

Leslie C. Youngblood received an MFA from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and has taught and lectured at several universities. She's also been awarded a host of writing honors, including a 2014 Yaddo's Elizabeth Ames Residency and a Hurston Wright Fellowship. She's fortunate to have a family of natural storytellers and a circle of supportive family and friends. Born in Bogalusa, Louisiana, and raised in Rochester, New York, her debut children's novel, *Love Like Sky*, published 2018. In July, the follow-up to her debut, *Forever This Summer*, continues the story of G-Baby and her family.



**Q. You introduced G-Baby and her family in *Love Like Sky*. Why did you want to come back to this character in your new book? Other than that she is irresistibly charming, that is.**

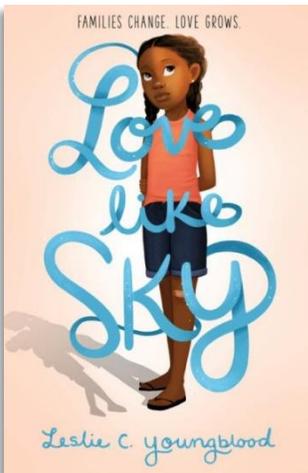
Yes, she is charming. And like most 11-year olds, she's homing in on her talents and strengths, and conquering her insecurities, or at least facing them. In *Love Like Sky*, She was just beginning to find her footing in a new family dynamic. Oh, we should be mindful that she answers to "Georgie" now; she's outgrown G-baby, since she's an "almost teenager." And as soon as she gets into a groove and makes some strides with her new normal, it's time to load up the car for the summer and road trip.

**Q. You also write books for adult audiences. What are the special joys and challenges of writing for middle-grade readers?**

At this point, you can say that I write short stories for adult audiences and "yet-to-be" published manuscripts for adults.

The voice of Georgie came to me when I was grieving over the sudden loss of one of my younger brothers while I was attempting to revise a women's lit manuscript. I've said before that if a novel ever saves a reader, it first has saved the author. That's what Georgie and *Love Like Sky* did for me.

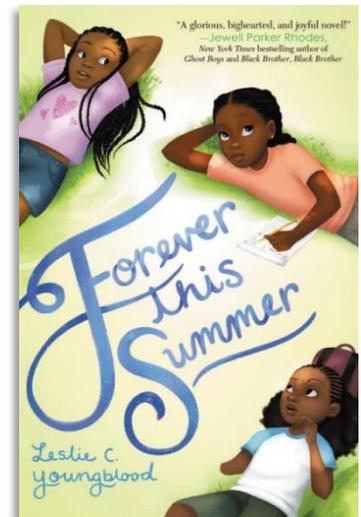
The theme of infinite love of someone no longer here in physical form is what helped me cope with that loss. The theme of infinite love is prevalent in *Love Like Sky*. It's how Georgie comes to understand that their father's love will not change even though he's no longer present in the household due to divorce. And love is what motivates Georgie's actions in *Forever This Summer* as she figures out ways to help her great Aunt Vie, who has Alzheimer's.



That brings me to the special joys of tackling realistic topics and portraying them in a way that is appropriate for middle-grade readers. Through workshopping with author Marita Golden, I learned that children are often smarter and wiser than adults give them credit for, and we have to portray that in fiction.

With that said, I don't make a vast distinction between writing for middle-grade readers and writing for adults. Parents and guardians learn quickly that kids know when you're hiding something. They don't trust what they deem inauthentic. The internet is ever-present and unforgiving. The topics we try shielding young readers from are readily available to them. My joy and challenge is to do what all guardians of young people seek to do: Take the brunt of what's out there and then make it palatable for young readers without condescension.

I write for the young reader first. As an added bonus, I know that I'm giving teachers, parents, and/or guardians a way to introduce or broach a topic. When writing for adults I don't have that extra layer, which, for me, can make my adult fiction more self-indulgent, if I'm not careful.



### **Q. Are there any authors who have inspired you to write?**

If we were in person, I'd say "Pour yourself a cup of tea or coffee," because this is going to take awhile. Yes, some writers consistently inspire me to write. Some of their brilliance lurks on social media platforms, even Twitter. But others are why I'm interviewing with you today. Here is the short version of what I call "the Baldwin Story." Picture this: I'm a receptionist in the 1990s, pre-Internet explosion. I'm attending night school. A secretary named Nettie — I'll never forget her — hands me a copy of a novel she thinks I'd enjoy (in between calls, I'd do homework, flip through magazines, or read Sidney Sheldon). The novel is James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. I read *Go Tell It* in one sitting and the next day, I change my major from marketing to English with a concentration in creative writing.

