A CONVERSATION WITH DELIA OWENS

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What is your debut novel, *Where the Crawdads Sing*, about?

Where the Crawdads Sing is a mystery, a love story, and a courtroom drama, but it is primarily about self-reliance, survival, and how isolation affects human behavior. Since our species is a social mammal, we have strong genetic tendencies to belong to a group of tightly bonded family and friends.

But what happens if a young girl—such as the novel's heroine, Kya—finds herself alone without a group? Of course, she feels lonely, threatened, insecure, and incompetent. Kya also behaves strangely, hiding behind trees when she sees others on the beach and avoiding the village. She ventures deeper into the wilds of the marsh, away from people, and in so doing begins to learn life's lessons directly from the natural world. This organic guidance, along with instinctual behaviors born from isolation, allow her to survive and protect herself. But much more than that, the confidence she gains from self-reliance permits her to soar with personal achievements beyond what she could imagine.

The novel explores how isolated individuals behave differently from normal and how much we change when rejected by others. On their own and excluded, humans often revert to behaviors that resemble those of early man, who survived eons ago on the savannas, or of wild creatures who still live "way out yonder where the crawdads sing."

In the novel, the North Carolina coastal marsh is itself almost a character. What made you choose this setting for your story?

The coastal marsh of North Carolina, and Nature in general, is definitely a character of the novel. As one line of the story reads, "Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother." After her family left her, Kya had no one but Nature to teach her about life, and there is no better teacher if we take the time to observe and listen to the wild. Kya honed her skills of harvesting mussels by watching the crows; she learned about dishonest signals from fireflies; she learned about loyalty and friends from the seagulls.

I chose the coastal marsh because I was somewhat familiar with it and knew other marshes and swamps of the southern states very well. When I was girl, I went canoe camping with my mother in the Okefenokee Swamp and other wild places.

Other important reasons I chose the North Carolina marsh: Very little has been written about the historical population of people who lived within these untamed deltas and estuaries for more than four hundred years. These hardy souls were a mishmash of mutinous sailors, castaways, debtors and fugitives, and runaway and freed slaves. They ignored whatever laws—British, provincial, or American—ruled at the time, living off the land and scrapping like muskrats over their staked-out claims. Kya was born in the 1940s and probably would represent one of the last true marsh people, who lived for generations in their own nation of land and water.

(Note: I in no way want to forget the Native American populations who lived here for many more hundreds of years than anyone. But they are not the ones I write of in the novel. They were civilized and lived by a social order with strong families and laws.)

Another reason for choosing this marsh is that although it is a wild place, it is conceivable that Kya could have survived on her own. Collectable food was bountiful, as she shows us so well; temperatures are mild; hiding places abundant. And companions like Jumpin' and Mabel are not too far away.

Tell us a little bit about the main character, Kya Clark. She is abandoned by her family at age ten, is rejected and scorned by the town locals, and faces obstacles that would be unimaginable to many of us today. How is she able not only to survive her circumstances but also build a satisfying life for herself?

Kya is every little girl and one in a million. Kya is all of us. She represents what we can be when we have to be. I believe in her with all my heart. I believe all of us can do more than we can imagine when life requires it.

I was careful to write her survival in a realistic and believable way. To me, the story had to be feasible. I purposely kept Pa around until Kya was ten, an age at which she was capable of gathering food and firewood, cooking, and boating in the marsh and sea. And of course, by then she could run or hide from anyone. So by the time she was truly alone, it was quite possible for her to survive on her own abilities.

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And like all of us, she is intelligent and capable. The lives of the marsh creatures fascinated her, so she started collecting shells and feathers, learning Nature's lessons as she went. Since she had no friends or family, her only entertainment was to observe, collect, and record the wondrous fantiwild around her. And in so doing, she learned a tremendous amount about natural history, and her mind and talents developed. With those in hand, she was able to become a true naturalist and publish numerous reference books. Her collections of marsh life grew into the most complete and profound of its kind. A true and satisfying work of life—hers and the marsh's.

But let's not forget. Kya was also adventuresome, witty, and spunky. And full of love. Once she has the chance to be with others, some of her more hidden traits begin to shine.

Kya grows up in solitude and isolation. Have your experiences as a researcher in remote areas of Africa informed your creation of this character?

Much of my adult life—more than twenty-three years—was spent in either extreme or partial isolation. For one seven-year period, I lived in the Kalahari Desert with one other, and we were the only two people in an area the size of Ireland. (There were a few bands of roving Bushmen to the south, but so remote we never saw them.) In the Luangwa, I had my own camp in a very isolated spot, meaning that for twenty-three years I was isolated. Even now in Idaho I usually see other people only once or twice a week.

So yes, most definitely, my experiences created Kya. I know what it is like to be alone. To make friends with baboons and brown hyenas because there are no other girl friends around. I know how isolation can make you feel insecure and inadequate. What it is like to avoid people when you go to town because you don't belong.

However, I also know how your confidence soars when you learn how to track a cougar across sand or recognize a deer's alarm call. When you can live in the wild—start a campfire in pouring rain and find your way in the dark—you truly believe in yourself. You may still be lonely and feel awkward around other people, but you can do much more than you ever thought possible.

All of this is Kya: Alone, unsure, awkward around people, but strong, capable, knowledgeable, and very spunky on her own. And in the end, the confidence she gains from self-reliance in nature gives her the strength to thrive in man's world.

