

(Intro)

Layla: I'm Layla Saad, and my life is driven by one burning question: How can I become a good ancestor? How can I create a legacy of healing and liberation for those who are here in this lifetime and those who will come after I'm gone? In my pursuit to answer this question, I'm interviewing change-makers and culture-shapers who are also exploring that question themselves in the way that they live and lead their life. It's my intention that these conversations will help you find your own answers to that question too. Welcome to Good Ancestor Podcast.

Dawnie Walton is the author of the incredible debut novel, *The Final Revival of Opal & Nev*. Born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida, and currently residing in Brooklyn, New York, Dawnie earned her MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop and holds a journalism degree from Florida A&M University. In this conversation, we talk about Dawnie's journey from a journalist and editor at Essence Magazine and Entertainment Weekly to pivoting to her true love, fiction writing, and the choices she made along the way to pursuing this dream. *The Final Revival of Opal & Nev* is a fictional oral history that tells the story of a beloved rock and roll duo who shot to fame in the 1970s New York and the dark, fraught secret that lies at the peak of their stardom. *Opal & Nev* is our Good Ancestor Book Club Selection for the month of May. To join us in the book club, visit [goodancestorbookclub.com](http://goodancestorbookclub.com).

Hello, everybody, and welcome back to Good Ancestor Podcast. I'm your host, Layla Saad, and I am here with our newest book club author, author of the amazing book, *The Final Revival of Opal & Nev*, Dawnie Walton. Dawnie, I'm so excited to have you here. I'm so excited for our book club members to be reading your book. Welcome to the podcast.

Dawnie: Layla, thank you so much. It's an honor to be here.

Layla: It's an honor to be in conversation with you, especially after basically inhaling this book and then getting to ask you all about it. I'm definitely, you know, like all authors are, we love reading other people's books and just wanting to dissect all the meanings of it and everything so I'm excited to be in conversation with you.

Dawnie: So excited to talk with you about all the themes that your podcast covers, you know, community, ancestry. All those things have been so meaningful to me on this debut journey.

Layla: I'm so happy to hear that. All right, so let's kick off with our first question and I'm really intrigued to actually hear your answer to this question, especially, you know, based on what this book is about. Who are some of the ancestors, living or transitioned, familial or societal, who've influenced you on your journey?

Dawnie: So the first one I'll say is one that I'm sure you hear quite a bit and there's actually an illustration of her hanging behind me on my wall in my office and the first one is Toni Morrison. As a writer, of course, you know, her work is something I return to again and again because, when I first read her novels, I was very young, I think too young to really fully understand and absorb everything that was happening in them so I have been slowly working through her oeuvre as an adult, I just re-read *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* last year, but I do want to talk for a minute about Toni Morrison as a sage —

Layla: Yes.

Dawnie: — for future writers like me, because writing can be a very scary and vulnerable thing and I think writing requires courage, especially for black writers who are faced with certain pressures and expectations and critique and questions and whenever I need courage, whenever I need a challenge, whenever I need a reminder of who exactly it is I aim to center in my work, I go to YouTube and I call up interviews with Toni Morrison and I listen to her talk about defying the white gaze, which is something that can be difficult to do, you know? It is freeing yourself of what Toni Morrison has called, you know, that white male critic that sits on your shoulder and is questioning whether what you're doing is important or meaningful and so I return to Toni Morrison again and again to remind myself of that mission. So, Toni Morrison is the first. The second I will say is black women in rock and roll generally, who gave me the thing that I always yearned for when I was a teenager and that's a reflection of myself and the kinds of music that I was drawn to, for whatever mysterious reasons that I'm still interrogating in my work, but, you know, Big Mama Thornton and Betty Davis and someone that we've been talking a lot about in the States recently, Tina Turner. There was a wonderful documentary about Tina recently and it was a reminder that her triumph is not just overcoming and escaping her abusive partner but it's also redefining herself for herself. And, being a late bloomer, because I'm a late bloomer as well, you know, I had a whole career as a journalist before I turned to my dream of writing fiction and, as an artist who really stepped into her own in her forties, I really admire Miss Tina Turner for that. And then the third is very personal to me but it's both of my grandmothers who I dearly wish were here in this moment. My maternal grandmother, Bernice Cooper Falk, and my father's mother, Louise Elizabeth Walton. I miss their warmth. They were both avid readers, very different women but loved good stories and loved me dearly and would be so proud if they could see everything that's happening right now.

Layla: Oh, my gosh. I love that so much, especially what you said about your grandmothers because I feel that very deeply. Both of my grandmothers have also passed and I feel that very, very deeply. And I also love what you said about being a late bloomer, because, even though Toni Morrison had a prolific career as an editor, you know, her writing career, in terms of being a writer, that was a second part of her life when she started that journey and yet she gifted us so many novels and I'm also working my way through her books at the moment as well and just, you know, you read her words and it's like, "This person was a person who actually existed? This was a real person?" You know?

Dawnie: It feels — it's a very inspiring standard but also it feels impossible because you're thinking, "How was she doing this?" You know? She was an editor at Random House, she was a mother with two boys, and she said that she always kept her door open to her sons and that she managed to write so brilliantly and prolifically is incredible.

Layla: She really is. Truly, truly is. So, the second ancestors that you talked about were black women in rock more broadly, which brings us on to talking about *Opal & Nev*. So, I want you to — if you can briefly just share what this book is about and then we're going to track back to hear about your story before this novel, but it's good to give people context, so tell us about *The Final Revival of Opal & Nev*, your debut novel and I am blown away, you know?

