

The Love Songs of Honorée Fanonne Jeffers

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN

After making her literary mark with award-winning books of poetry, Professor Honorée Fanonne Jeffers was encouraged by her agent to try her hand at a novel. A beach read, nothing too time-consuming—something she could stay on top of while simultaneously working on her fifth book of poetry and teaching creative writing at the University of Oklahoma.

More than a decade later, Jeffers instead delivers a story of incredible depth and scope, tracing four centuries of intertwined Indigenous, Black and white families on a single piece of Georgia farmland. Their mixed heritage is ultimately distilled into a uniquely American protagonist, Ailey Pearl Garfield, whose intelligence and irreverence help her navigate a world where she does not fit into a neatly

checked box.

“The Love Songs of W.E.B. DuBois” represents years of archival research and comes in at a whopping 800 pages. The reviews have been weighty, as well. In March, “Love Songs” received the 2021 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. The novel has earned spots on the Top 10 lists of The New York Times and The Washington Post and was longlisted for the 2021 National Book Award. Barack Obama included it in his best books of 2021 and Oprah Winfrey selected it for her eponymous book club, but when the media mogul tried to call Jeffers with the good news, the OU professor was having none of it.

“When the phone rang and said, ‘No caller ID,’ I just ignored it,” says Jeffers. But the phone rang again. And again. “By now I am smoking

*Gifted in poetry and fiction writing,
an OU English professor has found herself on the
bestsellers lists in two genres two years in a row.*



hot because I'm tired of people bugging me and I am also just really tired from getting the book ready for publication."

Jeffers answered the phone with a "hello" as curt as one with good home training possibly can. A woman on the other end asked for her by name.

"I said, 'Who is this?' And the woman said, 'Are you Honorée Jeffers?' And again, I said, 'Who is THIS?'"

Even after Winfrey identified herself, Jeffers refused to believe her. Then, "She got that sound—that Oprah sound. And she said, 'This IS Oprah Winfrey.'"

In the nanoseconds that passed, Jeffers scrambled for a reason why Winfrey would be calling her. "Is she giving away new cars? Did I win a drawing? So, I just said, 'Hold on.'"

"That's what I said to her: 'Hold on. Let me get myself together,' and she said, 'You are already together, Honorée, because you wrote a beautiful book and I am choosing it for my book club.'"

"That's when I started crying," Jeffers says. "And the first thing I was thinking is that I might be able to pay off my student loans."

Like her characters in "Love Songs," Jeffers knows the cost and value of higher education. The daughter of two college professors, she has mentored students from all walks of life in her OU English classes for the past 20 years.

"I think that education is always the key, whether it's formal or autodidactic," says Jeffers, who earned a bachelor's from Talladega College and an MFA from the University of Alabama. "Many of my students are first-generation college students and I also get Black kids reaching out to me from outside OU. I'm grateful to have had people guide me and I say, 'Well, somebody did it for me. When you see somebody who is successful, they've had their challenges, too.'"

One of Jeffers' closest friends and mentors was poet Lucille Clifton. A professor of literature and creative writing, Clifton was twice a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for poetry and was poet laureate of Maryland. Although much of her work addresses the beauty and power of Black women, her poem "homage to my hips" became an anthem for women of all colors.

The mother of six, Clifton emphasizes endurance through adversity and the influential place of women in family life, themes reflected in "Love Songs."

Jeffers spent summers with her own multi-generational maternal family, listening to her grandmother's and great-grandmother's stories as they rocked on the front porch or prepared meals in the kitchen.

"My mother told me that my great-great grandmother was born enslaved and that her first memory was of her father being sold," says Jeffers. Like young people of any

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decade, Jeffers' mother did not always make time to listen to her elders. "My mother would say to me, 'You are the child who paid attention.'"

Because her life was enriched by "the gray-headed folks," her novel celebrates not just academic learning, but also the knowledge passed down from one generation to the next. Whether Ailey is gardening with her grandmother or studying in university archives, they are equal parts of her heritage and identity.