The words of Baldwin changed my life. They evoked emotions and connections in me more than any novel had. And then I discovered Toni Morrison (who I've been fortunate to hear live twice and have sign a novel for me). That led me to Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Mildred D. Taylor Jewell Parker Rhodes, Terry McMillan, Bernice L. McFadden, Tayari Jones, Jacklyn Woodson, and Renee Watson.

See, this is why my Acknowledgment section is usually so long. I'm going to force myself to stop now. Keep in mind that there are many more than I will probably mention in a subsequent interview.

I love characters. An author who creates characters who live with me long after I've read the novel inspires me. There's this magic moment when you think of a fond memory of someone you know — and then you realize that it was a character in a novel. You can return to them, that place, anytime you want. That may not always be possible for the actual people in our lives, but characters in novels are evergreen.

### **Q. We love this book and can't really pick a favorite part of it. What is your favorite character or part of *Forever This Summer*? Why is that?**

Of course, I can't pick a "favorite part" or a "favorite" character, either! Since Georgie is the central protagonist in both works, she helped me create others in her world. Scenes where I have two or three people in conversation are always fun for me to write. You have to ensure that each character's voice shines through. Scenes that include Georgie, Markie, and Nikki are especially fun because they

have similar-sounding names, but such distinct personalities. And sometimes they get on each other's nerves, much like real-life friends.

When creating dialogue in *Forever This Summer*, I also enjoy making adults present, competent, and responsible in. Sometimes, in our push keep a story centered on middle-graders, we may overlook the adults who help them. It's important for adults in my stories not to be static backdrops but adults who are there to give young people guidance and correction, when necessary.

I must add that the setting of *Forever This Summer* is a real town and the birthplace of my mother, my aunts and uncle, and me. I've travelled there many times as a child and returned as an adult. Unfortunately, the town has had recent struggles just as the food, music, history, and culture of Bogalusa were bouncing back (from Hurricane Katrina), but it's always been a town of people who'd never give up and fought back. Its history shines through. I'm proud to be able to depict some of that spirit in *Forever This Summer*.

### **Q. Do you have any special writing tricks when you're stuck?**

I've been fortunate to have never considered myself "stuck." If anything, I'll write too much. When I need to take a break because what I'm writing isn't resonating with me like it should, one of my go-to's is *Columbo*. And I also watch comedies (*Seinfeld*, *Sanford & Son*, *Frasier*, *black-ish*, etc.) or uplifting reality TV like *The Voice*, *America's Got Talent*, *Chopped*.

For me, there is a correlation between watching people go after their dreams and my work. Neil Gaiman says, "A book is a dream you hold in your hands." I truly believe that. Every time I write, that is exactly what I'm doing: dream-chasing. Can I create on the page these characters who are in my head? Will this book help me help someone, especially a young reader?

Writing allows me to work toward a new dream every time I see that blank page. So many of my ancestors didn't have the opportunity to see their creative dreams come to fruition. Because I know the path they set for me, I don't waste a minute of it with writer's block. I'm not denying that it exists for some, but I've been fortunate to avoid it. I'm thankful for that.

### **Q. What are you working on now?**

There's a bit of mystery in *Forever This Summer*. Along with working on essays and adult fiction, I'm in the middle of a writing a mystery that features a 12-year-old boy, Sammy. Georgie's not featured in this one, but she's waiting to share her next adventure.

### **Q. Anything else we should know?**

In *Forever This Summer*, Alzheimer's is mentioned in the first couple of pages. It is a devastating disease that snatches a lifetime of memories. Oftentimes, while caregivers are dealing with the day-to-day care of their loved ones, the children have questions and fears that so many not have the courage or words to articulate. Along with all *Forever This Summer's* fun and adventure, I hope it provides a bit of comfort, as well as ways to hold important conversations.

Editorial Note: Visit these Alzheimer's organizations that Ms. Youngblood mentions in her forward for more information: [www.usagainstalzheimer.org](http://www.usagainstalzheimer.org) and [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org).

---