

'Mixed Roots' Festival Embraces Mixed Race Authors

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The 2000 Census was the first time the U.S. government recognized people with mixed race backgrounds, when 6.8 million people identified with two or more races. In 2010, 9 million Americans identify as such. This summer, *Tell Me More* will focus on stories and novels about the mixed race experience in America. To launch our Summer Blend Book Club, host Michel Martin speaks with bestselling author Heidi Durrow, who wrote the novel *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. Durrow also co-founded the Mixed Roots Film & Literary Festival that just ended in Los Angeles.

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MICHEL MARTIN, host: In the 2000 census, for the first time, the U.S. government gave people the option of identifying with more than one race. At that point, 6.8 million Americans chose to identify with two or more races. In 2010, that number had increased to 9 million people. These numbers give us a clear picture of an increasingly diverse America and a picture of Americans who are increasingly comfortable identifying themselves as mixed race, multicultural individuals.

And that experience is increasingly being reflected in literature. That's why all summer long we will be reading stories and novels by and about people exploring what it means to be mixed. You can read along with us, if you like. We're calling it TELL ME MORE's summer blend book club. And, today, to kick off our series, we've invited a guest who writes, blogs and organizes an entire festival around issues of mixed race identity.

Heidi Durrow co-founded the Mixed Roots Film and Literary Festival. The fourth annual festival just wrapped up in Los Angeles. She co-hosts a weekly podcast called Mixed Chicks Chat. And last, but certainly not least, she is the author of The New York Times bestseller, "The Girl Who Fell from the Sky." It's about the daughter of a Danish mother and a black-American GI who becomes the only survivor of a family tragedy. And Heidi Durrow joins us now from our NPR studios in New York. Congratulations on all of that.

HEIDI DURROW: Thank you so much. We are so excited to hear about this summer reading series you're doing.

MARTIN: Yeah. It's going to be great.

I want to ask about the festival. But, first, I want to talk a little bit about your book, "The Girl Who Fell from the Sky." It's a bestseller. It's a novel for those who don't know. You've received many accolades, including from The Washington Post, which named it one of the best novels of 2010. But I understand that you actually went through a kind of an interesting journey to get there. That it was rejected by a number of publishers because they said...

DURROW: They said no one could relate to a story about a half black, half Danish girl. That there was no market for that. And I think I got about 48 different publishing houses to reject it before I finally got

someone to accept it. And now it's so exciting because they were wrong. They were wrong. People really do relate to this story.

MARTIN: And it seems that you've tapped into a rich vein and that clearly is a desire to hear this kind of story. From your experience as an author, and, also, just from your experience organizing the festival, what is it you think that people are attracted to? I mean, obviously with your book it's the writing as well as, you know, the story clearly, you know, I mean you can have a great story, but if it's poorly written, you know, meh.

But, what do you think people are attracted to in your novel and in the other works that are coming forward and in the festival?

DURROW: I think what's happening is that we are excited when we can connect to the other and we find out that they're not so other than we thought they were. So there are a lot of people who have read my book and they get excited because, finally, they're allowed to talk about their own difference that they haven't been able to talk about.

I met a young woman on the Jersey shore last month who was so excited to read the book. And she said I'm not black and white mixed, but I'm half Christian and half Jewish. And I totally related to that story. So all of these differences that we have hidden from each other, people are allowed to talk about them suddenly, when they have a story in their hand.

MARTIN: Talk to me a little bit about the festival, if you would. And what gave you the idea and what kinds of pieces, authors did you showcase?

DURROW: Very honestly, Fanshen Cox and I started this in 2008 because we were frustrated artists. She's a filmmaker who couldn't get her films made and I was a writer who couldn't get my book published. And we thought we would be the gatekeepers because certainly there must be other people like us who are telling stories about the mixed experience.

And so we thought we'd just hold the festival in our living rooms that first year. But the Japanese-American National Museum became our major sponsor. Now we're on year four. We had 1,500 people come through this weekend, which was super, super exciting. And our roster of writers was amazing. I hope that you'll be talking to some of them this summer.

Danzy Senna appeared this year. Nina Revoyr, who wrote "Wingshooters." Susan Straight was there. But more importantly for us, we're featuring emerging storytellers. We had a young woman there who had never written anything before, always wanted to, saw the deadline for the festival, wrote her story, came to the festival and now that story is being published in the Boston Review. That's one of the great, exciting things for us. That suddenly we've created a space so people know that there's a space for their stories.

MARTIN: Well, one of the things that's interesting, too, is you've created a space for different ways to talk about this that isn't tragic. I mean, there is, of course, many people will remember the whole tragic mulatto theme that emerged in film and in some books, you know, earlier in our life as a country. But one of the things that I think you're trying to do is not be tragic. In fact, I'm attracted to your biography where you start by saying, when people used to ask what are you, you would say, well, I'm the best speller. I'm the best in my class at multiplication.

DURROW: Absolutely.

MARTIN: My favorite color is blue.

(SOUNDBITE OF LAUGHTER)

DURROW: Well, you know, I mean, that's the question that plagues all mixed race people - what are you? Well, we're so many different things and that's what's happening in this literature right now, that we're telling the story in very many different ways. So, Susan Straight, who's a white mom of mixed kids, is writing all of these wonderful stories that are different than stories that I might write as someone who is actually mixed race.

We're writing stories about not just racial difference, but also cultural difference. We're writing stories where there are, quote, unquote, "double minorities." And so these are all new things that we're exploring. And then we get to get to the tough stuff, too. Danzy Senna's new collection, "You Are Free," she's writing about class and all of these other things that we haven't been exploring in the literature of the mixed experience, but we get to now because there are so many of us talking about it.

MARTIN: Heidi Durrow is the author of the bestselling novel, "The Girl Who Fell from the Sky." She's also the co-founder of the Mixed Roots Film and Literary Festival that just wrapped up its fourth year in Los Angeles. And she was nice enough to join us from NPR studios in New York. Heidi Durrow, thank you so much for joining us. Congratulations on everything.

DURROW: Thank you.

MARTIN: If you want to read along with TELL ME MORE's Summer Blend Book Club, just go to NPR.org, click on Programs, then on TELL ME MORE. The first book in our series will - surprise - "You are Free" by Danzy Senna. Please read along with us.

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