





book
benches
project

body of work

Frank X Walker, a Kentucky poet laureate and an advocate of Appalachia's African-American culture and history, is among the distinguished authors honored by the Book Benches project

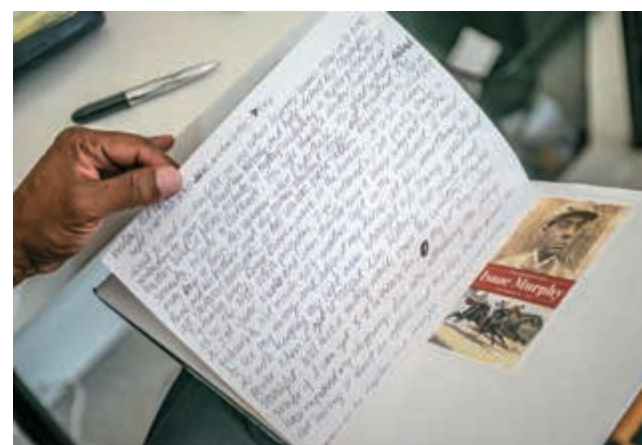
By Kate Savage
Photos by Lee Thomas



Franks Walker regularly wakes at 4:30 a.m., enjoying the morning quiet to capture the thoughts and ideas that percolate in the pre-dawn hours. This wellspring for his art and writing consistently provides him with recurring themes relating to family, place, identity, and social justice.

And his early morning musings have served him well during a career that has seen Walker produce 10 collections of poetry, several anthologies, and at least a dozen plays as well as numerous articles and essays. Walker also teaches at the University of Kentucky. His book *Isaac Murphy: I Dedicate This Ride* inspired a bench in Lexington's Book Benches project.

Born in 1961 in Danville and one of 11 children, the former Kentucky poet laureate fell in love with books at age 5. "My mother taught me to read early," Walker said. "Books were my



Top, Walker works in a studio from his home in the Artists' Village near downtown Lexington. Above, one of his many journals contains details about a trip to New York and his golf swing, plus a notice about an Isaac Murphy book event.



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- Executive Chef & Owner Cole Arimes

body of work



friends. I especially liked big books that you could cradle and fall asleep in.”

Walker’s parents divorced before he was 6, and the family moved to the “projects” in Danville. “We never thought of ourselves as poor; we were always clean and our clothes fit,” Walker said. “We didn’t have television or a lot of toys, so we had to fall back on our creativity. I remember my sisters and I would take all the grass clippings after the grass in front of our apartment had been mowed and we’d build little walls and big houses that were defined by mounds of grass. And it was really a sin to step over somebody’s wall. We’d say, ‘You know you can’t do that! The door is over there!’ ”

His mother — he mentions her repeatedly — was his first and perhaps most important creative influence. A Pentecostal minister and regular participant in church activities at the Green Street Pentecostal Church of God, she expressed her creativity by composing children’s plays during holidays, fashioning costumes and clothes from scraps of fabric, and using her imaginative culinary skills.

“When I think about how my mother fed all of us, making us think that every day was a ‘different meal,’ I still appreciate how much a creative cook can do with a single potato.”

Perhaps it was some of these kitchen memories that inspired Walker’s poem “Fried Chicken” from his collection *Ink Stains & Watermarks*, in which he questions the credibility of Colonel Sanders’ claim to the recipe for his famous dish:

Who really believes an old white man discovered a chicken recipe anywhere else but from over a black woman’s shoulder who didn’t even get credit for wringing his neck?



Walker credits his mother with nurturing his creativity during a childhood in which imagination substituted for television and toys. Left, his collection *Ink Stains & Watermarks* contains the poem “Fried Chicken.”

Throughout his youth Walker was a voracious reader, but he was also drawn to the visual arts. He remembers, “The artist person started first. As far back as kindergarten I have this very fond memory of this thing we did where we shaved crayons, put them between wax paper, ironed it, and then opened it up. There was this double image; that seemed like magic to me.”

