereal boxes, and her sister's textbooks. "My mother discovered I could read when we went to the Red Cross for our shots," she explained. "I knew all of the letters on the eye chart and could produce their sounds. When I figured out the sounds made words and the words made pictures—well, at two and a half, I was hooked." By age four she was writing adventure stories and nursery rhymes.

Rita has many fond memories of growing up in Seaside, California, where she spent countless hours playing kickball, roller skating, and "dirt clod fighting" outdoors. "My siblings and I indulged in now-vanishing pastimes," she recalled. "We played hard. Read books. Colored with crayons. Rode bikes. Spoke as children spoke. Dreamed our childish dreams. If our parents did anything for us at all, they gave us a place to be children and kept the adult world in its place—as best as they could." Her parents had firm rules and high expectations for their children, providing a home environment that the author has described as "a safe place for us to dream and achieve." They also instilled in them a sense of social responsibility. For example, Rita and her siblings would come to the rescue of kids who were bullied at school or in the neighborhood.

Rita has cited her mother, Miss Essie, as the most influential figure in her life, crediting her as an artistic inspiration. "[S]he frightened me, made me laugh, and loved to paint things in weird colors—napalm orange, chartreuse, and aqua. She encouraged me to be creative and to see objects and situations beyond their physicality," the author explained. In addition to Miss Essie's creative spirit, Garcia-Williams has also discussed her mother's strength of character and no-nonsense parenting style, which included physical punishment. "My mother was clear about

do's and don'ts, so you couldn't plead ignorance or miscommunication. Miss Essie was quite the communicator," she stated.

In 1969, when Rita was 12 years old, the family left California for Georgia. After six months in the South, they moved back to Queens, settling in the neighborhood of Jamaica. She recalls experiencing culture shock during this transition, stating: "We had no backyard to play in, no great outdoors. School was hardly a safe-haven. Fighting for the underdog became a thing of the past. We learned quickly to mind our own business. During those times, my journal became my confidant. I wrote in it faithfully." Her love for words grew as she entered adolescence, and she grew hungry for literature featuring female African American protagonists. At the time, she found only the books *Mary Ellen*, *Student Nurse* and *Amos Fortune, Free Man*, both of which she enjoyed. Wanting more, however, she read the biographies of Sojourner Truth—a slave who escaped and became an abolitionist and women's rights activist—and Harriet Tubman, an escaped slave who helped other slaves find freedom along the Underground Railroad.

Around the same time, she developed the habit of jotting down story ideas in a notebook throughout the day. In the evening, after she had completed her homework, she would write at least 500 words of her continuing autobiographical novel. She also kept a diary. "I laugh when I read my early work," she said, "but writing it developed my writing rhythm. It helped that writing was my own thing and I looked forward to doing it." In seventh grade she began spending afternoons and weekends in the library reading *The Writer's Market*, *The Writer's Handbook*, and other guides on how to get published. She mailed out a manuscript every week to publishers and quickly accumulated a stack of rejection letters. When she was 14, however, her hard work began to pay off—she sold her first story to *Highlights* magazine and her second to *Essence* when she was a college student.

EDUCATION

As a student, Williams-Garcia was very conscientious and always eager to demonstrate her knowledge. "I was a proud little nerd with my hands clasped on my desk ready to rocket in the air when the teacher asked a question. My classmates wanted to kill me," she joked. In elementary school, she would often spend her recess time writing stories and poems. A self-described geek when it came to academics, she was also a serious dancer, studying under choreographers Alvin Ailey and Phil Black.

Williams-Garcia attended Hofstra University in New York as an economics major. "I truly believed blacks needed to have an active role in the distribution of capital within their communities, and I planned to be at the forefront of this movement," she remembered. For three years, she temporarily abandoned writing in favor of other activities, including political activism, a leadership role in a dance company, and community outreach with her sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. She eventually changed her academic focus, graduating from Hofstra in 1980 with a B.A. in liberal arts. During her senior year, she took a fiction workshop led by noted authors Richard Price and Sonia Pilcer, which revived her interest in creative writing. At the same time, she was involved in a volunteer tutoring initiative to help high school girls who were reading below their grade level. She combined her writing ambitions with her outreach work to produce a draft of what would become her first novel, *Blue Tights*. She created her protagonist, Joyce, in an effort