Dawnie: Well, in a way, I feel like it's a book that I have been writing my whole life. So, *The Final Revival of Opal & Nev*, it's a fictional oral history. It's about an interracial rock and roll duo. That would be Opal, who is a black woman, born and raised in Detroit, and Nev, who is a white Englishman, born and raised in

Birmingham, and they make weird rock and roll together in New York City in the early 1970s and the book follows their rise and their fall and some of the secrets that come to light as they consider reuniting in 2016 for a tour, and so you have two separate timelines. There's an early 1970s timeline and then the 2016 timeline and the bridge between the timelines is the journalist who is curating this story. Her name is Sunny and she has a very personal tie to the launch of Opal and Nev and it's not a spoiler to say it because it's the very first line of the book. Her father was Opal and Nev's drummer and he was killed during a racially motivated riot at a 1971 Opal and Nev concert when Opal lodges a protest against a rival band who brandishes the Confederate flag during their shows. And so Sunny is trying to learn more about the father she never knew because he was killed before she was born, just before she was born, but also sort of dealing with her complicated relationship toward Opal who has been a bit of a heroine for her her whole life and so as she learns more about the complications of this figure, everything gets a little more fraught.

Layla: Yeah. And it is just an incredible novel. I really want to encourage everyone to pick it up and read it. If you want to join us in the Good Ancestor Book Club, we will be studying this book. You can go to [goodancestorbookclub.com](http://goodancestorbookclub.com). Join us. We will be live in conversation with Dawnie at the end of the month discussing, asking her questions about the characters, really going into the spoilers that you so carefully tried to avoid in that description and that I will also be doing my best to avoid in this conversation as well but it really is just a novel that — it's written in a novel way so let's start there. I remember opening it up, I had no preconceptions about what it was, you know, I'd just seen the cover, read the blurb, and was about to just dive in and I start reading the very first thing which is the editor's note and I'm reading it and I'm going, "Wait, what? Is it — wait. Is this Dawnie's editor? Who is this? Who is —" Then

I'm like Googling Opal and Nev to see if they were real people and I just hadn't realized it, right? So, I'm reading and I'm like, "Oh, no, this is how it's written. This is the style." It is not written in a traditional format, and I think that really speaks to your own journey as well. I know you started off — well, prior to where you are now, you were at Essence Magazine. Tell us about your journey and why you chose the specific journalistic format that you did for this book.

Dawnie: Sure. For 20 years, before I started writing this novel, I was a journalist. As you said, I worked for Essence. I also worked for Entertainment Weekly, I worked for Life, and, especially at Entertainment Weekly, we used the oral history format which is basically allowing the people at the center of a story to speak very directly, raw, you know? It's a series of interviews. And what we loved about using the format there was that it allows a lot of different voices to overlap and it was a really fun way to tell the stories of films or television shows or albums that everybody loves, things that feel iconic, you know? And I wanted the reader to feel Opal and Nev as, (a), real people, and, (b), sort of larger than life and deserving of this kind of treatment, that there would be a lot of different kinds of people talking about them and having opinions about them and their influence. And it's a very structured format in some ways but I thought that kind of having some structure in that way allowed me to go wild within the lines of that and just let my characters be as bold and raw as possible and I loved kind of creating this chorus of voices, you know? Of course, my main characters, the title characters, but everyone around them, from Opal's stylist to the owner of the record label to the secretary of the record label to Opal's sister, you know, who she grew up with in Detroit. So, it was a really fun format to also try to explode a little bit and so the editor's notes that you talk about are sort of interruptions by the Sunny journalist character and she sort of breaks in and gives the reader a little

more context and some personal color and she gives glimpses of these figures as older people, kind of 45 years removed from these incidents that launched them into the spotlight. And it was just a great — it was just great fun to use this form.

Layla: Well, I really like how it was arranged in that it seemed like the characters were responding to what the others were saying but, actually, in Sunny's way of composing the book, she interviewed them all separately and didn't share what anyone else had said, right? So it was very interesting. I was sort of seeing it documentary style in my head, the way that you see different voices featured and they're sort of building a storyline but, actually, each person is just sharing their experience, their witnessing of what was happening. I found that really fascinating.

Dawnie: And Sunny is the one who's curating it. In a way, she is also telling the story even though she wasn't there, she wasn't born for most of the events, she's the one that's sort of tying everything together and picking and choosing what are the things she's using to tell the story and I thought that that was a fascinating thing to create a character that the reader, even when she's not on the page, she's there because you know who the characters are speaking to and so sometimes when they say shocking things about her father, you know, you're kind of thinking, "Oh, my — like they're saying this to her?" You know?

Layla: Yes.

Dawnie: And I liked that effect very much.

Layla: I did too. I did too. So, I'm thinking about your own journey as a journalist and this being your debut novel, tell us about how did the shift come for you, that leap into something I'm assuming, just from the way that this book is written and

how you've poured yourself into it, was something that has been burning inside for quite a long time. Writing journalistic style is very different to writing a full-bodied story in this way. Tell us about that transition.

Dawnie: Yeah. I was always a very practical kid, I will say, and that's not anything that my family put on me but it was just in my nature to think, "Well, I love to write and so how can I have a steady career where I make money and write?" And so I always, from my high school years, you know, I was the editor of my school newspaper and I went to journalism school and then I went into journalism, worked in newspapers and websites and magazines. It was always very kind of straight and narrow. But I always still loved writing fiction and I would do it for myself, never submitting anything, but just having fun and playing with different ideas. And then, in 2013, I went through some shifts in my personal life and those shifts caused me to question a lot of how I had been living my life and getting older and more reflective and really thinking, "What do I want the rest of my life to look like?" And part of that is because, at the time, I was working at Essence Magazine, which is, of course, the iconic, wonderful brand for black women, and every day, every month, every year at the Essence Festival where we met our audience, I was encountering black women who were doing amazing and inspiring things with their lives and that spirit started to rub off on me. And I loved my work, I loved my co-workers, but it was time to try something else and probably the last couple of years that I was working in Essence, I was working on *Opal & Nev* as well.

