



# Terry McMillan

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*What I do know deep down, although I keep it secretly secret, is that I am terrified at the thought of losing myself again wholeheartedly to any man, because it is so scary peeling off that protective sealant that's been guarding my heart, and letting somebody go inside and walk around, lie down, look around, and see all those red flags, especially when right next to your heart is your soul, and then inside that is the rest of your personality puzzle pieces and they're full of flaws and in your grown-up years you have just finally started to recognize them for what they are one by one.*

— How Stella Got Her Groove Back

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## Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1951
- \* African-American novelist
- \* Author of *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*

## Biography

Terry McMillan was born October 18, 1951, in Port Huron, Michigan, to Madeline Washington Tilman and Edward McMillan. She was the first of five children. Her father was a sanitation worker and an abusive drunk. Her parents divorced when McMillan was thirteen; her father died three years later. Her mother worked at a variety of jobs, including as an auto worker and a pickle factory employee. She was responsible for teaching McMillan and her siblings how to be strong and resilient, and how to take risks.

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# Terry McMillan

## Biography continued

McMillan attended public schools in Port Huron and had little interest in literature as a child. The only book that was even in the house was The Bible. However, when McMillan turned sixteen, she got a job shelving books at a library for \$1.25/hour. There she discovered the Brontës, the biography of Louisa May Alcott, and James Baldwin, an unexpected surprise. She didn't know that African Americans published books. She recalls feeling embarrassed and now admits that she did not read the book because she was afraid. Eventually, she did read Baldwin, as well as other classic Black writers.

McMillan attended the University of California at Berkeley from 1973 to 1979. She graduated from there with a Bachelor's degree in journalism. While attending Berkeley, she wrote and published her first short story, "The End." After graduating she moved to New York to study film at Columbia University where she earned a Master's degree. She made her living by word processing and enrolled in a writing workshop at the Harlem Writers Guild. It was during this time that her son, Solomon Welch, was born.

During the early 1980s, McMillan battled cocaine and alcohol abuse although she has not touched either substance since. In 1988, she became associate professor at the University of Arizona. She retains her tenure there even though she now lives in Danville, CA. In 1990, she was a judge for the National Book Award for fiction. The same year, McMillan edited the anthology *Breaking Ice* to introduce other black authors to readers.

In September 1993, McMillan learned that her mother had died from an asthma attack. She was very close to her mother and her death threw her into a tailspin that lasted for months. She was too devastated to continue working on her novel *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*, which featured a loving mother similar to her own. It is not known whether she will finish that novel. McMillan was on the verge of picking herself up when her best friend, Doris Jean Austin, a New York City novelist, died of liver cancer in September 1994. Healing eventually came to Terry during an extended trip to Jamaica.



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## Biography continued

McMillan's first book, *Mama*, was published in 1987. She did all the marketing for *Mama* herself. She sent out thousands of letters, primarily to Black organizations asking them to promote her book, and she read in every black bookstore that would have her. White publishers did not support her because Terry's book was geared primarily to the Black population, and they believed that Black people did not buy books. McMillan, however, proved them wrong.

In response to *Mama*, critics praised McMillan for her realistic detail and powerful characterization of her heroine, Mildred Peacock. They loved Mildred's energy and zest for life. On the other hand, some critics found *Mama* flawed. Janet Boyarin Blundell's review in *Library Journal* says that "The book's main weakness is that the author apparently could not decide what to leave out. She also has not decided who her audience is: at times she seems to be writing to blacks, at other times to be explaining things to naive white readers. Although the story has power, it lacks focus and a clear point of view" (108). Most critics, however, thought that McMillan had promise as a writer.

Her second novel, *Disappearing Acts* (1989), did even better than her first. When reviewing *Disappearing Acts* in *Newsday*, Robert G. O'Meally speaks of McMillan as a writer: "with eloquence and style, McMillan gives her work a voice that is her own, one tough enough to break across color and class lines, daring enough to make a statement about our country and our times." Unfortunately, after its publication, McMillan was involved in a landmark legal battle. Her former living partner sued her for slander of character. He charged that the central male character was clearly himself and that the depiction was negative. Fortunately, his claim was dismissed in court.

McMillan's third novel, *Waiting to Exhale* (1992), spent months on *The New York Times* bestseller list and has sold nearly 4 million copies. It touched something in the African-American community; not since *The Color Purple* had there been so much discussion about the state of relations between African-American men and women. Some critics found it to be nothing more than a male bashing session, but the characters are fully developed and the story shows the importance of people sharing and being supportive of one another.



# Terry McMillan

## Biography continued

Frances Stead Sellers' review in *The Times Literary Supplement* supports McMillan by saying-- "But whether her views are politically correct or not, McMillan has hit a nerve. Many African-American women identify with her heroines. Using the vibrant street-talk McMillan grew up speaking, her protagonists tackle sexual issues that most women can relate to" (20). McMillan says that her writing was inspired by personal experiences of unfulfilling, explosive romantic relationships over the years, and she came to realize that many of her friends were in the same boat: educated, smart, attractive . . . and alone. This is what moved her to write *Waiting to Exhale*. The book and the movie that followed launched McMillan into the public spotlight. The movie became one of the biggest black movie events of 1995.

McMillan's latest novel, *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1996), was written in less than a month. It is the closest thing to an autobiography that McMillan has written. Stella, the main character, is like McMillan, a forty-something professional single mother of a preteen son, who's no longer in possession of her "groove." Both Stella and McMillan try to get it back during a trip to Jamaica. In the book, Stella meets and falls in love with a twenty-year-old man. This parallels McMillan's own life; she herself met and fell in love with a younger man during a trip to Jamaica, following the deaths of her mother and her best friend.

McMillan has been criticized for her writing style in *Stella*. She used free-flow sentences and paragraphs without intervening punctuation marks. She says it is reflective of the stream of consciousness which has no punctuation. She chose not to edit the sentences and paragraphs because that's the way her mind was working. Lillian Lewis' review of *Stella* in *Booklist* says that "The stream of consciousness narration that is utilized for most of this story is awkward at times" (1394). But the style is dictated by the story and the characters. The story is about freedom--freedom from being a slave to other people's opinions, views and hang-ups. The public hasn't had a problem with Terry's style of writing in *Stella*; it had a first printing of 800,000 copies in hardcover. This is unheard of for an African-American novelist. The film rights have already been sold.

It has been said that Terry McMillan has created a new literary genre with her upbeat novels about contemporary black women. McMillan says--"I don't write about victims. They just bore me to death. I prefer to write about somebody who can pick themselves back up and get on with their lives. Because all of us are victims to some extent" (Sawhill 76).



# Terry McMillan

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