



Q & A



Young, Gifted, and Black *A Journey of Lament and Celebration*

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Sheila Wise Rowe is a writer, counselor, speaker, spiritual director, and author of the award-winning book *Healing Racial Trauma*. For over twenty-five years she has counseled abuse and trauma survivors in the United States, and she also ministered to homeless and abused women and children in Johannesburg, South Africa, for a decade. Sheila is the executive director of The Rehoboth House and the cofounder of The Cyrene Movement, an online community for people of color seeking healing for racial trauma.

New from the Author of *Healing Racial Trauma*

How does *Young, Gifted, and Black: A Journey of Lament and Celebration* connect to your first book, *Healing Racial Trauma*?

Sheila Wise Rowe: *Young, Gifted, and Black* addresses a variety of experiences of Black and biracial millennials and younger adults. I delve into the effect and healing of personal struggles, which includes but is not limited to racial trauma. Similar to my prior book, *Young, Gifted, and Black* includes stories that do not shy away from pain, but point to hope. I share several real-life stories that give voice to some of the issues facing young, gifted, and Black folks as they experience lament and celebration. I hope gifted ones will find some aspect of their lives represented in each chapter. This along with the research, Scripture, and embodied prayer practices that are included, readers can begin to heal and thrive in a world where they have to hold the tension between lament and celebration.

Why did you decide to focus this book on the experiences of millennials and younger adults?

Sheila: This book is both *for* and *about* those young, gifted, and Black millennials and younger adults who dream and strive for a better life and a better world. And it's for those like me who were gifted young adults and are now processing our life stories.

If life is like a race, then our lives begin at the starting line. There are rules to follow, such as where and how we are to take up our position. Then we wait for the referee to instruct us to get on your marks, get set, go. During the race, we must stay in our lane. Taking all factors into account, we can assume that each runner has a fair shot at winning. However, this is not always the case because there may be obstacles on the road. In life, these impediments may come from home, community, church, and society. The obstacles we face may encourage stability or instability. The effect is undeniable yet unique for each of us.

I write about the burdens carried by young, gifted, and Black millennials and younger adults.

We celebrate their academics, arts, sports, trades, leadership, and entrepreneurial achievements. They appear to be self-sufficient and high functioning, but they are also in need of support. Their needs and struggles are often overlooked at home, at work, and in classrooms.

They often keep their emotions in check, feelings submerged, living behind a mask. These gifted ones may quietly struggle with sadness, anxiety, fear, and perfectionism, and struggle in their relationships. Some believe that they need to perform and follow the rules to get approval, stay relevant, be accepted, loved, or even tolerated.



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Each chapter refers to a different line, whether it be a starting or boundary line. For instance, what is the significance of the chapter “The Boundary Line”?

Sheila: These millennials and younger adults face visible and invisible lines or barriers that hinder their ability to live well-rounded and authentic lives. Each chapter addresses how a specific line or barrier affected a certain person’s life and their journey toward healing.

Which individual story is especially powerful in conveying the experience of being “young, gifted, and Black”?

Sheila: It’s important to note here that our Black experience is not a monolith. An article in the *New Republic* notes how “We don’t all agree on what blackness or Americanness means, or whether we should even reconcile those two things. But we all have our own stories, and those stories are crucial to understanding the experience of black millennials [and others] and what that experience says about our country.” I agree with this sentiment. Here are two chapters from my book:

In chapter 4, “Fall in Line: The Mask”

We were expected to fall in line, conform to a rule or standard, or stand poised. In addition to following the strict rules of engagement, our family, school, church, community, and society taught us the roles we play. We may look back and see how we played a role and wore a mask to survive and thrive in our youth, later in school, college, vocational training, and now at work. We face a world often confused by our very existence. Unable to categorize us, they put us in a box. For some of us success relegated us to be a model for everyone to emulate. We receive messages that tell us to be strong, but sometimes we are not strong and don’t feel capable, so we wear a mask to keep up a front. We present strong and represent, remain silent, compliant, and stare straight ahead with a ready smile. Studies have revealed that while doing so some of us quietly deal with perfectionism and fear of success, and mismatch cognitive, physical, and emotional development. We may struggle with underachievement, introversion, nonconformity, heightened self-awareness, and feeling different. There are also idealism, justice, concern over world problems, and empathy that were more specific to gifted Black students than White ones. The mask we wear and the role we play may seem to be who we really are, but in fact, it is an adaptation, an attempt to get our needs met. This was Terrance’s story.

Terrance remembers when he was a shy fifth grader, and his family moved from Queens, New York, to a mixed but predominantly White town on Long Island. The students and teachers in his new primary school were mostly White. Terrance spent much of the first year avoiding eye contact with his peers. By the time he entered sixth grade, it was undeniable: he was academically gifted. He was placed in advanced classes with a select group of fifteen others called the “high potential group.” Terrance and an Asian girl were the only people of color in the group. Outside of the group, he faced racism and his fellow students started calling him a nerd. Back then, nerd had negative connotations for a Black boy. In this chapter we trace Terrance’s journey of healing despite the barriers as he learns to embrace his life more fully as a young adult.



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In chapter 11, “Walk the Line: What Matters Most”

The conversation about values is essential for many reasons. If we take a closer look at previous chapters, we see how values drive how folks perceived and responded to different situations. If we examine each of them, we get a picture of what motivating factors may have also inspired us on our journey of lament and celebration. The inherent value woven through all of these stories is that these individuals believe in God; some are firmly rooted in their faith; and others have or are going through a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. However, their relationship with God is a core value that inserts its way into their decisions and actions. There are moments when these folks have responded contrary to their values. Yet they come into a real, felt awareness that they have strayed and recommit to their values or establish new ones. Shanell is a gifted Black musician and clinician whose commitment to “walk the line” is tested before, during, and after college. Yet we see how with each step she found the courage and fortitude to keep moving with integrity. We also gain insights about walking the line from the book of Daniel. His life illustrates this challenge and how we can maintain, reclaim, and proclaim what we hold most dear.

What are key pieces of encouragement you hope readers take from this book?

Sheila:

- Be encouraged to embrace and share your whole story.
- Learn how the love of God and people and the availability of safer spaces aid in our healing.
- We can transcend the visible and invisible lines or barriers that hinder our ability to live well-rounded and authentic lives.
- Life is a journey where we will all face lament and celebration. Yet we now have hope that will carry us.



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