

# Growing Up Biracial

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places," she said.

As an 11-year-old, Durrow, now 42, moved with her family to Portland, where she graduated from Jefferson High School, before receiving an undergraduate degree from Stanford, a Masters in Journalism from Columbia and attended Yale Law School.

Inspired by both a true story and the personal experiences of Durrow growing up as a brown skinned girl with a white skinned mother, *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* both reveals an impossible and tragedy

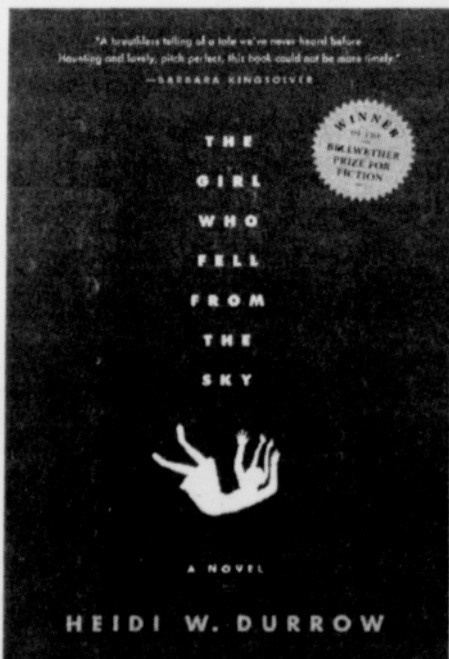


Heidi Durrow at 4-years-old.

stricken past, while exploring issues of identity at a time when race continues to build categories of social and personal identity.

According to Durrow, the inspiration for *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* was catalyzed by a newspaper story about a family, like the one in her book, who had died in a car accident, leaving a young daughter as the sole survivor.

"I became obsessed with this story," said Durrow, who remembers watching TV broadcasts of the accident and digging through newspaper clippings. "There was



something about this story that made me want to give that girl a future and a voice."

But that was just the starting point, she said. "When I sat down to write this story, I knew nothing about her, so I had to go back to the basics and think about what it was that made me so obsessed with the story to begin with."

It had to do with a girl who survived this tragedy, but it was really about her missing her mother, said Durrow. "Even though I had a mother, who is the most amazing mother in the world, in a way I felt like society had divorced me from her because she is white, and I am

brown."

Durrow grew up in northeast Portland in the 1980s, which was "a scary time," she said. "It was the height of the crack epidemic, and gangs had come to Portland. There was a lot of despair around."

As a kid, she said she fought against metabolizing that despair of the neighborhood, which was made up of mostly people of color. "Except for my mom," she joked.

"I remember feeling this profound loss when I would see a classmate on the weekend at Fred Meyer, and then Monday at school someone would say, 'Hey, what were you doing with that white lady?'"

Durrow said, "I couldn't understand at the time why it was I didn't seem to be a part of my mom, and I realized I could infuse some elements from my own life into the story."

She said the greatest honor comes when youth find reflections of themselves within her words.

Last year, she said she was teaching a workshop to some students at a local high school, when one teenage girl said, 'Heidi, you wrote my life.'

"A piece of me was so excited that I wrote something that could connect me with someone from a different generation," said Durrow. "But then the other piece of me was thinking how horrified I was that things hadn't changed for her."

Eventually, however, she said hope won over despair because the girl found a reflection of herself in literature, and thus, in the world.

"The most important thing about books and being a human being in the world is knowing that someone has seen you," she said. "That is a hopeful thing for me."

When Durrow initially began to write the novel, she said she thought she would put the characters in an "imagined, no where kind of time," with a sense of the 1980s.

But to make the characters make sense, she said she soon realized the need for a certain time.

She doesn't, however, believe the book is purely historical fiction. "In a way it is historical, but what is exciting for me, is it is not preventing people from connecting with Portland now," she said. "It is about the history of our city, but we also can't be in the present now without having that connection still."

She said often people only view Portland in its "new shiny way," with its great restaurants, food movements and eclectic neighborhoods. "But I feel like we can't own that

unless we also own the difficult periods," she said.

