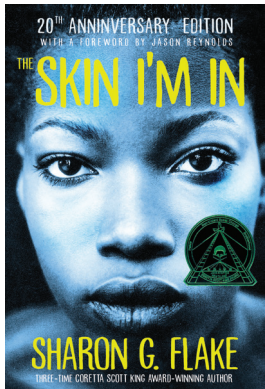


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The Skin I'm In Turns 20

Sharon Flake wrote her Coretta Scott King–winning debut, *The Skin I'm In*, 20 years ago, and in those two decades, it's remained as vital and empowering for readers as when it first appeared. To celebrate its twentieth anniversary, Disney is publishing a new



edition with a foreword by Jason Reynolds that succinctly captures the enduring appeal of Flake's novel: "Before incredible movements and monikers like *Black Girls Rock*, *Black Girl Magic*, and *Well-Read Black Girl*, there was *The Skin I'm In*, which is not just a book, but a platform for young people—especially the Maleekas of the world—to stand on, chin up, shoulders

back, voices lifted, beaming." We talked with Flake about the book's lasting impact, relevance, and urgent importance today.

BKL: What's it been like to revisit the book for the twentieth anniversary of its debut?

FLAKE: For me, it hasn't been a revisit because it's still my most popularly requested book. People meet me usually through Maleeka, and they tell me about their lives and their transformations through her. Even though *The Skin I'm In* was first published when I was 42, young people helped me to grow up through that book. As they were finding their voices through the novel and the character, I was finding my own voice. I hear from people when they first read it in elementary school, and then I might hear from them on the way to college. Somebody just wrote me that she's a mother, and she grew up on the book, and she's going to get it for her kid.

BKL: What do you think of Jason Reynolds' lovely foreword to the new edition?

FLAKE: My editor told me, "You're gonna cry when you get it," and she was right. Not everybody nails what your hope is for a book, but he did. His foreword is a reminder that, when you write a book, it has wings. It floats around the planet like a butterfly, and it lands wherever it will. And you may never know the impact that it's had, but every once in a while, that butterfly flies back to you and lets you know.

BKL: Tell us about the book's continued popularity.

FLAKE: One thing I get asked a lot is, "Why has the work sustained itself for so long?" And I finally think I am able to

articulate it: everybody wants to fit in, and everybody wants to be liked. Everybody wants to be able to speak up for themselves when the time comes. Everyone wants their talent to be recognized. And no one wants to be bullied, belittled, beat down, for being who they are. Those things everybody wants come through the storytelling, through the characters, through the journey of Maleeka, and you get kids all over the planet seeing themselves in her, which I think is an amazing thing.

We can't always explain why a generation would decide to take up a book, and when that happens, in a sense, the book becomes bigger than the writer. Even now, someone will tell me something about the book or their interpretation of it, and it's something I never thought of.

Let's face it—black kids are not the most beloved people in this country. We watch them get shot, and we don't do a whole lot about it. We watch them struggle in schools that don't serve them well. They're not the most beloved kids on this planet. So I don't consider it a small thing that you have this kind of global embrace of this character, Maleeka, and people say that *this* girl knows my story. And to have shepherded in a book that does that . . . It feels humbling and it feels amazing at the same time, and I'm sure I'll never top it. And that's OK.



Sharon Flake