

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Kelly Starling Lyons *on **Going Down Home With Daddy***

Down home is Granny's house. Down home is where Lil Alan and his parents and sister will join grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins in a rich celebration of family history. It's where he will hear stories of ancestors and visit the land that has meant so much to all of them. And down home is where each of the children will find their way to pay tribute to family history. All of the other children know what to do...but what will Lil Alan do?

Q: *What inspired you to write **Going Down Home With Daddy***

A: The story was inspired by my husband's heritage and my own. As a little girl, my grandma would take me to the land in Gibsonia, PA where she grew up. Family would come together at Woods Grove, named for her dad, for reunions and fun. My mom shared stories of drinking water from the spring, picking blackberries, being captivated by stories and dancing into the night.

Reunions were part of my life too. Relatives converged in different cities to celebrate our bonds and remember the past. The pride I felt at being connected to cousins from around the country and standing on the shoulders of ancestors has always stayed with me.

Going Down Home With Daddy began to take shape when my husband took me to a gathering at his grandma's house in southwest Georgia. Set on countless acres, every piece of the land held memories. Fighting for rights. Building a home and a life. Planting seeds for the future. The setting was a character. As I took it all in, my mind spun with possibilities.

I felt the joy of family members who came back home. Uncles, aunts, cousins, grandparents, family friends all reminisced and reconnected. Being there reminded me of

my grandma's and mom's stories and reunions I've attended.

I found my way into the story when my husband and I brought our kids to visit. I began to look at the tradition through their eyes. What did coming down home mean to them? What would they remember and pass on?

Q: *What does family mean to you?*

A: Family means everything to me. My cousins were my best friends. Every place I've moved, my grandma would connect me to a relative so I had someone to look out for me. I talk to my mom and aunt almost every day. My husband and I try to pass on the importance of family to our kids by making sure they attend reunions, go to our hometowns each year, spend time with relatives and listen to stories. We want it to be in their hearts.

Q: *What role have family reunions played in your life? Were they a significant part of your childhood experience?*

A: Reunions have always been part of my life. I have vivid memories of my grandparents planning ones in Pittsburgh. It was a time to come together, eat good food and celebrate what makes you kin. We traveled to

reunions too. Family members would take turns *hosting* them. Every few years, we'd return to Eden, NC where my maternal grand-dad's family has roots. That's a tradition I still observe as part of the Hairston clan. As a mom, I love going to reunions with my kids. They've been to reunions on my side of the family and my husband's. I help plan reunions too.

Q: *What role does the family reunion play in the Black family?*

A: Family reunions connect us. Our people were stolen from Africa and shipped to this continent in chains. Slave owners brutalized us, separated our families, and tried to break us. But reunions show that we stand strong together, always. They celebrate the ties that bind us together. Reunions are about roots, resilience, and rejoicing.

Q: *Land and home are key themes in your story. What are their significances?*

A: One reason land has such deep meaning to African-American families is the broken promise of receiving 40 acres and a mule when freedom came. In the story, Lil Alan's daddy shares that their family was enslaved on this land, made a way out of no way and saved up and bought it. They come home each year to honor that history.

While sharing what the land means to Lil Alan's family, I wanted to make sure I didn't erase Native people as the rightful owners of all land in this country. I'm grateful to author Traci Sorell, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, for her feedback and help.

Q: *Were you ever unsure of yourself as a child? If so, did those feelings inform the main character of Lil Alan?*

A: I definitely had moments of uncertainty. Stuttering was a struggle, so public speaking could make me queasy. But coming from a family who performs, loves out loud, and always applauded my efforts made it a little easier. I wanted little Alan to struggle with what to share, not because he was expected to be part of the celebration, but because he wanted to. He understands what this big anniversary means. He wants to share like his sister and cousins. One day, he may open the celebration just like his dad.

Q: *Lil Alan's father and great-grandmother share wonderful words of wisdom. What is some family-given advice you've carried with you?*

A: Thank you. An early message from my grandma was simple but stayed with me: "Say please and thank you and put a napkin on your lap." Being kind and gracious serve you well anywhere you go. Another favorite saying of hers was "Nothing beats a can't but a try." I remember that and put it in action. Hope is at the core of who I am.

Q: *Do you think Going Down Home With Daddy crosses cultural boundaries? How do you think it connects with readers who have never attended a family reunion like Lil Alan's?*

A: Definitely. Reunions are not limited to African-American families. All around the country, people come together and celebrate where they're from and who they are. Whether people have attended reunions or not, they have their own meaning of family and home. I want *Going Down Home With Daddy* to honor and celebrate that.

Q: *The illustrations play a big—and meaningful—part in the book. How did you feel when you first saw Daniel Minter's interpretation?*

A: I was blown away. Daniel brought so many layers of meaning – the Adinkra symbols, the colors and emotion-filled faces, the texture and ancestral connections, the land. When I wrote the story, I hoped Daniel would be the illustrator. He lives in Maine, but is originally from Ellaville, Georgia. I knew he would get the story but I had no idea how his vision would make it soar. There's intention, care and love in the art. Each spread calls for you to linger. His work fills me with pride.

Q: *The scene where the family sits down to eat dinner makes my mouth water! Is there any significance to foods you mention?*

A: My husband's grandma was known for her homemade mayhaw jelly. It was one of my husband's favorite treats, especially on biscuits. I grew up eating the soul food staples of greens and mac and cheese. Smoked turkey is on the menu because my husband's grand-dad used to smoke meat in the smoke house that still stands. Okra and tomatoes speak to a Southern tradition.

Q: What do you want readers to take away from your book?

A: I want readers of all ages to celebrate their family and heritage. What makes their family special? What are their traditions? How can they help preserve their history and pass it on?

Q: What is your writing process like?

A: *Going Down Home With Daddy* started with images. Land that stretched on forever, cows and goats, pecan and grapefruit trees, medicinal plants, the smoke house, mayhaw jelly, cotton. Then, as I thought about my kids going down home with their dad, I came up with the character Lil Alan. I let him take me on a journey from driving to the reunion with his family in the wee hours of the morning to discovering what his heritage and the land mean to him.

Q: What's next for you?

A: I'm looking forward to celebrating *Going Down Home With Daddy* at my Quail Ridge Books launch party and at events throughout the year. This summer, two more books will debut – *Dancing Queen*, a new title in my Jada Jones chapter book series, and *Sing a Song: How Lift Every Voice and Sing Inspired Generations*. I can't wait to share these stories with kids.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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