Walker believes that happy children are those given the freedoms he had to be expressive, to discover, to create their own “refrigerator door” masterpieces. He

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remembers mixing tempera paints with powdered detergent and painting the Baskin-Robbins windows every Christmas season. Not for money but for all the ice cream he could eat. “I believe that what we often call survival skills is simply creativity at work,” he said.

A self-described nerd and jock, Walker survived the projects and his adolescence, inspired by his favorite character, the Black Panther, who, with no superpowers, relied on his smarts. “By the time my ‘bookish’ reputation and thick glasses became a target for the neighborhood bullies, I was already responding by composing juvenile but truly ‘heroic’ rhyming couplets in my head.”

For Walker, words still serve as his first weapon of choice.

“
...IT’S JUST
AN X AS
IN THE
UNKNOWN...”

—Frank X Walker

It was also during his high school days that Walker acquired the extra initial, X, to his name. Because of his likeness to Malcolm X, the political activist of the day, Walker’s friends affectionately tagged him as Frank X, often abbreviating it to just X. He is quick to explain, “It doesn’t stand for Xavier or even xylophone; it’s just an X as in the unknown — like in mathematics.”

Recruited by the University of Kentucky, Walker initially embarked on an engineering path, but academic and health problems made him decide to drop out after that first year. However, three months working in a factory changed his mind, and he returned to UK. This time around, after exploring journalism and studio art, Walker happened to take a creative writing class being



Among his many contributions Walker coined the term Affrilachian to examine what it means to grow up African-American in Appalachia.



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Portraits of famous African-Americans decorate part of a wall in Walker's studio. He designed his house and is the first to have moved into the Artists' Village.

taught by Gurney Norman. "More than any one person Gurney Norman is the reason I'm a writer. It was because of his class that I changed my major to English and decided to take every creative arts class I could get a hold of. It was because of him that I never stopped writing."

In turn, Norman effortlessly recalls the young student Frank. "He had a quiet, earnest presence in the classroom. His knowledge of his hometown and his extended family and his intense feelings about them were evident immediately. He had a fine writing talent, a strong voice, and I recognized how truly articulate he was with his rich mix of standard and colloquial and folk language. He was a natural storyteller," said Norman.

Walker graduated from UK subsequently receiving his MFA in writing from Spalding University in 2003. Throughout this time Walker and Norman had continued to stay in touch. "Then one day he showed me his new poem 'Affrilachia,'" said Norman, "and I quickly realized that a new cultural space had been named."

It was around this same time that Norman and his wife, Nyoka Hawkins, founded Old Cove Press and so, as Walker's poem "Affrilachia" grew into a collection of poems that became his first book, similarly it became the first book ever published by Old Cove Press. "It was obviously the right choice for the first title from our press," said Norman.

Affrilachia, a collection of groundbreaking poems, is now in its eighth printing and considered a classic of Appalachian and African-American literature. Nikki Finney, herself an "honorary" member of the Affrilachian Poets group and winner of the 2011 National Book Award for poetry, said of Walker's book: "Finally, a gathering of words that fiercely speaks to what it truly means to grow up African-American in Appalachia. These are not stories of those of us transplanted conveniently into the territory for whatever reason. These poem-stories are from a native Affrilachian heart, more specifically, from the man who first created the word in order to define and not be rendered invisible."

It was indeed Walker who first coined this word naming that new cultural space Norman recognized. "In 1991 I opened the dictionary, and it said that Appalachians were the white residents of the mountainous region known as Appalachia," said Walker. "OK, I thought; that means I can never be an Appalachian writer. So that night I sat down with my journal to make sense of this and came up with the word 'Affrilachian.' I took the word to my writing group the following Monday eve-

ning, and we made a decision right then to name ourselves “The Affrilachian Poets.”