Layla: Wow.

Dawnie: I was waking up at five in the morning when it was still dark outside and quiet and before e-mail start blowing up and texts and I was using that time in the morning and sometimes

late at night as well, if I had energy, to work on my fiction, and, after a while, working on the edges of my day just became more dissatisfying because I felt for the first time that I was really on to something that was interesting with this book. And I had a friend who was a writer and was sharing with me all the different opportunities that there are in the literary community in terms of fellowships and things like that and he encouraged me to apply to a residency here in the States, that's a prominent residency and it's pretty competitive and I never thought I would ever get in but still, I was like, "Why not?" You know? The application fee wasn't exorbitant and, well, I might as well try, and I remember the day that I was about to hit the Submit button and my finger lingering over that button and I told myself, "If I get this, I'm going."

Layla: Wow. Yeah. Like I'm all in.

Dawnie: Yeah, I'm all in. I'm all in. Not thinking that it would actually...

Layla: Right.

Dawnie: But, Layla, it happened.

Layla: Yeah, of course, it happened. Yes. And you're speaking about the Iowa Writers' Workshop or is it — is that right?

Dawnie: This is a step before that so this —

Layla: Wow. MacDowell, okay.

Dawnie: Which is the artist residency in New Hampshire and so I was faced with a huge decision because they ask you, when you get into MacDowell, they say you can go for as few as two weeks or as many as eight and I knew that I could do the two

weeks as vacation time from my full-time job and go and enjoy it a little bit and then come back into work but I knew that two weeks wouldn't be enough.

Layla: No. I feel like two weeks is just — starting off, you're over like normal life stuff, right? Like once you're into two weeks, then you can really settle into it.

Dawnie: That's right. That's right. I had no idea what it meant to devote myself to arts full time and so you're right, the first two weeks, you know, I ended up going for six, and the first two weeks I was there, it was like I was a deer in headlights because everything felt so new and magic and it took me those two weeks to adjust to that reality —

Layla: That's right.

Dawnie: — and that beauty of it. And then, about halfway through those six weeks, I said, "This is not enough either. I need more," and that's when I decided to apply to Iowa.

Layla: Amazing, amazing. And we know former podcast guest, Kiley Reid, the best-selling author of the book, *Such a Fun Age*, was also at Iowa. Were you there at the same time?

Dawnie: We were. We overlapped for one year. She came the year after me.

Layla: That's incredible. It's amazing. And so, shifting from, you know, as we said, writing as a journalist is, yes, there's a viewpoint that you instill into the stories that you're telling but, really, it's about serving the purpose of the magazine, right? It's not just you going off on a tangent on things that you want to write about. Shifting from that to, "I am devoting my time fully to telling the story that I want to tell and opening myself up to

where it might lead me as well,” was there fear there? Were there feelings of trepidation? I mean, what was that like?

Dawnie: Yes, absolutely. As you said, when you write for a publication, you are often taking on that publication’s voice and that publication’s — “agenda” is a weird word to say because it’s not necessarily the agenda but the things that are important or interesting to that publication is what you are paid to do.

Layla: Right.

Dawnie: Now I had to trust myself. I had to trust my own interests and my own curiosities and I think — when I think back on that, I think my late blooming was for a reason.

Layla: Tell me about that.

Dawnie: I think it was to gain the confidence that I had in my voice and my interests and I think those things take time to develop, where you can get to a point where you have faith in yourself and you know what it is that you’re trying to do and trying to say.

Layla: That’s right.

Dawnie: And so when you go into, say, a workshop situation, you’re very clear about what kind of feedback you are looking for, what kind of feedback you are listening to, because your gut knows what path you’re following, right? And so that feedback is to hone that path, not to knock you off of it but to clarify it —

Layla: That’s right.

Dawnie: — more strongly.

Layla: There's so much to be said on what you've just said, being able to come from that place of really knowing that, as I submit myself to this process and put myself really in this space where people are able to read things that I'm still in process of writing and able to give me feedback, I'm open to the feedback but I also know what it is that I'm trying to say and what it is that I'm trying to do and that is powerful and I'm thinking about you, Toni, myself, Opal and that journey of really, really getting clear within yourself, "Who am I? What is important to me? What is my unique way of showing up in the world? How can I own that no matter what anyone says?" And then specifically, being the subject often of the white gaze, of the male, white gaze, and all of the stereotypes and assumptions and all those manner of things that are placed on us to own your voice and to say, "No, this is who I am. This is what I know to be true about myself and my artistry," is so, so powerful.

Dawnie: Yeah. It was incredibly powerful. And, again, I don't know that I would have been in that place if I were younger and still searching for those things.

Layla: I was going to say, do you also feel that having come from a publication that really did center black women, was that also influential in helping you build up that sense of confidence within yourself?

Dawnie: Absolutely. I wanted to write this book for black women. I was writing this book for myself, you know? I am a black woman who has many interests and obsessions and that was my primary goal, to always speak to us, and this novel has gotten many beautiful, wonderful, flattering reviews but I tell you, when I get a tweet from just a reader, a black woman reader, who says, "I feel seen. I feel that this is a part of my

story,” those are the things that mean so much to me and are the reason why I wanted to do this book because there is also art in which I felt seen and reflected and those moments were revelations to me as a woman and an artist.

