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Discover an incredible resource for maps (and much more!) hidden in plain sight right here in the Village on page 22.

Resident Author Cynthia Sylvester

A CONVERSATION ABOUT HER BOOK,
"THE HALF-WHITE ALBUM"

By Gordene MacKenzie and Lynn & Lynda Miller

"This is my sand painting, this paper, black on white. These pieces, poems and stories, are my songs that I offer to the night sky with the hope that at dawn the ancient deities will see me—see us—and remember our names.

Maybe she could walk between worlds, maybe she could walk where lightning had struck and find that the path between black and white and this and that was just the zigzagged path of lightning."

Excerpts from the Half White Album

Incandescent images conjured by Los Ranchos writer Cynthia Sylvester in her book *The Half-White Album* transmute into gorgeous and haunting journeys of love and generational trauma, including forced assimilation into boarding schools.

Cynthia is an enrolled member of the Diné, born into the Kiyaa'anii Clan for the Bilagáana Clan. A recipient of the Native Writer's Award at the Taos Writer's Conference, her work has received local and national attention.

She says her vivid and lovable characters came to her and she followed each one to see who they were. "Writing the book was a healing ceremony for me."

The Half-White Album is part of the *Lynn and Lynda Miller Southwest Fiction Series*, published by the University of New Mexico Press. Lynda and Lynn are Village residents who selected Cynthia's work as a standout piece for their own publication, *The Bosque Journal*. Lynn is a former writing and performance professor, author of four novels, and a 2023 book of stories titled *The Lost Archive*. Lynda is the managing editor and art director of their journal *ABQ in Print*, and she recently authored the book *More Horses than Cars*.

I asked Lynda and Lynn Miller to interview Cynthia about her writing. Here is their interview.



Photo above: Cynthia (center) with her friends Lynn & Lynda Miller. Photo on opposite page: Cynthia with the Half White Band, whose music was interwoven with Cynthia's storytelling during her recent book launch.

Q When you first started writing this book, were music and ceremony as integral as they are in the published book, or did those two components surface as you wrote?

A Music was. But it wasn't until I did a show with a rock band in 2013 called *Stories That Rock* that I realized that these pieces—poetry, short and long fiction, and essay—were my Birth, Rain, and Mourning Songs. The stories combined with music felt like ceremony to me. At the time, I wasn't promoting a book; I just wanted to be in a rock band. And it did rock! And it was a powerful experience for me and the audience. One of my favorite reviews of *The Half-White Album* was, "It's a unique treasure in the book and music world."

Q How did you decide on the structure of the book? I.e., did you always see the book as a combination of prose, poetry, and memoir?

A These pieces were written over a decade. I had separated them into two collections: one, a chapbook-length of poetry and flash-fiction and memoir, and the other one was a traditional short story collection with long-form stories. I was trying to stuff them into a recognizable form they didn't want to conform to. So, more years went by, and then during the pandemic, when campgrounds reopened out of state, my sister invited my wife and me to go camping. She made "Cowboy Margaritas," and I had a few. It was the perfect combination of high altitude and tequila, and I awoke in a dream walking toward two books on a shelf. One was called "It's All One Story." BAM! I went home, deconstructed both collections and reassembled them into this book.

Q You call your book a "hybrid" form. Can you talk a little about that and how the form you're using allowed you to express elements you couldn't have with a more traditional form?

A I called it a hybrid form because it had to have a name or a label. When I dreamed it was "all one story," I was



inspired and allowed myself to break through the traditional barriers of form and let the book be what it wanted. The book and I emerged together, or maybe even it's pulling me along on its journey.

Q Who were your major influences as a writer, and has that changed over time?

A Joy Harjo and Flannery O'Connor are two of my most significant influences. Joy taught me about rhythm, and Joy and Flannery create unforgettable images. That's what I want to do, too. You may not remember my whole book, but an image or a character may stay with the reader. [...]

Q What are you working on now, and is it anything like *The Half-White Album*?

A The project that is closest to completion is my novel. It's set in Albuquerque and the north valley and is about friends who met when they played high school basketball together. They were the Lady Warriors and, at "middle age," are still working to recoup their losses. So, you could say that the themes of loss, friendship, family, and what is "home" plays an integral part in that novel as it does in *The Half-White Album*. But is that the second, nameless book in my dream? I don't know.

I'm also working on, dreaming about, creating a show based on *The Half-White Album*. I did something similar to *Stories That Rock* for the book's launch but bigger! I had a whole band, *The Half-White Band*, and they supported my reading of the book, interweaving music and story into the Half-White Show. We just did that show on the UNM Campus, and we'll go to Fort Lewis College in October to do another.

To learn more about Cynthia, find links to purchase her book, and view her calendar of events, visit her website at cynthiajylvester.com/