From this culturally encompassing term Affrilachian, conceived by Walker some 25 years ago and now recognized in the Oxford American Dictionary, has developed a group of more than 40 artists and activists who through their solidarity and desire to advance diverse voices, continues to this day to challenge and shape the literary and social landscapes of the Appalachian region and beyond.

but
if you think
makin’ ’shine from corn
is as hard as Kentucky coal
imagine being
an Affrilachian
poet.

Final lines from “Affrilachia”

Despite his distaste for labels, Walker has become known as an historical genre poet giving voice and persona in several of his subsequent collections to little known or credited black in-

dividuals from the past. Walker considers his expanded world view and that of global politics to have developed while he was a college student, heavily influenced by his reading and the youth movements in South Africa. He believes the activism of his own generation helped dismantle apartheid as an institution. Walker crafts his art to, in his own words, “write the wrongs.”

In his Isaac Murphy book, Walker gives voice through his poetry to individuals of significance in the life of America’s most celebrated black jockey, who was not particularly recognized until recent years.

In his collection *Turn Me Loose: The Unghosting of Medgar Evers*, Walker unleashes the powerful emotions both before and after the moment of Evers’ assassination. Allowing others — Evers’ wife and his brother, the murderer as well as the latter’s two wives — to tell the story while Evers himself remains silent.

“I thought that Evers’ loss of life was a tragedy, but what was even more tragic to me was that there were hundreds of kids in a college classroom who didn’t know who he was — had never heard of him,” said Walker. “You can’t really understand America if you don’t get the whole story. If you’re going to live here, you need to know your history to have a better understanding of this place. If you don’t know your history, then you will walk

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around always wondering why things are happening the way they are.”

In his most recent work, *Last Will, Last Testament*, Walker shares in intimate accounting the coincidental dying of his father while yet his new son was being born.

As I hold him tight,
I wonder what he knows
About seasons,
how his arrival
gave my father
permission to leave.

Extract from “Mourning ... Sun”

In 2016 artists Kurt Gohde and Kremena Todorova asked Walker to collaborate on a public art project and commissioned him to write a poem as a love letter to the world. This project evolved from Gohde and Todorova’s earlier Lexington Tattoo Project that had started as a Facebook request for Lexington residents willing to have words or phrases from a love poem to their city inked on their bodies.

Now Gohde and Todorova were interested in expanding the scope of their success by creating a public artwork that intertwined poetry, tattoos, photography, spoken work, storytelling, and music in order to foster community on a global scale.

This second effort became an international phenomenon with thousands of participants worldwide. Walker