There are similarities in the author's own family. She describes her father's family as "privileged." The grandson and great-grandson of physicians, her father, Lance Jeffers, earned his undergraduate and master's degrees from Columbia University. A poet and short fiction writer, he taught at California State College, Long Beach and North Carolina State University until his death in 1985.

By contrast, Jeffers' mother attended segregated schools in the tiny town of Eatonton, Ga. Her father could not read or write but wanted better for his children. Trelle James Jeffers was not only the first person in her family to go to college; she was also the first person to go past elementary school.

"My mother was the oldest and her parents were tenant farmers," she says. "Tenant farmers are not the same as sharecroppers. If you're a sharecropper, the white foreman

could take your kids out of school at harvest time. But tenant farmers rented their land. My grandfather told Mama he was not going to have white men pulling his kids out of school. And that's why her sisters and brothers were able to graduate from high school.

"So, Mama's family were not sharecroppers," says Jeffers. "To this day she gets really cranky if you make that mistake."

An exceptional student, Trelle James was accepted into Spelman College, a historically Black liberal arts college in Atlanta, in 1951. "She started Spelman on a wing and a prayer," says Jeffers. Her mother later earned a master's from California State and a doctorate from Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University).

As a child of professors and writers, Jeffers was encouraged to expand her literary horizons from an early age.

"I first read W.E.B. DuBois in junior high school," she says. "I loved 'The Souls of Black Folks' and 'Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil,' too; it's very lyrical."

Jeffers begins each chapter of "Love Songs" with a DuBois epigraph relating to her characters.

"Dr. DuBois always had something of importance to say to and about Black people in America," she says. "You cannot be an educated Black person in America of a particular age and not have read DuBois."

Born during Reconstruction, DuBois was the first Black man to earn a doctorate from Harvard. As a sociologist, economist and historian, he coined the term "sorrow songs" to describe the gospel music and folk songs enslaved Blacks sang to express their suffering. Jeffers renamed DuBois writings "love songs" for the inspiration they gave to Black Americans.

DuBois himself makes an appearance in "Love Songs" during a visit to Atlanta, where he encounters the fictional Uncle Root. Uncle Root also attends a party where author Zora Neale Hurston is present. While some see these encounters as poetic license, Jeffers says that well-educated Black people were often part of the same close-knit circle. It is a phenomenon she witnessed growing up in her own household.

"My mother taught Alice Walker in the seventh grade," says Jeffers. "And when I was a little girl in Durham, Miss Alice came to give a reading at Duke University and Mama and Daddy invited her back to the house for dinner."

Because her father was a well-known poet in the Black Arts Movement, many of his colleagues were also writers and artists, including author Toni Morrison and poet Eugene B. Redmond.

"Once Mama and I went to a James Baldwin lecture at Emory when we were living in Atlanta," she says. "We stood in line to meet him, and Mama introduced herself as Lance Jeffers' wife. And Mr. Baldwin asked, 'How is Lance?'"

"And I'm like, 'What is happening? Why does James Baldwin know Daddy?' Apparently, they were friends in the Village when Daddy was at Columbia. But you can't sling a cat at two Black



W.E.B. DuBois

intellectuals without hitting one that knows other famous Black people. That's what we do. We get together and then we'll start talking and we'll find connections. It's a large group, but it's also very tight."