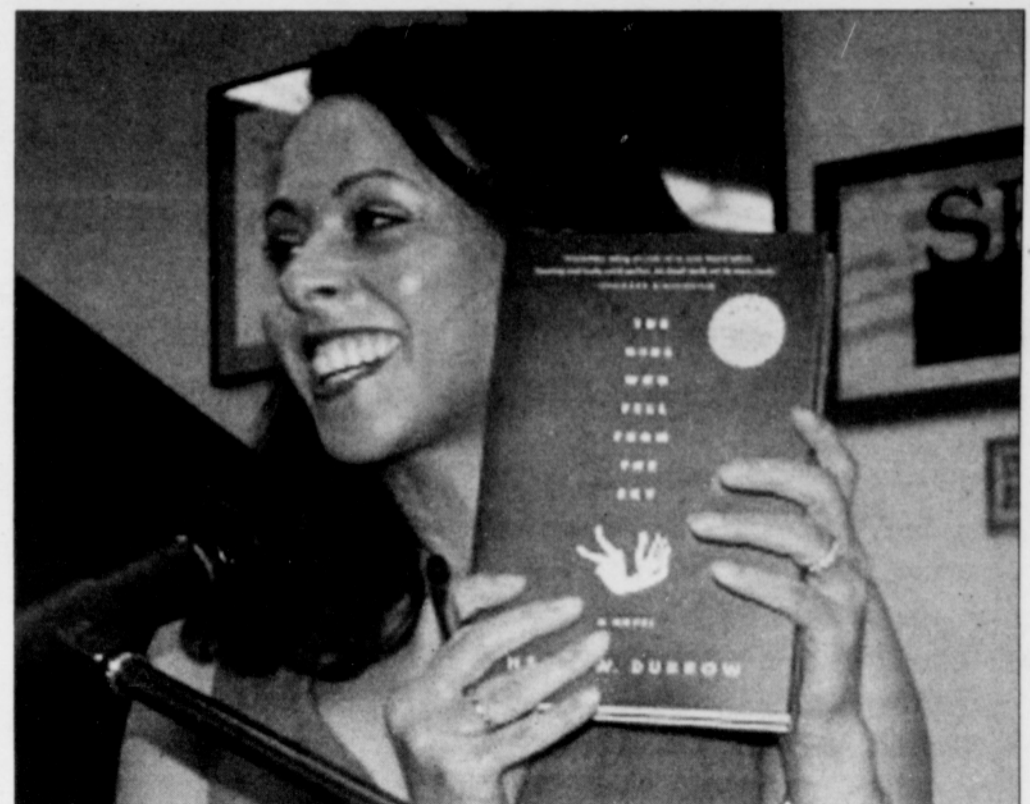
Although she agrees when people say her book is about multi racial multicultural identity, Durrow said the message is beyond the labels. "It's about being labeled young and working with or against those labels to enforcing your identity."

Durrow explained that she has watched as individuals marked with both negative and positive labels, sometimes given early to youth who often carry them with them into adulthood. "They hold onto that, even if it is to their own detriment," she said.

She encourages everyone to gather the strength to create yourself in the way you want to be in the world. One way to do this, said Durrow, is through books.

Throughout her life, Durrow said literature has influenced the way she sees herself and her place in the world, including work by authors Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Shakespeare, William Faulkner and Oregon poet William Stafford.

"There are a lot of different voices I have responded to over the years



Best selling Portland author Heidi W. Durrow with a copy of her book *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*.

and my greatest wish is to have all of those sounds and messages come out in the writing that I do," she said. "Literature matters. It can say something to us. Not in giant political statements and directives, but I mean, literature gives us a chance to reframe questions."

And in doing that, she said, we can reframe the way we look at the world.

Everyone is encouraged to read Durrow's book *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, which can be bor-

rowed from Multnomah county library locations, Oregon Public Broadcasting and the Portland State University Library.

The public is also welcomed to share their thoughts at a book discussion at your neighborhood library, local bookstore, or elsewhere in your community. Heidi W. Durrow will be speaking on Tuesday, March 6 at 7:30 p.m. at the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall.

For more information, visit [www.multcolib.org](http://www.multcolib.org).

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