You spent decades researching two groups of mammals with strong matriarchal social structures. Are there similarities and differences in your observations of these animals and how humans behave?

My research and many other studies have shown us that most social mammals, such as most primates, elephants, lions, hyenas—live in tightly bonded groups of females. Males emigrate from their natal group when they reach adolescence to search for other females to mate with. Otherwise, they would only have relatives with which to breed. But the females remain in their group for all of their lives, so that the pride, troop, or herd is made up of closely related or bonded females.

While observing lions, brown hyenas, and elephants in the wild, I became fascinated with how much their social behavior is like our own. Of course, these groups of females evolved because of the survival advantages, such as being the anti-predator. With forty baboon moms looking for leopards, there's a better chance the cat will be seen. And then you have forty moms alarm-barking and mobbing the leopard until it runs away. Another benefit is territorial defense. A group of bonded females within a troop can chase smaller groups from their range, keeping the best fruit trees for themselves.

But everything is not all hunky-dory in these groups. There is almost as much discord among the females as there is camaraderie. High-ranking female baboons fight over dominance to the point of inflicting wounds. They form cliques of strongly bonded individuals who harass lesser individuals and chase them from fruit trees. Lionesses feeding at a kill swat, snarl, and clobber one another's bloody faces. You would never guess these were the same pride mates that just hours earlier sprawled in an easy pile, licking one another's chins.

The troop, pride, pack, or herd evolved for the survival benefits, not the companionship. Sisterhood does occur, but is not the only driving force. So yes, they remind me a lot of us. Stay in the group for what it is worth, but watch your back. Still, the relationships between the females of human and other mammal groups are some of the most precious, loving,

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IN FACT, IT WILL BE A CHORUS."

and enduring relationships we have during our lives. And we suffer, as Kya did, if we are denied this honor.

What were the challenges of incorporating poetry into the story?

It was great fun to incorporate poetry into the novel. The challenge was to reveal Kya's feelings without giving away the answer to the mystery.

The novel touches on race and environmental issues. Why was it important to you to include these aspects in the book?

I think it would be very difficult to write a novel based in the 1950s and '60s about a young white woman who is befriended and protected by an older African American man and not touch on racism. Or to base a book in a threatened habitat such as the coastal marsh and not at least refer to its natural significance to the Earth. I strongly believe that art and literature are two of our best means of promoting social consciousness. However, I also believe that being a novelist is primarily being a storyteller, and that whatever messages we want to convey as a writer should not interfere with the story we tell. I tried very hard to let the story itself speak of the issues and to keep my personal opinions low-key.

You've coauthored three nonfiction books. Were there surprising differences or similarities to writing fiction?

My nonfiction books followed strong story lines, with a beginning, middle, and end, so in that way the writing was similar to writing a novel. Also, the nonfiction books were character-driven—even if the main characters were lions, brown hyenas, or elephants. But of course with nonfiction there are the constraints of dates, times, and facts that must be accurate, yet these real-life events don't always flow within a good story line.

I loved the freedom of writing fiction. Of letting my imagination go as far as it would take me. You can always pull back, take a more conservative course. But why not soar for a while just to see what happens? A character can look, say, feel whatever works best for the tale. You can never do that with nonfiction.

To me writing fiction is like riding a horse through the gate and into the mountains. You take off and are never quite sure where you will end up.

You were educated in zoology and animal behavior, and the descriptions of the marsh in *Where the Crawdads Sing* seem to reflect a reverence and deep respect for even the smallest aspect of the natural world. What does a connection to nature mean for you, personally?

Nature is and always will be my best friend. She is not constant or steady, but ever present. She is always there to soften a blow, to hold me, to teach me, to forgive me. She stays when others go. She makes me laugh and cry and teaches me everything I need to know. She is blue skies and rain. Mountain and valley. A hard rock to stand on and soft moss to lie on.

As I wrote in another book, "By nature, Nature gives." Every single thing we need comes from her, but we abuse her, starve her, forget her. She will be here long after we are gone, and we will once more be absorbed into her core. Hopefully this will remind us of what we forgot for a while—that we have been part of her all along.

Do crawdads really sing?

Technically, scientifically, crawdads do not sing. But I've made a bit of a study of it myself. And I've found that first you must go—all by yourself—and set up a small camp in real wilderness. I'm speaking of a place far from any road or village. Not a park, but a remote and wild land filled with Earth's creatures. Just before dusk, you must walk deep into the woods and stand there exposed and totally alone as darkness descends around you. When you can feel the planet beneath your toes and the trees moving about, you must listen with all your ears, and—I promise—you will hear the crawdads sing. In fact, it will be a chorus.

Kya falls in love with two very different men. Did these distinctive characters have any meaning for the story?

To me, Kya's first love, Tate, represents the sensitive, "evolved human male." He shares opera with his father and loves poetry. He is strong and manly, but is kind, intelligent, and caring. Of course, he makes mistakes, but tries to also make amends. He loves deeply and truly.

On the other hand, Chase is the raw, "unevolved" male who flashes his secondary sexual characteristics—such as his fancy ski boat—in order to attract one female after another. He is not very different from a buck deer in rut. He doesn't care who he hurts along the way as long as he can be with as many females as possible.

Kya, as many mammal females would, falls for both, but in the long run she makes the intelligent—evolved human—choice for the right one.