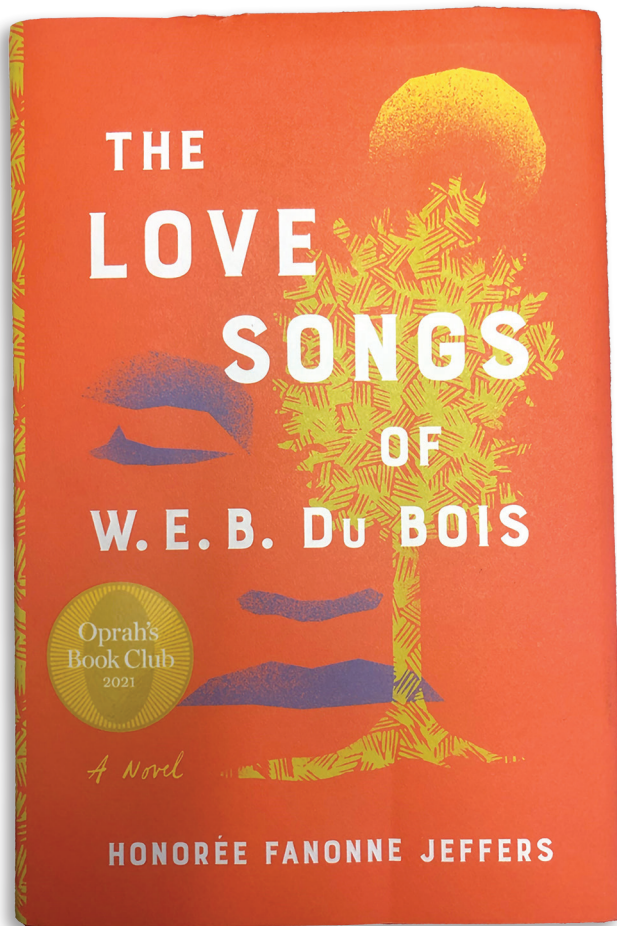
Jeffers has enlarged that circle, nurturing new generations of authors and poets.

Among them is Rain Prud'homme-Cranford, who earned a doctorate in English at OU and teaches at the University of Calgary, specializing in Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous literature. She is executive editor of That Painted Horse Press and the author of several books of poetry, including the award-winning "Smoked Mullet Cornbread Crawdad Memory." She says Jeffers was instrumental in her success as a professor, poet and editor.

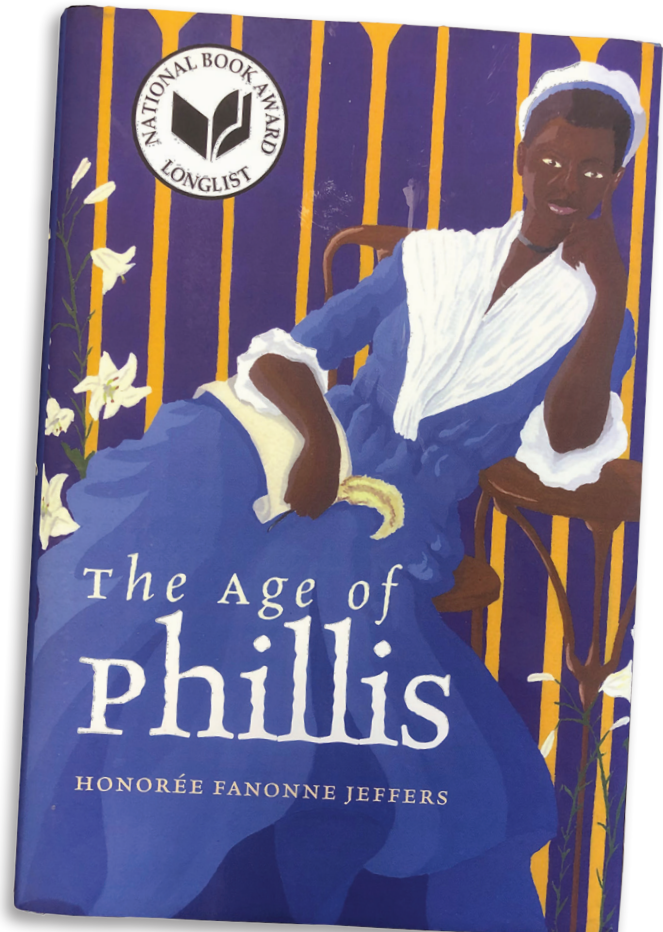
"At one point in her class I turned in a piece that I was struggling with, and Honorée said, 'Who are you writing for? This doesn't feel like your authentic voice.'

"I was trying to talk about something personal and intimate, but I was putting up shields right and left, and she called me on it. It was the first time in an academic setting where someone understood my experience and encouraged my voice. She never accepted less than my best."

Another former student, Bailey Hoffner, earned a



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Jeffers' critically acclaimed 2020 novel, “The Age of Phillis,” was based upon 15 years of archival research on poet Phillis Wheatley Peters, the first American slave, first person of African descent and only the third colonial American woman published.

bachelor’s in English and a master’s in library science at OU.

