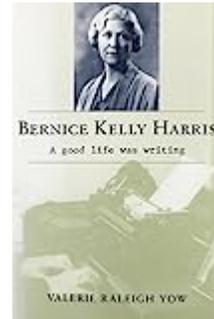




**Valerie Raleigh Yow.** *Bernice Kelly Harris: A Good Life Was Writing.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999. xx + 334 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8071-2348-5.



**Reviewed by** Michele Crescenzo (Department of English, Emory University)

**Published on** H-SAWH (April, 2001)

## Writing a Woman's Life

### Writing a Woman's Life

Bernice Kelly Harris (1891-1973) was the first woman to win the Mayflower Cup – awarded for outstanding writing about North Carolina – for her 1939 novel *Purslane*. She wrote seven more novels[1], as well as plays, short stories, and a memoir.[2] Harris also published three edited collections.[3] Named by Melrose Press of London as one of *Two Thousand Women of Achievement*, she received the North Carolina Governor's Award for great distinction in literature, the Carnegie Award for Women, and two honorary doctorates.

Such achievement, as Valerie Raleigh Yow demonstrates in this biography, is more remarkable when juxtaposed with Harris's conventional life as a middle-class southern matron. Drawing on Harris's autobiography, her unpublished autobiographical writings and letters, and Richard Walser's 1955 biography of Harris, Yow emphasizes the tension between Harris's work as a serious woman of letters and her life as a traditional, white southern woman in the early twentieth century.[4]

Harris was born in Wake County, in the Piedmont

section of North Carolina, into a family of small landowning farmers whose principal crops were cotton and tobacco. She attended Meredith College, a Baptist college for women, in Raleigh, where she wrote short stories for college publications and worked on the staff of the college literary magazine. "At Meredith," Yow writes, "Bernice decided definitely she would be a teacher and nurture writers rather than be one" (p. 19). Harris taught English, Latin, and drama at a public school in Seaboard, North Carolina, for eleven years. In the summers she taught summer school and attended classes in Chapel Hill at the University of North Carolina, where she was inspired by her drama professor, Frederick Koch. Koch organized the Carolina Playmakers in 1918 and later an annual spring festival of plays, where some of Harris's students saw their works performed. Harris organized the Seaboard Players in her own town, directing, producing, and designing sets and costumes, as well as teaching playwriting.

Bernice Kelly was 27 when she met Herbert Harris in 1918. Part-owner of a cotton-gin business, he was "one of the richest men among the gentry" (p. 35). Af-

ter an unusually long engagement, they married in 1926. As a “town matron,” Harris became active in community and church activities, played cards at “rook parties,” and ran the household. Eventually Harris began to write again, publishing articles in the local newspapers. Yow points out that the financial security provided by marriage allowed Harris, “for the first time since childhood, the leisure to write” (p. 43). For her newspaper articles, usually human-interest stories or descriptions of social events, Harris “received awards” (p. 44), although Yow does not specify further.

As Harris began writing short stories, she “refrained from writing in [her husband’s] presence” as he “could not understand why she would spend time ‘scribbling’” (p. 44). It is no wonder that “[s]oon after the marriage, she began to have problems with ‘nervous indigestion’” (p. 45). When in 1934 she sold her first short story, “Bantie Woman,” to the *Saturday Evening Post*, Herbert “said he could not understand why anyone would pay so much for so little” (p. 45). Yow details Harris’s often poignant attempts to please her difficult husband while retaining enough of her own sense of self to continue writing. The worst blow was Herbert’s refusal to have children, something Harris remained angry about more than forty years later (p. 41).

During the Depression, Harris worked for the Federal Writers Project, conducting interviews in rural communities with “a wide range of people—women as well as men, blacks and whites, rich and poor” (p. 93). She recorded the life stories of tenant farmers, sharecroppers, and day laborers, as well as landowners, doctors, and merchants. Raising her awareness of race, class, and gender, this work “reinforced her feelings about social injustices and charged her writing” (p. 96). Particularly interesting is Yow’s claim that, after working in African-American communities, Harris began to write differently about race (p. 44). In her 1946 novel *Janey Jeems*, Harris portrayed a rural black family without explicitly indicating their race. Her sympathetic depiction of African Americans was criticized by white readers, who felt that “she had played a trick on them by not emphasizing skin color” (p. 156). She replied, “I deleted all reference to color and race, not with any wish to mystify or deceive readers, but rather to point up the essential oneness in the human experience, in happiness and tragedy and in love and hate” (p. 156).

Yow, a psychotherapist and former history professor, speculates on Harris’s feelings about the roles available to white southern women in the early twentieth century.

For Harris, she writes, “the choice seems to have been to rebel against community expectations and be a writer or to settle into the role of married woman whose concerns would be cooking, nurturing, cleaning” (p. 15). Yow contends that while Harris was always a deferential and self-sacrificing wife, she also defied tradition by writing fiction, in which “her rich inner life, the ‘life behind the mask,’ could be articulated” (p. 47).

When writing about literature, however, Yow is not as effective. Despite the wealth of recent work on Southern women writers, Yow relies almost exclusively on one text, Anne Goodwyn Jones’s *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South 1859-1936* (1981).[5] Pioneering and insightful as that work is, much historical and literary work on Southern women writers has been done since. Furthermore, although Yow’s attempts to contextualize Harris’s fiction are often useful, too often she makes seemingly pointless comparisons with other writers. For example, she devotes three pages to the work of Erskine Caldwell in order to explain differences between his novels and those of Harris. Elsewhere she misidentifies Harris’s novel *Janey Jeems* as a work of naturalism and digresses into a discussion of the figure of the tragic mulatta in African-American literature, again using only one source and that one also twenty years old, despite a spate of recent work on the subject (p. 150).[6]

*Bernice Kelly Harris: A Good Life Was Writing* will appeal more to those interested in the lives of southern women in the first half of the twentieth century than to those seeking literary insights. What Yow illuminates successfully is how one woman’s seemingly conventional and unremarkable life of pickling and canning, church and family, was nonetheless a life of rewarding creative achievement and inspiration to her community of fellow writers. Although Yow sometimes overstates the quality of Harris’s writing, few writers could have divided their energies between the roles of traditional wife, Sunday school teacher, community pillar, writing teacher, and mentor and still write so ambitiously and prolifically, as Harris did throughout her life.

#### Notes:

[1]. *Purslane* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1939), *Portulaca* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1941), *Sweet Beulah Land* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1943), *Sage Quarter* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1945), *Janey Jeems* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1946), *Hearthstones: A Novel of the Roanoke River Country in North Carolina* (Garden City, N.Y.: Double-

day, 1948), and *Wild Cherry Tree Road* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1951).

[2]. *Southern Savory* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964).

[3]. *Folk Plays of Eastern Carolina*, Frederick H. Koch, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1940), *Southern Home Remedies* (Murfreesboro, N.C.: Johnson Publishing Co., 1968), and *Strange Things Happen* (Murfreesboro, N.C.: Johnson Publishing Co., 1971).

[4]. Richard Walser, *Bernice Kelly Harris: Storyteller of Eastern Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955).

[5]. Anne Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South 1859-1936* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).

[6]. Vashti Crutcher Lewis, "The Mulatto Woman as Major Female Character in Novels by Black Women, 1892-1937" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1981).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-sawh>

**Citation:** Michele Crescenzo. Review of Yow, Valerie Raleigh, *Bernice Kelly Harris: A Good Life Was Writing*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. April, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5057>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).