

Ravi Howard chimes in for an insightful moment

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Author Ravi Howard works well under a tight deadline. The urgency is something he learned to harness during his time as a writer for network television, which earned him a Sports Emmy for his work on HBO's "Inside the NFL." Two published books later, he continues "crafting towards a deadline," where time constraints shape his work.

Currently, he is in the thick of writing a short fiction work he'll share at the 100 Thousand Poets for Change Global Reading on Saturday, Sept. 26. Howard is one among many local Tallahassee poets and writers, as well as international participants, to celebrate 10 years of sharing writing for world peace, justice and sustainability.



Howard

The event was founded by Michael Rothenberg and Terri Carrion to promote empowerment through global solidarity and is celebrating its tenth anniversary this fall.

"Even though I'm not a poet, I will share something that will capture a scene that is in the same rhythm or time of poem," says Howard. "It's a good way for a community to connect people who are here in various professional, civic and activist roles and put them together and share work."

Howard teaches on faculty in Florida State University's English Department. He follows in his parents' footsteps as both were professors at Jackson State University. Howard grew up with their dissertations within reach on the bookshelf. He also was influenced by the works of author and professor Dr. Margaret Walker Alexander, who established the Institute for the Study of the History, Life and Culture of Black People at the university and worked with his parents during their tenure.

"I write a lot of historical fiction about the south, so I'm always contending with Jim Crow, slave narratives, or the constraints America put on black lives and voices in a particular moment and then making those feel contemporary and then seeing what is the equivalent today," says Howard.

Howard's stories reflect the coastal south and his hometown Montgomery, Alabama. His historical fictions traverse memory, cultural touchstones, and ancestral roots.

As a young writer, his passion for reading and writing only grew stronger during his middle school's language lab where he was given the opportunity to workshop plays and commercials. Eventually, he studied journalism and earned his MFA from the University of Virginia, specializing in fiction and creative non-fiction.

"I enjoyed the short story form and the ability to have multiple voices in one collection," says Howard. "It also matched my interest in freelance writing and journalism where in 1,500 words you can have these very different journeys through a subject matter and then turn that page and start something completely different. A basis in journalism, research and small scenes got me focused on the building blocks of storytelling."

No matter the story, he always begins with a photograph. He often turns to the photographs of Carrie Mae Weems which capture the African American experience and New Orleans photographer L. Kasi-mu Harris' contemporary cultural scenes as starting points to build language.

His most recent novel, "Driving the King" centers on Nat King Cole's origins in Montgomery. Howard recalls visiting King's childhood home numerous times while it was being restored into a mu-



"Driving the King," a novel by Ravi Howard.
TALLAHASSEE



"Like Trees, Walking," by Ravi Howard.

If you go

What: 100 Thousand Poets for Change 10 Year Anniversary Celebration

When: 11 a.m.-2 p.m. and -7 p.m., Saturday, Sept. 26

Where: Online

Cost: Free

Contact: For more information please visit <https://www.facebook.com/100ThousandPoetsForChangePage>.

seum.

"That was inspiring, growing up with that in close walking distance from where I lived and imagining what life would be like in that house," says Howard. "One photograph is not enough for a novel, so I think about how that one image becomes a series of images."

In addition to language decisions, Howard tries not to answer all of his questions about pacing and rhythms in one draft so that the process is organic as he continues to build a story. His time writing for sports television lends itself naturally to this process since the ending of a story's arc — whether it is an intense championship game or a re-imagined piece of history — is already set in stone.

"The surprise is in the middle ground," says Howard. "You know the ending but how did it get there? Instead of it being a surprise at the ending, it's about what made the surprise possible."

In many cases, his main characters are not the most famous people, but rather the people surrounding those figures and events. That way, the stories can be told away from archives or recorded history and mirror more closely the reader's own life.

This idea of having characters be "witness" to these events and telling their stories is echoed in the readings Howard continues to be influenced by as a writer. James Baldwin's "I Am Not Your Negro," Zora Neale Hurston's "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From A Birmingham Jail" all served as the groundwork for how to stay engaged as an artist and share work that inspires conversation and change.

"It's important to see how they used whatever platform they had and why we can still read it now and why does it still resonate," says Howard. "Their voices have been really sharp in the way that they were insightful for that moment."

Howard believes the 100 Thousand Poets event has the capacity to capture a similar moment, especially following this summer's Black Lives Matter protests. He is looking forward to the inclusion of a global audience since the readings are hosted in a virtual space and hopes the works shared will continue to find a broad reach.

"I think that this is a challenge for us to be equally insightful to our moment, and then record it," says Howard.

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).