

Interview Excerpt Transcript

Excerpt of interview with screenwriter and director, Dee Rees, on the National Public Radio program, Fresh Air. November 14, 2017.

TERRY GROSS [Program Host]: I know one of your grandmothers, or maybe it was your great-grandmother, kept a journal. Tell me who it was and also if you were able to use anything from her to help you understand the characters you were writing about in the era you were writing about.

DEE REES [Screenwriter/Director]: Absolutely. So my grandmother's name is Earnestine Smith. She was born in 1925 in Ferriday, La., and she wrote this journal or this unpublished book about, you know, her life growing up. And so she wrote about her parents picking cotton, my great-grandmother, Famie. And so she would tell me stories about how she and her little brother, Clarence, would ride on the - her mother's cotton sack and how she herself, you know, vowed she would never pick cotton. She didn't want to chop cotton. She wouldn't work as a domestic worker. She wanted to be a stenographer.

And so that's something I absolutely put in the film visually and intellectually, you know, this shot of this little girl and this little boy kind of riding backwards on a cotton sack and also the character Lilly May, Florence's daughter, I made her want to be a stenographer whereas in the book she's a singer and she can sing. You know, I injected my kind of grandmother's history and transposed that onto her because it gives this little girl a different kind of interest. And so yeah...

TERRY GROSS [Program Host]: And one of the characters says to her black people don't become stenographers (laughter) and...

DEE REES [Screenwriter/Director]: Yeah. And then the father affirms her and says, well, you'll be the first, you know? And I feel like that that was an attitude that was, you know, that pervaded, like, in my family was, like, not about the thing that you could see necessarily. The idea that you could be something that you couldn't even was, like, a huge one.

TERRY GROSS [Program Host]: So with your grandmother, like, her grandparents would have been slaves, right?

DEE REES [Screenwriter/Director]: Exactly, yes, and there's pictures of them. So I have this picture of them, Emma and Bill, and the photograph I have of them is actually taken from a larger photo of a plantation of, like, a group of slaves, so every family stood in their family group and had this picture, and then everyone cut out the square that had their members in it. So the picture I have of them is, like, an excerpt from a larger picture, so it's just a square with just their faces in it.

TERRY GROSS [Program Host]: Not everybody has photographs or writing or anything that dates back that far, you know, like, several generations back. What does it mean to you to have that evidence of your family's past?

DEE REES [Screenwriter/Director]: It's invaluable to have it. Like, my grandmother's a very meticulous, you know, organized person, you know. And the fact that she, you know, even, you know, took the time to sit down and, like, not just write, but, like, type out her experiences - there's, like, anecdotes about going to the market truck or anecdotes about funerals or people being sick. And, like, there's some pages that's, like, biblical. It was, like, you know, it was, like, these begats or who had who and, you know, how they looked. And she gives, like, physical descriptions and demeanors. And it's amazing to have it, and it gives me a sense of connectedness. And it's amazing to look at the pages. It's one thing to hear a voice. It's one thing to have the story. It's another thing to have the actual, like, faces kind of looking back at you, and I definitely had those and relied upon those from "Mudbound" and shared them with department heads, you know. It's just, like, a visual reference because you can see the lives in these people's faces.