Poet, short story writer, novelist, essayist, anthologist, teacher, editor, publisher, feminist and activist, Alice Walker was born on February 9, 1944 in rural Georgia, USA. Walker grew up in a loving household near the end of the Great Depression. While poor, the family was rich in love and perspective. After graduating from high school, Walker enrolled at Spelman College in Atlanta where she became involved in the civil rights movement.

Alice Walker’s fiction has established her as a major figure in the renaissance in African American women’s writings of the 1970s as well as a canonical figure in American letters. In 1982 Walker became the first African American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for her novel The Color Purple. Walker’s writings have been translated into more than two-dozen languages. A best-selling author, her books have sold more than ten million copies.

Alice Walker gave permission to use excerpts from one of the world’s favourite books, saying:

"It’s a wonderful effort. Reading is the biggest window there is, next to just looking at trees."

Love, Alice

Dear Celie,

*** I remember one time you said your life made you feel so ashamed you couldn’t even talk about it to God, you had to write it, bad as you thought your writing was. Well, now I know what you meant. And whether God will read letters or no, I know you will go on writing them; which is guidance enough for me. Anyway, when I don’t write to you I feel as bad as I do when I don’t pray, locked up in myself and choking on my own heart. I am so lonely, Celie.

The reason I am in Africa is because one of the missionaries that was supposed to go with Corrine and Samuel to help with the children and with setting up a school suddenly married a man who was afraid to let her go, and refused to come to Africa with her. So there they were, all set to go, with a
ticket suddenly available and no missionary to give it to. At the same time, I wasn’t able to find a job anywhere around town. But I never dreamed of going to Africa! I never even thought about it as a real place, though Samuel and Corrine and even the children talked about it all the time.

*** In the morning I started asking questions about Africa and started reading all the books Samuel and Corrine have on the subject.

Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the bible meant all of Africa? Well, I read and I read until I thought my eyes would fall out. I read where the Africans sold us because they loved money more than their own sisters and brothers. How we came to America in ships. How we were made to work.

I hadn’t realized I was so ignorant, Celie. The little I knew about my own self wouldn’t have filled a thimble! And to think Miss Beasley always said I was the smartest child she ever taught! But one thing I do thank her for, for teaching me to learn for myself, by reading and studying and writing a clear hand. And for keeping alive in me somehow the desire to know. So when Corrine and Samuel asked me if I would come with them and help them build a school in the middle of Africa, I said yes. But only if they would teach me everything they knew to make me useful as a missionary and someone they would not be ashamed to call a friend. They agreed to this condition, and my real education began at that time.

They have been as good as their word. And I study everything night and day.

*** Your sister, Nettie

---

GLOBAL CAMPAIGN FOR EDUCATION
www.campaignforeducation.org
Dear Celie,

It has been a long time since I had time to write. But always, no matter what I’m doing, I am writing to you. Dear Celie, I say in my head in the middle of Vespers, the middle of the night, while cooking, Dear, dear Celie. And I imagine that you really do get my letters and that you are writing me back: Dear Nettie, this is what life is like for me.

We are up at five o’clock for a light breakfast of millet porridge and fruit, and the morning classes. We teach the children English, reading, writing, history, geography, arithmetic and the stories of the bible. At eleven o’clock we break for lunch and household duties. From one until four it is too hot to move, though some of the mothers sit behind their huts and sew. At four o’clock we teach the older children and at night we are available for adults. Some of the older children are used to coming to the mission school, but the smaller ones are not. Their mothers sometimes drag them here, screaming and kicking. They are all boys. Olivia is the only girl.

The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said: A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something.
What can she become? I asked.
Why, she said, the mother of his children.
But I am not the mother of anybody’s children, I said, and I am something.
You are not much, she said. The missionary’s drudge.

It is true that I work harder here than I ever dreamed I could work, and that I sweep out the school and tidy up after service, but I don’t feel like a drudge. I was surprised that this woman, whose Christian name is Catherine, saw me in this light.

