

The Cushion in the Road: Meditation and Wandering as the Whole World Awakens to Being in Harm's Way

Alice Walker

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Alice Walker, too restless to retire, has a great deal more to say in meditations, essays, and letters.

In her latest collection of short prose, we learn that Alice Walker once looked forward to her retirement with an almost voracious appetite. She'd retreat, she thought, to sit upon a cushion and meditate. What she discovered instead was that the world moved forward even if she sat still, and her activist's spirit was not content to watch idly from the sidelines. She allowed herself to be swept back into the current, and these resultant meditations, essays, and letters will ingratiate her to her thirsty readership.

The collection begins by reflecting on the seminal candidacy of Barack Obama. Walker praises the then presidential hopeful in a 2008 essay as "a remarkable human being, not perfect but humanely stunning." She laments the inability of many to see beyond his skin color, champions him through the debates, and writes letters encouraging unprecedented moral fortitude once he is elected.

Beyond Obama's historic presidency are many other world issues of grave import to the conscientious Walker. She discusses womanism in a Q&A with South Korean feminists and acts as the officiant in the wedding of two male friends. She reflects, in connection to these moments, on the challenges she faced when, in 1967, she was married to a white man in the segregated South.

Also receiving focus are the tragic deaths of James Anderson, who was murdered by two white men in 2011, eerily reminiscent of mid-century lynchings, and Troy Davis, who was executed in the same year despite questions about the veracity of his conviction. Such pages are frank and heartbreaking, stirring spirits of social activism.

At moments, these essays act as a litmus test for liberalism. Those familiar with her work and activism will be unsurprised at Walker's celebration of Fidel Castro as a just and benevolent leader, or by her treatment of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Nevertheless, readers may find it difficult to reconcile some of the hyperbolic language she uses herein with an early essay's reminder about the power of words and the necessity of nuance. Walker has taken a hard-line pro-Palestinian stance in this complex situation—chapters on Israel have the flavor of invectives and can be jarring in her otherwise careful collection. Walker has garnered much criticism for her strongly articulated positions; this collection will do nothing to alleviate that.

Still, it is heartening to bear witness to Walker's fastidious and principled meditations, and a grace that her pages provide such a comprehensive overview of contemporary obstructions to human well-being. *The Cushion in the Road* is quintessential Alice Walker: edgy, demanding, prayerful, loving, and aware. It's an essential companion for those who wish to be a force for positive change in our perpetually challenging world.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Summer 2013)

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