Layla: I love that, and talking about, you know, feeling seen, I mean, anytime that I read a book that the viewpoint and the people who are being centered are black women, I always feel seen, regardless of whether they are like me or not like me, but this character, the protagonist, Opal, in this book, is a, you know, what we would class as like “weird black girl,” right? Doesn’t fit into anyone’s boxes, you know? Punk artist ahead of her time and really not understood by many communities, whether they are white or black, you know? You talked about like the ancestors who have influenced you on your journey, black women in rock. As I was reading it, I was like, “What is Dawnie’s music tastes?” Like I’m wondering why did she write this character who sings this kind of music and that’s who she is? I’m fascinated to know.

Dawnie: I grew up in a family of music aficionados. My grandparents loved the jazz vocalists, you know, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughan. My parents were in their twenties in the ’70s so that’s, I think, that’s partly why I’m always interested in the ’70s because I think my parents are amazing, I love them very much, and they always had music in our house, you know? Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, some of the conscious soul so there was always for me a real curiosity about music and when I was a teenager, there was the golden age of hip-hop which I was learning about hip-hop and exposed to hip-hop a lot through my older cousin, Mike, with whom I was really close growing up but I also was fascinated by things that felt taboo. You know, as a teenager, like you feel a little bit curious about those things and, for me, that was alternative rock, indie

rock, honestly, a lot of the post punk bands out of the United Kingdom.

Layla: Name a few.

Dawnie: Oh, yeah, sure —

Layla: So one of the people I was thinking of when I was reading Opal, I was like, “Oh, this reminds me of Skin from Skunk Anansie, like that’s who I had in my mind so I’m curious who are those bands for you?”

Dawnie: Definitely a bit of Skin in her but I also, you know, I loved The Cure and Stone Roses and a bunch of bands that I loved the music but the problem was, there weren’t many black women in that scene. I didn’t see myself reflected and that is something that I think I would have really benefited from as a teenager and so what I wanted to do in writing Opal is create a character that would have been almost like a superhero to me. I would have had her pinned up to my bedroom wall. And the reason why she would have been heroic for me is that she made the kind of music that excited me in a different way; she was cool and messy, like rock stars tend to be; she was witty and political; but most important for me was that she had no confused identity. She could hold all the pieces of herself together in a way that I didn’t learn how to do that until, honestly, I went to a historically black college and learned that I can be and like and enjoy whatever I want and nothing of that would ever mean that I was not also black and proud to be black and that is the thing that I wanted to make very clear about Opal.

Layla: I love that. And so we have Opal, we’ve spoke about a lot in this conversation, but then we have Nev who is the complete polar opposite in every single way imaginable. Why was it

important to have them be so different from each other in terms of how we physically see them? There's obviously a lot that they have in common, sort of just on a soul level. I think both feel like misunderstood, weird kids who just want to create their own universe but, on the face of it, you look at them and you're like these two things don't go together.

Dawnie: You know, I wanted it to feel somehow really different and a bit provocative and the interesting thing is that there are so many black women in rock and roll but they have played off in background. So, it was really important for me to get Opal and Nev to a level where, at least for a brief period, they are partners, clear partners, and when I was first writing, I was talking about the idea with friends and my short pitch was imagine if Grace Jones and David Bowie made music together, right? In this era of New York City that I'm really fascinated by and Grace Jones and David Bowie are, again, very outwardly opposite but they also have some things in common —

Layla: Definitely.

Dawnie: — almost to the point where, when I made that pitch, my friends would say, “You mean they didn't make music together?”

Layla: Right, right. Right, right. I was thinking more Grace Jones and Ed Sheeran, you know, like...

Dawnie: Yes. I've heard Ed Sheeran a lot.

Layla: But I think the music sensibility of Nev is more like David Bowie, though.

Dawnie: A little more, yeah.

Layla: Yeah.

Dawnie: I like what you said about, you know, the fact that they are outward opposites but they do have some things in common that bind them together and I liked exploring that. I liked exploring how them feeling outcast in their childhoods, how that would, you know, manifest in each kind of differently as they get older and as they experience fame and sometimes infamy together and then I also liked this idea of exploring ambition in both of them because both characters are hugely ambitious but one would do anything and the other would not and that becomes a key differentiator between them.

Layla: I love that you said that and I'm like, okay, no spoilers, but —

Dawnie: I know.

Layla: There were parts in the book where this dynamic between the two of them at times felt like they were, yes, real partners on this journey together, but at other times felt like Opal was to Nev almost like a life raft that he was clinging on to, you know? The way that he would react when he saw her that wasn't necessarily reciprocated from her, not that she didn't care for him or anything like that, but it seemed that she was possessed just within herself, very clear that she didn't belong to anyone, nobody owned her, whereas, for him, it was almost like, "I need her in order to do this," up until the point where he decides, "No, I don't anymore."

Dawnie: Right.

Layla: Tell us about that dynamic. And, again, I'm thinking about it from the perspective of the ways in which black

women in society through time have often been that figure for white people.

Dawnie: Yes. One of the things I wanted to explore as well, I think, was power dynamics. As you say, people tend to use black women when they need us and when it's sort of lifting all boats but, however, like when there's a shift of power, then there's discomfort and resentment and that is definitely what I wanted to explore. And then also, this idea of the muse.

Layla: Yes. Speak on this, because, I mean, Opal, in herself, just in the way that she adorned herself and showed up, I mean, is a muse kind of character, but she's not. She's also just a human being.

Dawnie: That's right. She's just a human being and she feels very uncomfortable in having someone regard her in that way because she has her own dreams. What happens in that muse relationship is you sort of strip that muse figure of, you know, usually it's a woman so I'm going to say her ambition and what she is trying to do and what's important to her. It becomes a relationship where it's about, you know, you're giving me inspiration to go get to the next level and it's a messed up thing, I think.

