

**JACKSON, from page 5**

of danger around you – not enough to keep you from going out, but you were aware that things had changed in the community.

It would have been an anomaly if you saw white people riding around in certain parts of the neighborhood – that didn't start happening until the 2000s.

When you lived in Northeast, you only saw African Americans at that time – we would have tournaments at the park and there would be no white people there. And then right around the time that I left, the neighborhood started to change. People's grandmothers started selling their houses. Next thing you know, another person has moved away.

**S.Z.:** *Pretty different from the liberal, hippie hipster, progressive "Portlandia" that folks tend to identify with Portland.*

**M.J.:** Yeah. I've never seen the show, but from what everyone tells me, it is starkly different.

**S.Z.:** *What are your thoughts about gentrification?*

**M.J.:** If you can make a neighborhood less dangerous and if you can improve the schools and if you can raise the care of the residents for that community, then it is good. What I don't like about it is that people get displaced.

It is often people who look like me that are getting displaced. If there was a way to improve the community (for the people who live there without displacing them), I would be 100 percent for it. There doesn't seem to be a way to do both.

I vacillate. Gentrification doesn't fix the problem, it just relocates it.

**S.Z.:** *Who is the audience for this book?*

**M.J.:** I like to think there are two audiences. One, people who have had a familiarity with the experience (of the characters in the book) and then the literary audience.

I just wanted the book to be for people who love language, people who love literary fiction. I thought the story would resonate with the people from my background.

**S.Z.:** *Your book helped me, as a reader,*

*better understand the African-American experience ...*

**M.J.:** Thank you for that!

**S.Z.:** *You used to live in a house in the heart of the Northeast with your girlfriend. In 2012, for the documentary, you and your mom were walking around (the old neighborhood). You tell her that you were robbed outside the house and she tells you about the first time she was in that house. What did she reveal to you?*

**M.J.:** She told me it used to be a drug house and it got raided. She ran away from police, barefoot, from that house (which Mitchell's former girlfriend bought years later).

My mom had that experience in the '80s and I lived there in 1996. The house my mom ran from was actually torn down and my girlfriend had a new house built in its place.

**S.Z.:** *Talk about full circle ...*

**M.J.:** That whole day, walking around with my mom (for the documentary) and hearing those stories ... yeah.

**S.Z.:** *You served 16 months in the Oregon Department of Corrections System in two facilities: Mill Creek and Santiam. Do you feel your time in the prison system 'rehabilitated' you?*

**M.J.:** Uh. No. Prison is not built to rehabilitate people. It is built as an industry. Guys who go there who have the will to make better decisions in their life, often can. It's much more about your own volition than it is (about) you becoming a different person.

Now, I do think it can give you some skills. And I do think it can change perspectives or at least cause you to question your perspective. I don't think it is a complete waste of time, but in my case especially, it wasn't something I learned in prison, it was being in prison and deciding that I don't want to be back here ever again.

**"I really think that the circumstances in Portland produced in me something that is not around everywhere. I like it. I've never written about anything other than home."**

**S.Z.:** *What was the pinnacle moment in your life (if any) – the moment where you said "Enough."*

**M.J.:** I don't think it was a moment. In 2002, I just committed myself to being a writer so that dictated a lot of my future decisions.

I think having that ambition gave me a sense of purpose that I didn't have. Because when I was selling drugs, I didn't have a purpose, really. I knew I wanted some money in my pocket, but I didn't know what I was gonna do.

Once I decided what I was gonna do, it made everything that was not conducive to that goal less attractive.

**S.Z.:** *How did you get the "Everybody Reads" gig?*

**M.J.:** I'm probably the most pro-Portland, not-living-in-Portland Portlander there is.

I'd heard about the Everybody Reads program about a year ago. I started to inquire about it. I felt like "Residue" had to be a contender.

I wrote this novel for Portland. As far as I knew, it is the only novel that talks about this part of Portland.

I asked the agency that helps me with booking events and they told me the content was kind of above what they were showing high schools. Maybe the next book ... but this book wasn't a good fit for the audience. I couldn't accept that as an answer.

So, I researched the program and found out who was in charge of making the decisions, and I called around to Portland State, and I called (former Portland mayor) Sam Adams. I had my editor send out books to everyone who was even remotely related to (the program) with a note: "Please consider this. I think this story is important for Portland."

I was on vacation last summer and my booking agent forwarded an e-mail from Andrew Proctor (executive director of Literary Arts) telling me "The Residue Years" was chosen as the Everybody Reads

book for 2015.

Then at the bottom of the e-mail, they asked me to host the Oregon Book Awards! I couldn't believe it. I just danced around my hotel room for an hour.

**S.Z.:** *How did you come to writing – or how did writing come to you?*

**M.J.:** I went to Hurston/Wright (a foundation for discovering African-American writers) in D.C. for writers of color. It was between my first and second years of graduate school.

They selected a piece of my writing to be published in this anthology called "Gumbo." It really gave me confidence because I hadn't had a publication before that. I thought, well, I had just come to writing a year before that. I said, "If I can be published with all of these amazing people, I might have an opportunity to really do this if I set my mind to it and work hard at it."

That gave me the fuel I needed to pursue it seriously. That was a reason that I came to New York – because I believed that I could do it (become a published author).

That wouldn't have happened if I didn't have some kind of early marker. I needed something to give me permission (to enter this other world).

**S.Z.:** *What is the importance of home?*

**M.J.:** It means everything to me. I lived with my great-grandparents when I was really young and then we moved around so much, I never had a home.

When I moved to New York, I knew people – I'm thinking of one friend in particular – he does not like to tell people that he is from Portland. He identifies himself as being from Harlem.

To me, where I am from gives me sustenance. It is like a point of pride, but it also gives me a kind of energy that I don't think a lot of people have access to.

I love being from Portland and I love representing Portland. I wouldn't want to be from anywhere else.

I really think that the circumstances in Portland produced in me something that is not around everywhere. I like it. I've never written about anything other than home.

**Untitled**

by Mr. Man

My eyes have seen the light  
But my heart belongs to darkness  
Introducing souls to their maker  
But never meeting mine.  
Was the pay worth the pain.  
I was following orders, he was just a  
Child. Kill or be killed, the old motto goes.  
Was it all for nothing? Does the devil  
Own my soul? I can ask for forgiveness,  
Idle chatter. The razor cuts the  
Flesh...Am I dead? Nope, still have  
A job to do. Physical pain trumps mental.  
Snap out of it, we are a long way from  
Home. Ah...back to work. "Tango at  
6 o'clock going hot."



Dignity



Poverty