She has a little girl, Tashi, who plays with Olivia after school. Adam is the only boy who will speak to Olivia at school. They are not mean to her, it is just - what is it? Because she is
where they are doing ‘boys’ things’ they do not see her. But never fear, Celie, Olivia has your stubbornness and clear-sightedness, and she is smarter than all of them, including Adam, put together.

Why can’t Tashi come to school? she asked me. When I told her the Olinka don’t believe in educating girls she said, quick as a flash, They’re like white people at home who don’t want colored people to learn.

Oh, she’s sharp, Celie. At the end of the day, when Tashi can get away from all the chores her mother assigns her, she and Olivia secret themselves in my hut and everything Olivia has learned she shares with Tashi. To Olivia right now Tashi alone is Africa. The Africa she came beaming across the ocean hoping to find.

***

Dear Celie,

Tashi’s mother and father were just here. They are upset because she spends so much time with Olivia. She is changing, becoming quiet and too thoughtful, they say. She is becoming someone else; her face is beginning to show the spirit of one of her aunts who was sold to the trader because she no longer fit into village life. This aunt refused to marry the man chosen for her. Refused to bow to the chief. Did nothing but lay up, crack cola nuts between her teeth and giggle.

They want to know what Olivia and Tashi do in my hut when all the other little girls are busy helping their mothers. Is Tashi lazy at home? I asked.

The father looked at the mother. She said, No, on the contrary, Tashi works harder than most girls her age. And is quicker to finish her work. But it is only because she wishes to spend her afternoons with Olivia. She learns everything I
teach her as if she already knows it, said the mother, but this knowledge does not really enter her soul. The mother seemed puzzled and afraid.
The father, angry.

I thought: Aha. Tashi knows she is learning a way of life she will never live. But I did not say this.
The world is changing, I said. It is no longer a world just for boys and men.

Our women are respected here, said the father. We would never let them tramp the world as American women do. There is always someone to look after the Olinka woman. A father. An uncle. A brother or nephew. Do not be offended, Sister Nettie, but our people pity women such as you who are cast out, we know not from where, into a world unknown to you, where you must struggle all alone, for yourself.

So I am an object of pity and contempt, I thought, to men and women alike.

Furthermore, said Tashi’s father, we are not simpletons. We understand that there are places in the world where women live differently from the way our women do, but we do not approve of this different way for our children.

But life is changing, even in Olinka, I said. We are here.

He spat on the ground. What are you? Three grownups and two children. In the rainy season some of you will probably die. You people do not last long in our climate. If you do not die, you will be weakened by illness. Oh, yes. We have seen it all before. You Christians come here, try hard to change us, get sick and go back to England, or wherever you come from. Only the trader on the coast remains, and even he is not the same white man, year in and year out. We know because we send him women.

Tashi is very intelligent, I said. She could be a teacher. A nurse. She could help the people in the village.
There is no place here for a woman to do those things, he said. Then we should leave, I said. Sister Corrine and I. No, no, he said. Teach only the boys? I asked. Yes, he said, as if my question was agreement.

There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don’t even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not ‘look in a man’s face’ as they say. To ‘look in a man’s face’ is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa.

Next time Tashi appears at your gate, you will send her straight home, her father said. Then he smiled. Your Olivia can visit her, and learn what women are for.

I smiled also. Olivia must learn to take her education about life where she can find it, I thought. His offer will make a splendid opportunity.

Goodbye until the next time, dear Celie, from a pitiful, cast-out woman who may perish during the rainy season.

Your loving sister,
Nettie

Read Alice Walker’s world famous book: The Color Purple

*** Text Omitted

NOW YOU’VE READ THIS, GIVE SOMEONE ELSE THE CHANCE

Write your name for those who can’t

www.campaignforeducation.org/bigread
(If you can’t get online, use the page at the back of this book)