Layla: It is, and, you know, we see that so you were talking about how the book is kind of split into these two timelines where it's in the '70s and then it's in 2016 and we see it playing out with Opal in the '70s but we see it also with Sunny in 2016. She has been promoted to be editor-in-chief at this magazine and, yet, there's things that happen and I'm like — I'm like reading the book and I'm like, "No, these are the microaggressions," right? Like she has been put into this position of power but people don't trust her, they don't think what the way — the direction that she's leading things in is

credible or right, it's leading away from canon, meaning, you know, centering white male musicians and white male storylines. Was that intentional, that sort of mirroring?

Dawnie: Absolutely intentional and I'm so glad that you saw that. I think the way that racism manifests is both similar and different and that's what I wanted to get at, as you said, with microaggressions that black people, black women face in terms of you are overqualified for the work that you do —

Layla: That's right.

Dawnie: — and you have made sure that all your t's are crossed and the i's are dotted and yet there is always within us sometimes, at least I'm speaking for myself, there can be this paranoia and sometimes it's warranted and people questioning your decisions or questioning your qualifications and assuming that you're just the diversity hire.

Layla: That's right. It's just a trend now, right? Highlight black voices, you know, black lives — it's just a trend for now.

Dawnie: That's right. And so that is something that Sunny grapples with in her career and she's finally in this position where she can take charge and she can decide the direction of this music magazine that is, frankly, the fictional magazine in the book is becoming increasingly irrelevant and speaking to an aging, very white male audience, and Sunny has exciting ideas to bring it up to where it needs to be and, yet, there are people who are very invested in the old ways that she leads and, right to her face, in a meeting that she's leading, they're questioning her and making her question herself.

Layla: If Sunny was a friend of yours and she came to you and told you about, you know, the experience that she has in the

book of being questioned and having her authority questioned and she said, “This happened and this is the BS that I had to face today at work,” what advice would you give her? And I’m asking because I know that what happened to her in this book is something that black women face all the time and we have to have a straight face about it and try not to lose our cool, but inside... What advice would you give her?

Dawnie: Listen, I am a huge advocate of therapy and finding a therapist that has experience with these kinds of things. I have a wonderful therapist who, you know, publishing is a whole, like —

Layla: That’s right.

Dawnie: — not about book publishing, right?

Layla: That’s right.

Dawnie: And kind of getting through certain things she helps me a lot with, but I think that if I had a friend in that situation, I would just remind her of what is real and what is real would be likely her qualifications, her successes, her wins. I would have, you know, that person focus on what they really feel they’re able to change and also, you know, something my therapist asked me a lot which is my own reality check and it’s the simplest question but it’s one every time she asks me, it puts my soul at ease, and that question is: Do you feel you did your best?

Layla: That’s the — I’m smiling because that’s the question I ask my daughter when she gets stressed out with work, like schoolwork, right? And I’m like, “Do you feel that you did your best? If you felt that you did your best, then that’s all that matters.”

Dawnie: That is everything. That's everything. If you feel you did your best.

Layla: Yeah. First of all, learning to have the skill of self-reflection and self-awareness instead of a detached way of being self-critical but in a way that's uplifting, right?

Dawnie: Right.

Layla: But then also trusting that that's enough and that's hard when you're the only or the first or the first and only, right?

Dawnie: Yes. And another thing, one thing that has been hugely beneficial to me is having black community in the literary world has been everything for me. We talked about Robert Jones Jr. who is part of that community.

Layla: That's right. We love Robert.

Dawnie: We love Robert, yes. Deesha Philyaw, Kiese Laymon, Dantiel Moniz.

Layla: Yeah.

Dawnie: So many writers. Black writers and writers of color. We navigate these things together and so I would say anyone who is in a similar situation to seek out those people and those voices that will remind you of who you are.

Layla: Right. I think that what you're touching on is so important there and I'm sort of reflecting on Opal at the same time that when you see black people who have achieved some level of success and publicity because of their work, their artistry has put them in certain positions and certain platforms,

it's easy to think that maybe they're not dealing with the BS anymore, right? Maybe that they have achieved themselves out of that, right? They have gained a level of power that puts them outside of that and it couldn't be further from the truth and I think a lot of times what happens is it happens more and also it's hard to know who to talk to about it, right? Who knows what you're going through and that's why therapy and building community with people who can relate and understand exactly what you're going through is so, so important because, part of it, I think sometimes is about, well, I should be grateful for the success that I have, right? So I shouldn't complain about these things that are happening. It's like, no, you deserve support always, right? Always, always.

Dawnie: Always. Always be vital to have people to reach out to and I've been very blessed that I do.

Layla: Yeah, I love that. So, I'm peeking behind you and I see a picture of James Baldwin.

Dawnie: Yes. He's with Nina Simone there.

Layla: Right, with Nina Simone and I'm thinking about Paris which features in your book. Why was that important to talk about? Black Americans, African Americans, like James Baldwin, moving there or spending time there as a way of finding respite from the way that white supremacy specifically shows up in America, in North America?

Dawnie: Yes. That chapter was really important for me in the sense that the first half of the book is a lot about building Opal up and building sort of —

Layla: Her origin story, like her superhero origin story.

Dawnie: Exactly, exactly, building the origin story and she is presenting herself as so strong and so cool and all of those things, a little bit playing with this image that we have of the strong black woman, and then toward the end of that part is sort of a very climactic moment in her career that changes everything and it is a traumatic moment for her and so the rest of the book is about showing her vulnerability and painting her as fully not just this super heroine and the Paris chapter was important for me because I thought she deserved rest and I thought she deserved pleasure in that moment and I think it was my way of, you know, reminding people that she needs this and she, at that point of the book, is only 23.

