

THE BLUEPRINT

A Conversation



A behind the scenes Q&A with the author about the inspiration behind her debut novel.

—Rae Giana Rashad

“ When she is fourteen or fifteen, her owner, or his sons, or the overseer, or perhaps all of them, begin to bribe her with presents. If these fail to accomplish their purpose, she is whipped or starved into submission.

—Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

What inspired *The Blueprint*?

The Blueprint is historically informed. It's inspired by girls who were enslaved concubines to politicians and planters in the 1800s. I wanted to explore what it may have been like to be connected to a man who wrote laws that oppressed you, or a man who, for example, wrote but never truly believed, "...all men are created equal."

But I wanted to do it in a way that spoke to our current times and the legislation surrounding women's rights. I wanted to create a timeless story that initiated challenging conversations and provoked introspection.



The Field of Angels, Whitney Plantation

2 **What is *The Blueprint* about?**

The Blueprint is about a young woman coming of age in an alternate, near-future United States where Black women are seen as property. Solenne, my main character, becomes entangled with a white, high-ranking government official. She navigates life using the story of Henriette, her ancestor, who was an enslaved concubine in nineteenth century Louisiana.

At its core, it's the story of hypocrisy centered on the commodification of women's bodies, but it's also a ballad of vulnerability, the story of ancestral ties, intergenerational trauma, sacrifice, and longstanding hope.

3 **What does the title of the book mean?**

A blueprint is a set of ideas or a set of beliefs. In *The Blueprint*, two very different characters interact. Like their ancestors, both want things that can't coexist. Both look to history to inform their actions. *The Blueprint* is an acknowledgment that history designs the present.

4 **Is the interaction between those two characters the central conflict?**

The disturbing connection between a Black woman and a white man is at the center of the narrative. This connection, which at times looks like love to Solenne, began when she was fifteen. Through my use of dual timelines and dramatic irony, the reader is in uninterrupted view of what inexperience and denial have obscured from Solenne. She's on one of two trains hurtling towards each other.

5 **Talk about how you created Solenne.**

The seeds were planted during a visit to Whitney Plantation in Louisiana. At the Wall of Honor memorial, I read heartbreaking quotes from enslaved people recalling their lives on a plantation. The words from or about women clung to me. They were exploited for their domestic, physical, and reproductive labor. These are the forgotten handmaids.



The Big House

Whitney Plantation

"I remember how my master used to would come get my sister, make her take a bath and comb her hair, and take her down in the quarter all night, den have the nerve to come around de next day and ask her how she feel."

—Julia Woodrich

At home, I reread slave narratives, this time listening for the voices of women. None lived a life as painfully complex as the concubines. I noticed patterns. They were girls between twelve and sixteen when the abuse began, and it often spanned decades, resulting in the birth of multiple children. The threat and promise of their children's livelihood and freedom became tools to keep them compliant.

I wanted to capture the essence of these girls and tell a story that focused on that internal hell of questioning love, identity, and what it means to be free. Solenne came to me fully formed, and once I decided to honor her voice, the beginnings of Henriette took shape.

6 **What was your guiding principle when creating the women in the story?**

The strong Black woman archetype doesn't honor truth, so it wouldn't exist in the narrative. There is this image, regardless of trauma, of the Black woman with a high tolerance for emotional and physical pain. That image makes it unnecessary to acknowledge our softness or humanity. Each of my characters demonstrate their desire to love and be loved. They make mistakes. Moments of wanting and weakness are normal.

7 **Was it difficult to tackle such weighty themes?**

It was, but the book is rooted in history. I owe it to my ancestors to bear witness.

The scenes where Solenne is manipulated, adultified, and put into sexual situations were especially difficult to write because they were written from a place of experience. Because of bias, I knew some would see Solenne, a wonderfully flawed Black girl who was never given space to come of age in a healthy way, and find a resting place for blame. They would see her as less innocent or complicit in her abuse. So I pulled the curtain aside to show the dark truth of power imbalances. I reminded the reader who Solenne is: A child who was never allowed to be a child.

8 **Why did you structure the book into dual timelines?**

The Blueprint has a propulsive plot, but it is primarily a character study. After the first drafts that consisted of a single timeline, I recognized that Solenne needed both time and space on the page. Her worldview wouldn't have been easily understood without exploring what led her to hold so steadfast to her beliefs about love and abandonment. Her earlier timeline is arranged in snapshots—an album of interconnected memories that shaped her. Her later timeline asks and answers whether she will have emotional or physical freedom.

Told in four interludes from 1800s Louisiana, Henriette's story provides a thematic glue that holds the narrative in place.

On Worldbuilding

The Blueprint is set in an alternate United States. Why 2030? Why Texas?

I know Texas. I live in this battleground of reproductive freedom. Setting the story in Texas while collating the past with the present highlights hypocrisy and underscores the history of the forgotten handmaids. It is a signal to the reader. Listen. Pay attention. Women suffer when the government clenches its fist around women's rights. Because of intersectionality, Black women bear the main force of it.



"Returning the Chains"

Whitney Plantation

"My ma had fifteen children and none of them had the same pa... My ma had one boy by her moss that was my missis brother's child. You see, every time she was sold she had to take another man. Her had fifteen children after she was sold de last time."

—Julia Woodrich

Did you consider writing historical fiction rather than dystopian?

Briefly, but with historical fiction, there is the ability to create distance. Setting the story in a world that looks like our own forces the reader to use present day morality to understand the psychological turmoil enslaved girls experienced. It forces readers to ask themselves difficult questions.

What message do you hope the reader walks away with?

We never had the luxury of disconnecting ourselves from history. We need to ask ourselves the difficult questions often—the first, how much has changed? Time will unfold in our children's hands. What moments, what future will we place within their grasp?

Biography

Rae Giana Rashad holds an M.Ed in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Texas at Arlington. A native Texan, she lives in the Dallas area with her husband and children. *The Blueprint* is her first novel.



"There is freedom in releasing the words captured along the journey of a long fight." —*The Blueprint*



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