to awaken the girls to a love of reading. “Contemporary urban black girls were hard to find in literature in the early 80s,” she explained. “They weren’t non-existent—just hard to find. Honestly, if I had found Alice Childress or Rosa Guy’s novels, *Blue Tights* wouldn’t have been written. . . . Since I couldn’t find the right book to speak to a group of girls I worked with in college, I came up with Joyce, her big butt and low self-esteem. The girls in my group didn’t want to read about a victimized, heroic girl or a ‘good’ girl. They wanted a real girl. They wanted to identify.”

In the early 1990s Williams-Garcia went back to school part-time to pursue a graduate degree. She earned an M.A. in creative writing from Queens College in 1997. “I can’t tell you how I balanced writing, my job, school, and family. None of these things are possible without the support and understanding of my family,” she said of her graduate school experience.

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

Blue Tights

Williams-Garcia’s plan upon college graduation in 1980 was, in her words: “to take my manuscript, get an agent, sell it, find an island and write the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel.” In the meantime, she took a clerical job in the mailroom of a marketing software company in Manhattan and sent out her manuscript—*Blue Tights, Big Butt*—to various publishers, only to receive a pile of rejection letters. Editors noted that the main character was not a positive role model and was overly concerned with her physical appearance. Despite these criticisms, she continued to try to sell her novel for three years before tucking it away. She meanwhile accepted a new job within her firm as a promotional writer, married Peter Garcia, and started a family.

In the mid-1980s the marketing firm eliminated her writing position, and she took an administrative job within the company. Deciding it was time to write again, she dusted off her manuscript, made some revisions, and looked for publishers who might be interested in realistic depictions of adolescence. She sent a query letter to Rosemary Brosnan of Lodestar Books that asked: “What would you do if . . . your ballet teacher tells you your butt’s too big for *Swan Lake*?” Brosnan, who was immediately intrigued, met with Williams-Garcia in 1986 to discuss a revision strategy and guided her through an extensive editing process. “*Blue Tights* needed work,” Brosnan admitted in *Horn Book Magazine*, “but there was something about it that was clearly unique, and the author had a fresh, vibrant voice.”

Blue Tights was published in 1988 and received a warm welcome by reviewers. The novel follows the life of Joyce Collins, a voluptuous 15-year-old with a gift for dance, as she struggles with self-esteem and her place within her family and urban community. After her ballet teacher remarks that she does not have a dancer’s body, she joins an African American troupe that accepts her for who she is, which allows her to achieve success and independence. Critics remarked on the novel’s uplifting ending, powerful subject matter, and believable characters. As Rudine Sims Bishop stated in *Horn Book Magazine*: “Williams-Garcia has created in Joyce a credible teenager—headstrong, confused, self-absorbed, but capable of positive growth and change. Young-adult readers will recognize something of themselves and appreciate the honesty of her story.”

Writing for Young Adults

Williams-Garcia did not start off intending to write for a teenage audience. In contrast, she idolized authors Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, and she hoped to write postmodern fiction for adults. When she told Brosnan that *Blue Tights* would be her last young-adult novel, she truly meant it. That changed, however, when the idea for another character came to her. “I was born to write stories,” she said. “When I’m not working, I’m daydreaming. Plotting out the next story. Listening to understand my character.” As it turned out, that next character was also an African American teen, and the author has since come to view writing for young people as her passion and her mission. “I find young people interesting. They have such potential,” she stated. “Their thoughts and actions matter and have great consequences. There is nothing simple about their lives, which makes for fertile ground.”

Williams-Garcia was inspired to write her next book after she ran into an acquaintance from school, a young man who had dropped out of college despite his potential and was now working at a fast-food restaurant. This encounter prompted her to write *Fast Talk on a Slow Track* for “those bright young men who couldn’t accept failure as a part of learning.” The novel is about Denzel Watson, a class valedictorian who has breezed through high school and is headed to Princeton. Facing potential failure for the first time, he opts to attend community college instead, where he knows he can pass with minimal effort. Although he is not portrayed as an honorable character, the reader comes to understand that he is struggling with self-doubt. After getting a taste for life on the street by selling candy door-to-door, he ultimately decides to study at Princeton. The book was published in 1991 to positive reviews and was named a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association.