Layla: Wow.

Dawnie: So young and has this image that she's been a bit locked into, you know? It's debatable whether she plays into that, you know, in some ways, but it is what it is. It's very confining, at the same time that it is the thing that has elevated her to stardom and, as any real person would, she grapples with that. She struggles with those things. And so getting her away from a place where she felt both boxed in but important, in a way, I just wanted to take her completely across the world somewhere else that she was curious about and so that's what that chapter was for me, but it was also a way for her to step back from everything and really think about who it is that she wanted to be and what kind of artist that she was going to carry on being, what were the things that were important for her. It's meant to be a clarifying moment in the book.

Layla: Very strong themes of, gosh, just self-discovery, but also that sort of paradox of "I'm trying to define who I am so I'm going to create this image, almost this mythology about who I am and what that looks like," and she has her friend, Virgil, who helps her to build that mythology and its physical manifestation

but also, at the same time, for any human being to be locked into one definition, one dimension, and to only be that all the time and anytime you try to experiment, as she does, right? Try to experiment to sort of stretch those boundaries, more often than not, some people who hold certain privileges get to do that and the consequences for it are not huge, right? For others who don't have those same privileges, it's like failure after failure after failure and, you know, you're just not given any credibility of any kind.

Dawnie: And that is another, for me, differentiating factor between Opal and Nev is that he gets to be a bit of this chameleonic figure who can try different things and different styles, you know, because his musical journey sort of starts one way and continues in a completely more radical direction. He starts as more of a folk, folksy —

Layla: That's right.

Dawnie: — you know, more outré and radical and then sort of changes again through the course, but his label allows it, they encourage it. He kind of moves with whatever is performing well.

Layla: Right, like in vogue, whatever is — exactly, yeah.

Dawnie: Yeah, and Opal doesn't have that same privilege because people from the label executives to, in some ways, some of her fans, they expect that thing that made her big in the first place all the time, even though, you know, in my opinion, she's a true artist and she wants to express different sides of herself and in the Paris chapter, I let her do that but it's mostly for herself, not anything that allows her to break through in a different way, unfortunately. But, yeah, that

freedom to change in the public's eye is something that Nev enjoys that Opal can't.

Layla: Right. That part hit me really hard, actually, because I think we work so hard to, first of all, survive and also try to thrive, take care of ourselves, take care of our families. As creative people, we are drawn to exploring different sides of ourselves as well and experimenting and seeing how is that received and how do I feel about it, and, as an artist, as a creative person, we do require people's feedback. Like if you write a book, people have got to read it and they can tell you, you know, is this good, is it not, right? Is this something that we want more of or not? If you're a musical artist, if you're a painter, whatever it is, you require that feedback, but when that feedback, that audience, is themselves really hooked into that white gaze that Toni Morrison talked about, it gives certain people infinite possibilities and other people very limited choices and options and possibilities. And it just — it hurt my heart, because it's real, right? I wasn't like Dawnie — "Why did Dawnie do this?" Right? It was like, "This is real, this is real."

Dawnie: I felt both happy for Opal in that moment of the book that she was doing things for herself and figuring out her voice and her journey and her purpose, but then also heartbroken for her at the same time, to know that it would always be just for her or for those who were closest to her and not something that was sustainable in a more professional sense.

Layla: That's right. And it's interesting how she does get this sort of revival later on in her career through, I guess, the rise of social media and the way that things, you know, happen, right? Things always loop back around and that does happen but, yet, there is still a sense for her and for black women that I see in our lived lives where you're expected to be this icon, this queen, this super woman, right? And when you break from

that, you show weakness, pain, vulnerability, you're then labeled as any manner of things, you know? "She's a diva. She is arrogant," right? "She is so demanding. She's aggressive. She's not grateful for what she's been given." It hurts. Yeah.

Dawnie: It's a lot of different things that she is dealing with and juggling and, again, like one thing that I kept going back over and over through revisions, my agent — Robert and I actually share the same agent who is a brilliant editorial thinker and he kept saying to me, "Remember how young she is. Remember how young."

Layla: Wow. Yeah.

Dawnie: And so always having that lens of her youth and her vulnerability coursing through that always like had my heart just like aching for all of those things that you talked about.

Layla: Oh, wow. You had this hashtag on Instagram about black women in rock. I think you did a — it was earlier this year.

Dawnie: Yeah, I did it for March.

Layla: Yes. I thought so.

Dawnie: To the end of March. It was for our Women's History Month but also just the lead up to the novel coming out in the States.

Layla: Yes. I was perusing the hashtag and saw some names that I recognized and people that I saw and I was like, "Oh, yeah, okay," and others, I was like, "I've never heard of this person," and it made me curious and you have a Spotify playlist for Opal and Nev that I was listening to just before we hopped on this call but it also got me thinking about *Ma Rainey's Black*

*Bottom* that I just watched, I think, last month, and wrote a newsletter about it and this is — we're talking about within sort of music and rock music in this context, but you can apply this to any other field. There is so much brilliance that has been birthed from black women but that when it's presented by black women isn't given its due, right? But when it is taken, remixed —

Dawnie: That's right.

Layla: Right? Often by white men, then it's edgy, it's something new, it's innovative, right?

Dawnie: Yeah. Or it's rock and roll and that, you know, I mean, a lot of black women who have rock spirit or are actually making rock and roll music are not called as such.

Layla: Right. What do you see them being called? How are they usually labeled under?