“I took every creative writing class that I could from Professor Jeffers,” says Hoffner. “She is the only person I’ve ever known who has the ability to teach curiosity, and she does it through a combination of high expectations and immense love for the craft and her students.

“Most important, her voice—both spoken and written—has always been a resounding proclamation of Black womanhood within a world that still does far more to diminish voices like hers than it does to uplift them.”

“I wrote this book [“Love Songs”] for Black women,” says Jeffers. “I wanted us to be able to see ourselves, but I also

want other Americans to see sides of Black families they may not see anywhere else.”

She excels at sharing intimate and sometimes painful moments for Black families, inviting readers into the living room of Ailey’s grieving parents moments after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. She broaches topics like colorism, sexism and elitism within Black communities and on Black college campuses.

The book is not without humor, delivered with comedic timing by Ailey, who often walks a razor’s edge to stay in her mother’s good graces. Ailey must also find balance between the different worlds in which she lives. In the city, she goes

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to a prestigious private school; her paternal grandmother, who passes for white, owns a vacation home on Martha’s Vineyard; and her father is a respected physician. In the fictional town of Chicasetta, Ga., Ailey spends summers down by the river, eating chicken from the Cluck-Cluck Drive-in and, in her teen years, cruising dirt roads drinking Mad Dog with her childhood buddies, Boukie and Baybay.

Equally important to the novel are flashbacks to the 1700s, 1800s and 1900s, where many ancestors unknown to Ailey hold keys to her identity. Jeffers relied on her researcher’s mind and poet’s soul to bring these characters to life.

“I would go into Southern university archives and ask for a portfolio of a particular family and they would bring out a box,” she says. “Some families had many boxes and others would have just one and inside there would be scraps of paper. Then you realize that every piece of paper is a person.

“And when I first saw those letters of enslaved African Americans, I heard their voices,” Jeffers says. “You spend time in the 18th century, in the 19th century and there’s a voice that they have, you know, every generation has a different voice.”

While Jeffers gave authentic voices to many of her characters in “Love Songs” based on historical records, she drew even more heavily on archival research for her latest book of poetry, “The Age of Phillis,” which she wrote at the same time she was working on “Love Songs.”

Through narrative poetry, Jeffers tells the true story of Phillis Wheatley Peters, who came to America as a child on a slave ship, was educated in the Wheatley home and, in 1773, became the first African American woman to publish a book. In 2020, “The Age of Phillis” was recognized as the NAACP Image Award Winner for Outstanding Literary Work—Poetry, the 2020 National Book Award for Poetry Longlist and a 2020 LA Times Book Prizes Finalist. Jeffers is also known in academic and antiquarian circles for helping to restore the reputation of Phillis’ husband, John Peters, who she says was the victim of earlier, faulty research.

Jeffers was recently awarded the Paul and Carol Daube Sutton Chair in the Department of English. She is the first Black woman in the department’s history to hold a chair.

“Honorée has had back-to-back blockbuster years,” says Department of English Chair Roxanne Mountford. “First with ‘The Age of Phillis’ and then with ‘The Love Songs of W.E.B. DuBois.’ It’s a remarkable opportunity for all our students to take a class with someone of such national renown, but it’s extremely exciting for our students of color to see someone who is African American speaking for African Americans both in fiction and in poetry. She is a treasure.”

After wrapping up a 10-month book tour for “Love Songs,” Jeffers has earned the right to relax over the summer at her Norman home. Instead, she is working on a book of essays; a return to the “Love Songs” setting of Chicasetta to flesh out some of her minor characters; and a third project suggested by her editor at Knopf, to write the biography of her dear friend Lucille Clifton.

“I could not say no,” says Jeffers, “Miss Lucille was my mentor, my second mother.”

Before her death in 2010, Clifton told Jeffers that she would become a successful novelist and added, “When that happens, think of me.”

The Clifton biography is predestined to be scrupulously researched and beautifully written. Like her novel, her books of poetry and the OU students she sends out into the world, it will make a beautiful addition to the “Love Songs” of Honorée Fanonne Jeffers.