Williams-Garcia’s next work, *Like Sisters on the Homefront* (1995), is considered her breakthrough novel. “Of all my books, I believe *Like Sisters on the Homefront* was the story that I enjoyed telling,” she stated. “. . . I knew it would have profound meaning for my readers. . . . They have all connected with the characters and the story.” The novel centers on 14-year-old Gayle, who becomes pregnant with her second child. At her mother’s insistence, Gayle undergoes an abortion and is sent to live with her Uncle Luther, a minister, and his family in Georgia. While there, Gayle grows very close to her great-grandmother, whose strong will and stubbornness mirror her own. Critics hailed the book for its authentic dialect, memorable characters, and dynamic narrative style. It was featured on the recommended reading lists of *School Library Journal*, *Publishers Weekly*, and the American Library Association, among other organizations, and it received an honorable mention from the Coretta Scott King Award committee. In 1997 Williams-Garcia garnered the PEN/Norma Klein Award for Children’s Fiction in recognition of her first three books.

After publishing her first picture book, *Catching the Wild Waiyuuzee* (2000), to favorable reviews, Williams-Garcia returned to writing for an adolescent audience with *Every Time A Rainbow Dies* (2001). The story centers on Thulani, a shy 16-year-old boy who, upon witnessing a rape, intervenes on the victim’s behalf and eventually falls in love with her. The book received a warm reception from critics. “Well-observed and subtle, Williams-Garcia’s latest novel artfully interplays harsh urban realities with adolescent innocence,” wrote Nell D. Beram in *Horn Book*

Magazine. The American Library Association included *Every Time A Rainbow Dies* on its Top 10 Best Books for Young Adults in 2002.

Williams-Garcia's next book, *No Laughter Here* (2004), tackles sensitive subject matter through the eyes of fifth-graders Akilah and Victoria, the latter of whom has just returned from a summer in Nigeria. Victoria's family made the trip to Victoria's birthplace for what they described as a "special celebration to mark her coming of age." While there, she undergoes female genital mutilation, a cultural practice prevalent in Africa during which part or all of the external female genitalia is removed. The World Health Organization, United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and American Medical Association have all called for an end to this practice, which has zero health benefits and can cause serious physical complications. According to the World Health Organization, 100 to 140 million females worldwide are currently living with the consequences of genital mutilation. *No Laughter Here* demonstrates how the trauma of this procedure has affected Victoria, whose once-sparkling personality has faded to the point that she barely speaks. A commentator for *Kirkus Reviews* called the novel "unapologetic, fresh, and painful," and other reviewers admired the grace and skill with which Williams-Garcia related this powerful and delicate narrative.

Writing Full-Time

In 2005 Williams-Garcia left her day job to concentrate on writing full-time. After 25 years of writing during her subway commute and on her lunch hour, she admitted: "There's something to be said for finally being in the life you were meant to have. I write every day except for Sunday." Despite having significantly more time to devote to her craft, she has cited her next novel, *Jumped* (2009), as the hardest to write. "Getting through *Jumped* was a trek through the desert. . . . So many drafts. So many restarts," she lamented. Although the novel took four years from start to finish, her hard work paid off—*Jumped* was a finalist for the 2009 National Book Award. The novel addresses the issue of female-initiated peer violence and the idea of bystander responsibility. Narrated from the varying perspectives of its three central characters, *Jumped* documents the events of a school day during which Leticia overhears Dominique threaten to beat up Trina after school. Leticia must decide whether or not to get involved in the conflict between the angry tough girl and the oblivious pretty girl. Critics have noted the author's well-observed characterizations and the lingering impact of her message. "Teens will relate to Leticia's dilemma even as they may criticize her motives, and the ethical decision she faces will get readers thinking about the larger issues surrounding community, personal responsibility, and the concept of 'snitching,'" noted Meredith Robbins in *School Library Journal*.