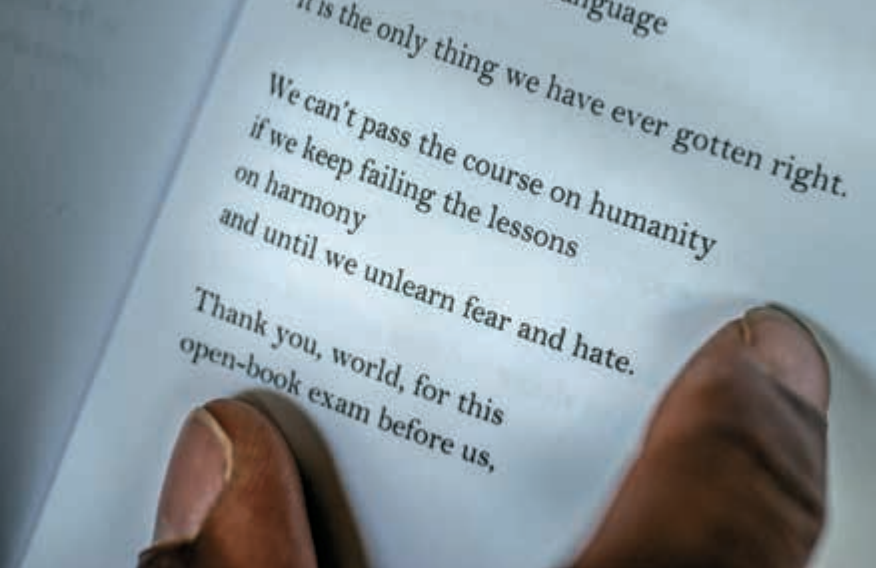
“

I JUST WANT
TO USE ALL
MY GIFTS
TO MAKE THIS
A BETTER
PLACE THAN
THE ONE
I INHERITED.
A PLACE MY
KIDS AND THEIR
KIDS CAN
BE SAFE AND
PRODUCTIVE
IN.”

—FRANK X WALKER



Writing poetry, teaching, and creating art keep Walker inspired.



Walker's "Love Letta to de Worl" developed from a project to foster community on a global scale. The words UNLEARN FEAR + HATE emblazon a sculpture on a downtown Lexington building.

himself has the words 'love you black' inked on his chest.

The poem, written to address growing racial tensions around the world, continues to have a poignant resonance in today's political atmosphere. Walker's words UNLEARN FEAR + HATE from the last part of the poem were appropriated by the artists and incorporated into T-shirt slogans, bumper stickers, Christmas ornaments, murals, street stencils, and most recently on a 21-foot diameter stainless steel halo sculpture erected on the side of a building on Lexington's Short Street.

We can't pass the course on humanity
if we keep failing the lessons
on harmony
and until we unlearn fear and hate.
"Love Letta to de Worl"

Asking Walker how he finds his inspiration invites a humorous response: "I pour a bowl of alphabets into a cup and leave it on the porch overnight, then when I wake up in the morning, there's a poem in it."

No matter how he works his magic, it must work because in Gurney Norman's opinion, "There has been no more significant or prolific writer of his generation anywhere in the country than Frank X Walker."

Looking ahead, Walker says, "I just want to use all my gifts to make this a better place than the one I inherited. A place my kids and their kids can be safe and productive in. I want my family's name and legacy to mean something when I'm gone. Writing poems and publishing poetry keeps my heart alive." **KM**

MEANT TO BE

Kip Cornett of Team Cornett knew exactly what Kentucky author he wanted to support when the Book Benches project was seeking sponsorships.

So when he called Neil Chethik, executive director of the Carnegie Center for Literature and Learning, one of the project collaborators, Cornett said emphatically, "I'll take a book by Frank X Walker, any book, but it must be by Frank X Walker," there happened to be a bench waiting for sponsorship.

Meanwhile, Melanie Osborne Wisdom, who had recently moved to Lexington from Ashland, had submitted four design possibilities, one of which fortuitously happened to be for Walker's book *Isaac Murphy: I Dedicate This Ride*.

Wisdom gave consideration to Walker's book along with CE Morgan's *Sport of Kings*. "A friend of mine who has been a fan of Walker's poetry for some time convinced me to go with Walker's book," said Wisdom, "and the Isaac Murphy book was a perfect fit because it was about horse racing.

"I loved it because it told the real story. It was what the black jockeys lived through and it was all retold

through narrative verse. It was horrible how they were treated back then," said Wisdom.

Wisdom reproduced the actual front and back cover images from Walker's book but couldn't resist a little artistic license in the two recessed alcoves on either side of the seat, painting life-sized cats that appear to be hiding under the bench.

"People thought I was suggesting barn cats, but actually on one side I painted my cat, and my daughter's cat is on the other," she said.

The cats look so realistic that during the public exhibition of the benches — Wisdom's bench being appropriately displayed at the Isaac Murphy Park on Third Street — dogs were seen approaching hers with caution.

Walker, although sad the bench left Kentucky for the library in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, is glad it found a home in a literary setting. He originally considered submitting an art entry for the bench project, but said, "After seeing the finished bench, I really appreciate the fact that the artist who painted it is a much better painter than I am. I made regular pilgrimages to see it when it was in the Isaac Murphy Park."