Dawnie: I will say that a lot of them are iconic background singers. I think about women like Merry Clayton who duets with Mick Jagger on "Gimme Shelter," one of the biggest rock and roll songs, anthems of our time, a song that she really makes special and unique and the fact that, you know, Merry Clayton made an album, a solo album — a few solo albums, actually, but I'm thinking of one in particular, I think her self-titled solo debut that spanned many different genres, including rock and roll. I mean, she was covering rock and roll songs, but it just went nowhere. I don't know if that's because it wasn't supported by the label but the artist Santigold has talked a lot about being miscategorized. You know, she sees herself as a rock and roll artist but she's sort of been placed in a soul context or R&B context, which I'm sure like there are blurry lines, that's the problem with these things, but it seemed

people go out of their way to exclude rock and roll a lot from what those many genres are, what those many influences are.

Layla: What do you think it is about rock and roll that people feel like it belongs specifically to white people, specifically to white men? What do you think it is about that specific genre — like we're allowed to do pop music, obviously hip-hop and R&B, that's our forte, right? Even some country music, not so much, but rock and roll is not seen as black.

Dawnie: Right. I wish I knew the answer to that beyond just things, especially in the United States, are very racialized generally, very categorized, and I think that there's been a lot of erasure and a lot of co-opting because the ironic thing is that rock and roll is born of the blues, it's born of gospel, it's born of R&B. It's all of the things and when you have, you know, Elvis Presley doing his version of "Hound Dog" which was originally performed by Willie Mae Thornton, it's suddenly something different and it is actually, lyrically, the Elvis version is a lot less rock and roll, in my opinion, than Willie Mae Thornton's version which is —

Layla: It also just makes less sense, like it doesn't —

Dawnie: It makes no sense. It strips the song of its meaning, of the politics, all of those things, and it becomes, you know...

Layla: Just sound right? Just something to, yeah, but it doesn't have that same meaning. Absolutely.

Dawnie: Yeah. But I have to really — I have to name check here a really brilliant nonfiction book that just came out last October, it's called *Black Diamond Queens* —

Layla: Oh, wow.

Dawnie: — by a scholar, Maureen Mahon, and it is about the history and the legacy of African American women in rock and roll and I learned so much in that book, and in the same way that you said, you know, in my black woman in rock Instagram posts, you recognize some of those people, but others were completely new to me, they were relatively new to me as well because I am still learning all the time about incredible black women in this genre. I just recently learned about Tina Bell, who was the front woman of a band in Seattle just before grunge broke. Her band was called Bam Bam and, you know, she — watching old footage on YouTube and looking at photos of her, she was incredible and she was an influence that nobody's talking about. Nobody talks about her until recently.

Layla: Right.

Dawnie: So grateful for.

Layla: On a personal note, so last year, when the pandemic started and we were all confined to our homes and my kids, I have two kids, and I needed something for them to do, we started guitar lessons and I don't come from a family that plays instruments, not on my side, not on my husband's side at all, but I'm always looking for opportunities for my kids to do things that I know when I was young was like, "Oh, that's a white people thing, like we don't do that," right? So I'm always looking for opportunities for them to do things so that they grow up not thinking that things don't belong to them. Anything belongs to them that they want to do.

Dawnie: Yes, yes.

Layla: Right? So we started guitar lessons, electric guitar, once a week. For me, as an adult learning music, it was more a coping

mechanism for like how do I keep my sanity in this pandemic, right? And I just needed something different, other. For my kids, this was like they are really into it and, you know, for myself, I did it for a few months and then decided to stop because then my work picked back up and I thought this is something that you actually have to dedicate yourself to, you can't kind of half timey do it, you have to fully do it do it, but my kids have kept with it and they love it and I've just upgraded them from the starter guitars that we were renting from the music school to their own — I bought them their own real electric guitars.

Dawnie: I love it.

Layla: So when I was showing my son the cover of your book, I was like, "That's kinda like the shape of your guitar," and he was asking me today about what is the book about and what are the characters and what do they do but it just — it was a very sweet moment for me in reading your book because this is something that, whether or not my kids want to pursue and do this as they grow into adults, that they get to have this as a part of their experience and a part of their memories is really, really important to me.

Dawnie: Thank you for sharing that. That is so meaningful. That is so meaningful. And I'm excited for your kids. I kind of want to hear them play.

Layla: Yeah. I mean, they're amazing. They're so good. And what's really cool is that they are learning about songs that we don't play, right? So, yeah, we learned a couple of Bob Marley songs, right? And that was really fun for me because I'm like, "I know these songs," right? I know the words. But there's other songs because I don't listen to rock music, I don't come from a family that listened to rock music, they were songs that I didn't

know. So we — one of the songs that we learned was Smoke on the Water, right? And that was —

Dawnie: I love that.

Layla: Yes, so that was the first song.

Dawnie: Great guitar riff.

Layla: Yes, exactly, right? So they're getting a wider — yeah, just like a more expanded worldview of music and some of the roots of it but, really, for me, as their parent, getting to see them see themselves as, "This isn't something odd or strange or different, this belongs to me too," so important.

Dawnie: Yeah. Our kids, you know, they deserve the world. They deserve everything and they deserve to understand that they are part of a legacy. We aren't always taught that legacy but there is a legacy of people like them. There's a Little Richard, there's a Jimi Hendrix, there's a Tina Turner, there's a Bette Davis.

Layla: That's right.

Dawnie: All of these people, we celebrate them through passing it on to you.

Layla: Absolutely. And I wanted to sort of end on that note, because, in the book, there is a lot of pain. There are things that happen that are very traumatizing. There's also a lot of things — and I want to talk about this more in the book club, but moments in which Opal, even understanding, "Okay, I'm a black woman in America, I know what the deal is," there are moments in the book where she is let down and she almost

wasn't expecting it and then it happens and she — "Oh, yes, of course. This is always how it is," right?