Williams-Garcia's most recent novel, *One Crazy Summer* (2010), is a work of historical fiction aimed at middle-school readers. It follows three sisters—11-year-old Delphine and her younger siblings Vonetta and Fern—as they travel to Oakland, California, to visit their estranged mother. The story takes place in 1968, an era of radical social change in America. *One Crazy Summer* depicts the Black Panther movement from a child's point of view. "I grew up in the 1960s and wanted to share a part of that time with my readers. If we think of the Black Panthers at all, we rarely remember their work with and for children," the author explained. The Black Panthers were a militant political party that played a significant role in the civil rights movement, a movement to ban racial discrimination and segregation in the United States. Founded in Oakland

in 1966, they sought to protect the African American community from racism and police brutality, and they were willing to use violence to establish social, political, and economic equality for minorities. The Black Panthers' call for a revolutionary war against the U.S. government came to the attention of local law enforcement and the FBI, which considered them a threat to the internal security of the nation. Despite their reputation for violence, the Black Panthers initiated a number of community programs, including free breakfasts for low-income families, clothing drives, and health screenings to test for sickle cell anemia, an inherited blood disorder affecting people of African descent. They also hosted recreational activities for children such as arts and crafts, physical fitness, and literacy. Through Delphine's eyes, the reader experiences the pivotal changes of that period in history as she and her sisters attend a summer camp sponsored by the Black Panthers.

The novel earned Williams-Garcia the 2011 Coretta Scott King Author Award and the Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. In addition, it was selected as a finalist for the National Book Award and was named a Newberry Honor Book. Critics praised the author's ability to interweave themes of family and identity with broader social issues. For example, Gillian Engberg of *Booklist* called it a "vibrant novel [that] shows the subtle ways that political movements affect personal lives," and Monica Edinger of the *New York Times Book Review* deemed it a "powerful and affecting story of sisterhood and motherhood."

Although Williams-Garcia's books confront serious issues, the author has maintained that her main focus is on developing characters. "Although my stories are contemporary and realistic, I don't write specifically about issues. I write about my characters' lives," she said. As critic Carla Sarratt stated in an interview for the website *The Brown Bookshelf*, "Rita connects with her characters and shows us that connection so that we feel as if we really know [them]. ... She studies people and imagines what if and out of those what if moments, a story is born." While most of her characters and storylines are the result of daydreams, she injects little pieces of herself into each of her characters. For example, she was an avid dancer like Joyce in *Blue Tights*, and she sold candy door-to-door like Denzel in *Fast Talk on a Slow Track*. "The characters have to become part of Rita; they need to talk to her before she can write," affirmed Brosnan, her longtime friend and editor. Despite writing about controversial or sensitive topics like sexual assault and bullying, she considers herself an optimist. "I'm always very hopeful about the generation that's coming up and the avenues that are opening up and how people are discovering that they can make an impact. I'm a very happy, hopeful person." As Brosnan summarized, "Say Rita's name, and anyone who knows her will break into a huge smile."

Advice to Young Writers

Williams-Garcia teaches in the Writing for Children and Young Adults MFA program at the Vermont College of Fine Arts. In addition, she holds an annual short story contest for young authors between the ages of 12 and 19 to help develop new talent. She encourages aspiring writers to read as much as possible, to study the techniques that authors use for effective storytelling, and to spend at least 15 minutes a day writing. "Write for your own joy to get into the habit of flexing those muscles," she urged. "Writing a little bit each day will grow into a sustained ability. Just write!" In addition, she has emphasized the importance of paying attention to the surrounding environment using all five senses. "As you engage your senses to the world

around you, your word choices and images will become all the more lively and multi-dimensional,” she maintained. Finally, she has stressed the importance of understanding grammar to develop good habits and clear, concise sentence structure. She envisions herself focusing on community outreach in the future, predicting: “20 years from now, I’ll probably direct my resources and energy toward creating a space for other people to write. Most likely, young people.”

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY

In the early 1980s Rita married Peter Garcia, with whom she had two daughters, Michelle and Stephanie. Peter served in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 when the children were young. The couple later divorced, but Peter remains a close and supportive friend. “[B]ack while I was trying to do everything (work, write, school), my ex-husband kicked in as ‘Super Dad,’” Williams-Garcia stated. “The marriage didn’t hold, but the co-parenting is forever.” Their first born, Michelle, is an editor at *The Advocate* and was recently married. Stephanie is working toward a doctorate in psychology.

