

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Terry McMillan

---

## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	McMillan, Terry
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Terry McMillan,
<b>Dates:</b>	March 27, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:27:41).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Fiction writer Terry McMillan (1951 - ) was a popular author whose third novel, 'Waiting to Exhale,' sold nearly 4 million copies. McMillan also wrote 'How Stella Got Her Groove Back' and 'A Day Late and a Dollar Short,' and served as the editor of 'Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction.' McMillan was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 27, 2002, in Danville, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_038
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

---

## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Popular writer Terry McMillan was born on October 18, 1951, to Madeline Washington Tillman and Edward McMillan. She grew up in Port Huron, Michigan, a city about sixty miles northeast of Detroit. Her parents divorced when McMillan was thirteen and her father died three years later. McMillan's mother supported her family by working nights at a factory.

As a child, McMillan had little interest in literature, but she discovered the joy of reading as a teenager, while working at a library shelving books. She attended the University of California at Berkeley, graduating with a B.A. in journalism. At this time, she also immersed herself in African American literature classics. 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.

McMillan's first book, *Mama*, was published in 1987 after she took control of the book's publicity when the publisher failed to do so. McMillan wrote 3,000 letters to bookstores, Black organizations and universities, asking them to promote her book. This unique marketing approach proved highly successful; McMillan received several offers for book readings and six weeks after *Mama* was published it went into its third printing.

McMillan continues to find much success as a novelist. *Disappearing Acts*, her second novel, was published in 1989. Her third novel, *Waiting to Exhale*, spent months on the New York Times bestseller list and sold nearly four million copies. McMillan's work tapped into a market long ignored by the publishing industry: young, educated Black women. *Waiting to Exhale* was adapted into a successful film starring Whitney Houston, Angela Bassett, Loretta Devine and Lela Rochon. McMillan followed this accomplishment with the novel *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, an instant best-seller, which was made into a hit film starring Angela Bassett, Whoopi Goldberg and Taye Diggs.

Not limiting herself to writing, McMillan served as the editor of *Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction*. McMillan lives in northern California with her husband, Jonathan Plummer, and son, Solomon. Her most recent novel is entitled *A Day Late and a Dollar Short*.

---

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Terry McMillan was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on March 27, 2002, in Danville, California, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fiction writer Terry McMillan (1951 - ) was a popular author whose third novel, 'Waiting to Exhale,' sold nearly 4 million copies. McMillan also wrote 'How Stella Got Her Groove Back' and 'A Day Late and a Dollar Short,' and served as the editor of 'Breaking Ice: An Anthology of Contemporary African-American Fiction.'

---

## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

---

## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

---

## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

McMillan, Terry

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

McMillan, Terry--Interviews

---

# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

---

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

---

# Occupations:

Fiction Writer

---

# HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

---

# Administrative Information

## Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

## Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Terry McMillan, March 27, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

## Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

---

# Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

---

# Detailed Description of the Collection

## Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Terry McMillan, Section A2002\_038\_001\_001, TRT: 0:31:07 ?  
Born in Port Huron, Michigan, author Terry McMillan describes that she was raised primarily by her mother. Her father, an alcoholic, died from diabetes

when McMillan was a teenager. Terry McMillan's earliest memories include her grandmother's funeral, the violence in her childhood home, her cold bedroom, the black soot from the family's furnace, and her mother's butter beans, chili and cornbread. Terry McMillan's elementary school was all black, except for one white girl from a low-income household. However, McMillan describes that her junior high school and high school were mostly white, with a few black students. According to McMillan, Port Huron is a segregated city, with small enclaves of black families throughout. Terry McMillan describes that as the oldest child in a violent household, she became an adult even as a child. She shared her mother's duties which included disciplining the children and maintaining the household.

Video Oral History Interview with Terry McMillan, Section A2002\_038\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:01 ?

Novelist Terry McMillan describes that violence was a recurring theme in her childhood in Port Huron, Michigan. She witnessed family violence in her own home and was constantly aware of violent encounters in school and other homes in Port Huron. As the oldest child of five siblings, Terry McMillan assisted her mother in disciplining the other four McMillan children. McMillan describes that her mother was totally committed to raising happy and successful children. Her mother was not surprised by her literary success, then; she expected greatness from all of her children. After a turbulent childhood in Michigan, Terry McMillan became determined to relocate to a healthier environment. Two months after her high school graduation, she moved to California and lived with a cousin. McMillan used skills she had acquired in high school to find employment. She worked and paid her way through college. She describes the 1960s as a pivotal period for her; she became familiar with the black literature and empowering rhetoric that was absent from curricula throughout her school life.

Video Oral History Interview with Terry McMillan, Section A2002\_038\_001\_003, TRT: 0:28:57 ?

After moving from her childhood home in Port Huron, Michigan to Los Angeles, California, Terry McMillan first pursued junior college and was subsequently accepted to The University of California, Berkeley. She considered a number of majors including sociology, rhetoric, and English. Her penchant for writing editorials and a suggestion from a counselor led her to declare the major in journalism. Terry McMillan cites writer and UC-Berkeley faculty member, Ishmael Reed as helping her to recognize her literary voice. A year later, McMillan's interest in storytelling led her to New York's Columbia University where she pursued film studies. In New York, she was accepted to the Harlem Writers Guild where she consulted with other up-and-coming authors on what became her first novel, 'Mama.' McMillan describes that she had to self-publicize her book, as the publishing company that had bought it was engaging in discriminatory practices that limited the exposure of her book. Her efforts were rewarded as buyers and retailers welcomed her arrival onto the literary scene.

Video Oral History Interview with Terry McMillan, Section A2002\_038\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:24 ?

Terry McMillan's third novel, 'Waiting to Exhale,' enjoyed unprecedented success. The best-selling novel, inspired by McMillan's observations of the dating situation amongst she and her friends, was subsequently turned into a screenplay. McMillan credits black readers with turning the novel into a film, as well as with making the film a box office success story. McMillan describes being overwhelmed by the sudden fame and wealth that her novel generated. Following the deaths of both her mother and a close friend, McMillan took a vacation in Jamaica where she found a muse in a younger Jamaican man. The novel, 'How Stella Got her Groove Back,' mirrors McMillan's romantic

relationship in some respects. She maintains that writing fiction involves using personal experiences to a small extent, and then embellishing in order to capture an audience. McMillan, a single mother, describes how she has maintained a home with her only child, son, Solomon. Though she would have liked for her son to have had a father in the home, she describes that she was and is a good mother, able to manage multiple roles and responsibilities.

Video Oral History Interview with Terry McMillan, Section A2002\_038\_001\_005, TRT: 0:26:12 ?

Best-selling author Terry McMillan describes that upon the success of her novels, people began to impose on her, asking her for money, time, and consultation on book projects. She remarks that she is determined to contribute to the career successes of up and coming authors of color. She has already organized an anthology of fiction and in the future, she hopes to recommend authors on her website. McMillan cites the low wages of the publishing industry as a significant contributor to a lack of diversity in the books that are published. McMillan wants to be remembered as someone who told compelling stories that offered hope to the black community. She would also like to be remembered as a woman committed to motherhood. She recognizes bad parenting as a major source of the problems amongst today's youth. Terry McMillan exhibits and describes a number of photographs of family, friends and memorable events.