

OPINION

My dark-skinned son, my light-skinned daughter

I gave birth to a baby boy as brown skin-toned as his sister was white. So began years of “You can’t possibly be brother and sister.”

By **Jewell Parker Rhodes** , Updated March 2, 2020, 2:41 p.m.



GELPI/GLOBE STAFF ILLUSTRATION; ADOBE

“She’s light-skinned.”

“All babies look this way,” replied the nurse.

No, they don’t. Not if they’re biracial — with a white father and a Black mother.

In 1987 my newborn girl was a rarity in predominantly white (and affluent) Rockville, Md. So much so that when the nurse wheeled her away for minor surgery, they returned to my room a brown, baby boy. We color-matched.

Before leaving the hospital, a social worker burdened with forms and pamphlets came to see me. It took me awhile to understand that she thought she was helping a single, unwed, without resources, Black mother.

Three years later, I gave birth to a baby boy as brown skin-toned as his sister was white.

So began years of “You can’t possibly be brother and sister” from kids to adults, from after school classes to a lei-making session at a Hawaiian resort. The latter had my kids in tears as they rushed to tell me a woman kept insisting one of them had to be adopted.

My husband walking with his son was given kudos for adopting. Me with our daughter was often dismissed as the nanny. Colorism and prejudice became an almost daily occurrence.

We moved West, hoping for more tolerance and inclusion.

After the 1992 rioting over Los Angeles police being acquitted of violently beating Rodney King, my husband and I were shaken at the thought of our toddler growing up and having police encounters. We added age-appropriate “living while Black” discussions, but nothing prepared us for schools (both private and public) revisionist views that our gentle son was now a threat to be monitored.

At a private arts school in Boston, a worker complained that our pacing son was a disturbance. The dean called and as I picked up my son, the worker stated emphatically, “Next time I’ll call the police.”

In college in New York, an almost daily “stop and frisk” by police emphasized over and over that my son’s skin color was problematic. My daughter never had these experiences.

My dark-skinned son would never be granted the privileges afforded his white-skinned sister.

Inspired by my family's experiences, my new novel, "[Black Brother, Black Brother](#)," is about Donte and Trey, two bi-racial brothers who are subject to privilege versus prejudice based upon skin color

The book addresses bias in schools, both public and private. Like my son who experienced colorism from Los Angeles to Boston to New York, Donte relies on his family, his sibling, in particular, and friendship to affirm him.

At novel's end, Donte encourages his classmates to end color-based racism and bias and celebrate everyone's unique heritage. Skin color should never determine the ease with which one child is more fully embraced by society while another is subjected to racism.

As Donte says (and my son would agree): "Be you. Even if others can't see you."

I'm a grandmother now. Skin color still determines the ease with which one child is or is not fully embraced by society. We live in tense, unsettling, disruptive times. Social equity issues affect all families. I hope my characters become a conduit for youth to explore ideas, feelings and, perhaps, most importantly, to discuss with classmates, teachers, and parents ways to make America's future better and brighter for everyone.

Jewell Parker Rhodes, New York Times bestselling author of "[Ghost Boys](#)" and "[Black Brother, Black Brother](#)."

[Show 62 comments](#)