FAVORITE BOOKS

Williams-Garcia’s list of favorite young adult books includes *Skellig*, by David Almond; *A Wrinkle in Time*, by Madeleine L’Engle; *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, by Scott O’Dell; and *The Hobbit*, by J. R. R. Tolkien. As a child, she read the books of Beverly Cleary and particularly enjoyed Louise Fitzhugh’s novel *Harriet the Spy*. She has cited Jamaica Kincaid, Gayle Jones, and Toni Cade Bambara as her favorite authors.

HOBBIES AND OTHER INTERESTS

Williams-Garcia likes to visit schools to talk to students about her career. On the other hand, like her character Gayle in *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, she hates to fly, and she refuses to travel by air during the winter months. In her spare time, she enjoys sewing, knitting, playing chess or Tetris, jogging, and boxing at the gym. She loves art, especially the works of Pablo Picasso, Vincent Van Gogh, and 20th-century collage artist Romare Bearden. While she is developing the characters for her books, she often listens to music as inspiration. She enjoys many musical genres, including soul, be-bop, gospel, Afro-Brazilian, reggae, and ska. Moreover, she admires such vocalists as Aretha Franklin, Nancy Wilson, Alicia Keyes, Johnny Hartman, and Frank Sinatra. “I love vocalists because I can’t carry a note pinned to my sweater,” she joked.

SELECTED WRITINGS

Blue Tights, 1987

Fast Talk on a Slow Track, 1991

Like Sisters on the Homefront, 1995

Catching the Wild Waiyuuzee, 2000

Every Time a Rainbow Dies, 2001

No Laughter Here, 2004

Jumped, 2009

One Crazy Summer, 2010

HONORS AND AWARDS

Best Books for Young Adults (American Library Association): 1991, for *Fast Talk on a Slow Track*; 1996, for *Like Sisters on the Homefront*; 2005, for *No Laughter Here*; 2010, for *Jumped*

PEN/Norma Klein Award for Children's Fiction (PEN American Center): 1997

Top Ten Best Books for Young Adults (American Library Association): 2002, for *Every Time a Rainbow Dies*

Coretta Scott King Author Award (American Library Association): 2011, for *One Crazy Summer*

Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction: 2011, for *One Crazy Summer*

FURTHER READING

Books

Authors and Artists for Young Adults, Vol. 22, 1997

Children's Literature Review, Vol. 36, 1995

Contemporary Authors, Vol. 159, 1998

Writers for Young Adults: Supplement 1, 2000

Periodicals

Booklist, Feb. 15, 1996, p.1002

Horn Book Magazine, Sep./Oct. 2009, p.479; Mar./Apr. 2011, p.151; July/Aug. 2011, p.86;
July/Aug. 2011, p.94

School Library Journal, May 2010, p.22

Online Articles

<http://www.thebrownbookshelf.com>

(*The Brown Bookshelf*, "Rita Williams-Garcia," Feb. 4, 2008, 28 Days Later archive, 2008)

<http://www.hofstra.edu>

(*Hofstra College of Liberal Arts & Sciences: In Focus*, "Rita Williams-Garcia '80: Liberal Arts Major," undated, In Focus—University Relations archive)

<http://www.loc.gov>

(*Library of Congress 2011 National Book Festival*, "Rita Williams-Garcia," 2011, National Book Festival archive, Kids and Teachers site, Meet the Authors category)

<http://www.myshelf.com>

(*MyShelf.com*, "Rita Williams-Garcia," Feb. 2003, Have You Heard archive, 2003)

<http://www.nationalbook.org>

(*National Book Foundation*, "Rita Williams-Garcia: *One Crazy Summer*," 2010, National Book Awards 2010 archive, Young People's Literature category)

Online Databases

Literature Resource Center Online, 2011, article from *Contemporary Authors Online*, 2011
Wilson Biographies Illustrated, 2000, article from *Eighth Book of Junior Authors and Illustrators*, 2000

ADDRESS

Rita Williams-Garcia
P.O. Box 2277
New York, NY 10185

WORLD WIDE WEB SITES

<http://www.ritawg.com>
http://www.harpercollins.com/authors/19042/Rita_WilliamsGarcia