Dawnie: Right.

Layla: But we can talk about that in the book club, but I wanted to sort of end on this moment because, yes, there's a lot of pain in the book, there is the reality of racism, both there in the '70s and now, you know, there's things that are mentioned in this book that are real life things that we've been through just recently and, yet, it's not about it being this morose tale of all the terrible things that happened to this poor black woman who was just trying to, you know, find herself and build a career. I get to the end of this book and I am an Opal-stan, right? Like I'm a Sunny-stan as well for her own journey as she learns to trust herself and takes control of her narrative and her journey. Is that what you wanted to leave your readers with? I guess what I'm asking is how do you write a story that tells the truth of the pain of racism and sexism and not have it end in a way that just feels like this was a black trauma story?

Dawnie: Right. Yes. I think, as you said, I did want you to pick certain painful realities and those moments of being reminded of, "Oh, yeah, this is America."

Layla: Right.

Dawnie: This is a cyclical thing. I think my counterbalance to that was to show the love and communion between my black characters and I think this is something we can talk about more in the book club, specifically around the ending.

Layla: Yes.

Dawnie: But the connection between Opal and Jimmie, between Opel and Virgil, who Virgil is her New York family, her industry family. He is her sounding board. He is the person who is allowed to check her because he actually knows her and he understands her. Between Opal and Pearl, her sister, who bicker all the time but who Opal still looks to for counsel. When things get very hard on a concert tour, she calls her sister for advice.

Layla: Yeah.

Dawnie: And between Opal and Sunny, who have a very interesting dynamic, you know? Sunny looking at Opal as an elder and as an inspiration. All of those things, I think, bring the joy to the novel and are the heart of the novel and remind us that we have each other in these times and that, for me, was just the hopeful thing and the thing that speaks to our resilience in any context.

Layla: Yes. Oh, I love that. I love that. And I take that as medicine for how we continue to survive and sometimes thrive despite the constant onslaught of messages that black lives don't matter.

Dawnie: Right.

Layla: That we are disposable. There is that on one side, and then there's the deep love of friendship, sistership, right? Sister to sister, mentor to mentee, all of those beautiful things, peer to peer, right? All of those beautiful things.

Dawnie: And I forgot to mention Sunny's mother also. There's a moment where I bring in Sunny's mother who, of course, has a complicated take on Opal but when it comes to her daughter,

there is a love and a protectiveness that I also wanted to make sure to highlight.

Layla: Absolutely. I love that you've created this story that is both, yeah, truth but also left me feeling like, you know, it was like I was reading it wanting to get to the end because I wanted to know what happened and I want to say this as well, as I was reading it, my heart was beating so fast, by the way. You know, you're watching something and you're like, "Oh, it's gonna happen," right? My heart was like thumping so hard because I wanted to know how it was going to play out and that's a really specific skill as well is being able to like build up the tension slowly because it doesn't start out like that, right? It builds up and it builds up and it builds up and that was powerful and we can talk about that in the book club as well but it really did leave me feeling, at the end, like, yeah, I want everyone to read this book, like I want to press it into everyone's hands. Read this book, you will get so much from it. Dawnie, thank you. Thank you so much for this incredible work, for this incredible conversation. I'm curious, before I ask you my last question, so I know that you're in that phase right now of talking about the book everywhere and with everyone, which I know, after spending years writing it, working on it, very internal work, now this is the external work, this is go out and share it with the world, but this period comes to an end as well.

Dawnie: Yes.

Layla: What do you foresee on the other side of this for you as you are evolving, right? Because the Dawnie you were when you started writing this book is very different to the Dawnie you are now.

Dawnie: Very different. I'm looking forward to having some moments of quiet when I think about the thing that is going to

spark my passions like this one did and I'm kind of in downtime now. I'm kind of playing with characters because that's where it always starts for me is thinking about the people who populate something and thinking about different kinds of people and putting them together and so that's where I'm at right now is the dreaming stage and I'm looking forward to having more dedicated time, to that music stage but, yeah, I definitely want to write another novel. Yeah. I'm thinking about those characters. I'm thinking about the time period, you know? I'm kind of also obsessed with the '90s so thinking to those days of my twenties.

Layla: Right.

Dawnie: Yeah, and just seeing what happens.

Layla: I can't wait to see what comes of that dreaming period. I know whatever comes next is going to be incredible and I can't wait to read it. When you said the '90s, I was like, "I'm all in. Tell me. I'm gonna read it." All right, well, our very last question, Dawnie: What does it mean to you to be a good ancestor?

Dawnie: I have to talk about Toni Morrison again and I never get this quote quite right but she once said, you know, having success is not just a candy grab game.

Layla: Yeah.

Dawnie: Freeing yourself is freeing someone else. So it's always being open to community and reaching to people who are trying to get past the gate as well and who have stories and voices to tell that are thrilling and different and all very special and so it's being open to that and being part of it with the ones

who went before and pulling in the ones who are coming after, I think, to me is what being a good ancestor looks like.

Layla: I resonate very deeply with that so thank you for sharing that and I definitely see you doing that. I see you being supported by your own peers as well, who are several books in as well and they are pulling you right alongside with them and it's beautiful to see and I think that's definitely a duty and a responsibility that we have to each other.

Dawnie: Yes. And I would say, you know, as part of that, I'm going to say look out for Monica West coming in May, I think, her release is. Look out for Zakiya Dalila Harris, coming in June. So many wonderful writers and I'm so excited for all of us and I root for all of us.

Layla: Thank you. I do too. Thank you.

(Outro)

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