

# TLC Showcase

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## Introduction to A Dark Iris

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The slave story of Sally Bassett is a well-known one in Bermuda. According to historical records in the 18th century, she was tried and found guilty of giving her granddaughter, Beck, poison to murder Beck's "owners" Thomas and Sarah Foster and fellow slave Nancy. The poison was discovered, thus foiling the plot. Sally was burnt at the stake but Beck was spared the same fate because she betrayed her grandmother by giving evidence against her in court. For this reason she is often viewed in a negative light. However, I have always seen Beck as a child victim of adult complicity.

Because I had always wanted to write a YA novel set in Bermuda, it occurred to me I could write about Beck since her story intrigued me, but I wasn't sure how. During a bout of writer's block, I took an art class to chivy me out of it and it was there, while learning to use pastels, I had the idea of revealing the story through another young girl's artistic vision. And so I created Rebekah Eve, a child during the 1970s when British Governor, Sir Richard Sharples, and his ADC, Hugh Sayers, were assassinated, with the help of the Black Berets. Troubled by her parents' separation and the challenges of high school, Rebekah has to confront the realities of racial discrimination and injustice still true in her own century. She becomes attracted to a young Black Beret revolutionary who may, she realizes, be involved with the assassinations. But she is also a brilliant artist and a mystic who through visions meets Beck and witnesses the unfolding of the events leading up to and after Sally's execution. She is helped by her two mentors: Leopold Everard Stowe, a renowned and empathic Bermudian artist, who takes her on as a student, and later Dr Ella Bien-Aimée Delacroix, a mysterious elderly historian who lives hidden in the school library. They both help Rebekah understand she is a kind of griot, revealing new and unrecorded insights into the slave story of Sally Bassett and Beck. I also wanted Rebekah to be for Bermuda what Heidi is for Switzerland or Anne of Green Gables for Prince Edward Island.

Some five drafts later, I felt extremely isolated and despondent, convinced my story was boring. I sent it to the TLC, knowing I could depend on them for honest criticism and constructive feedback. Aki Schilz chose CJ Flood as my reader. I am very grateful to CJ for her positive report that boosted my confidence and above all for her crucial insight. If Rebekah is a griot, CJ pointed out, then why does she

not have a revelation about the poisonings not already known from the records? I had tried to portray Beck in a sympathetic light but in the version I sent to the TLC, she was still the poisoner. As a result, I changed the plot so that Rebekah's vision reveals a collaborator with Sally other than Beck. From a historical perspective the new collaborator makes plausible sense.

I greatly appreciate all the support Aki has given me by sending my amended novel to agents and publishers and by giving me sound advice.

## A Dark Iris, by Elizabeth J. Jones

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### Extract

It's funny Mama's so interested in my drawing now my daddy has left, Rebekah thought. She never was much before. It was always "Do your homework Rebekah". Or "For heaven's sake do something useful." Maybe she's changed. Maybe if Daddy came back now it would be all right and we could all be happy. Maybe..."

"Rebekah?"

Sighing, she tore off the page from her pad and handed it to her mama.

"That's lovely, Rebekah – it looks just like you!"

"Me, Mama? It's not me, it's someone much younger! But I can't get her features right."

"When did you see her, honey?"

Rebekah knew the exact date when she had seen her – just six weeks ago, the 2nd of June 1972, because that was the day she and her friend Wanda Lambert had taken the entrance exam to the Meridian Institute, the most prestigious high school in Bermuda. After the day-long exam was over, the two girls had walked home together along the North Shore Road, lined with an assortment of pastel coloured houses and apartments. Rebekah had been frowning, terrified she had failed.

"Bekah! Don't even worry with it!" Wanda had said when Rebekah had muttered she'd got two questions wrong in the exam. "It's over, it's history! Who cares?"

"My mama," Rebekah had said, her mother's voice ringing in her ears. You have to have top grades in the exam, Rebekah! You have to get in if you want to make something of your life. "My mama cares."

"That's because she's a teacher," Wanda pointed out. "She can't help it."

As they approached their apartments, which were opposite each other down a narrow lane, Rebekah had seen her daddy's grey Mobylette parked next to their car. Good, Daddy's home early, she'd thought. When Mama starts interrogating me, I can

count on Daddy to change the subject.

It had never occurred to her that his coming home early was ominous. All she could think about was how she could explain she had forgotten just about everything she had written down. But in the event Mama had shown no interest in the exam at all. Once Rebekah had walked through their spotlessly clean concrete yard and opened the front door into the living room, her stomach lurched as she heard her mama shouting at the top of her voice in the kitchen. "You've never earned enough 'cause you never sell any houses! Gabriel says so. It's your hair! How can you sell houses with your hair like that?"

Rebekah had sighed inwardly because her daddy's hair was a constant source of argument between her parents. For some reason he was letting it grow and twisting it. And it seemed to her the longer the twists grew, the shorter her mama's temper became.

Now as she doodled on the cover of her sketch book she remembered her father's unusual response. Normally, he was never one to raise his voice. If something upset him, he took refuge in silence. But that day – "I don't want to sell houses," her daddy was actually shouting. "I want to..." Then his voice had dropped, Rebekah remembered, and she had not been able to hear what he wanted to do. Her mama had started shouting again. "The very least you could do, Jonah Eve, the very least, is sell your share of Papa Malachi's land! Or build on it!"

"Patricia!" her daddy yelled back. "I'm not going to do that – you hear me! I'm *never* going to do that." Then his voice had dropped again.

"How could you," her mother was screaming. "How could you just walk out!"

"When did you see this child, Rebekah?" her mama was asking her now, her voice so calm and gentle, it was impossible to imagine she was capable of screaming.

"The day I took the Meridian exam."

"Oh. Was she taking it too?"

"No. I told you, she's much younger than..."

"I can see she looks younger, honey – maybe she looks like you when you were little. So where did you see her?"

While her parents had been arguing, Rebekah had run upstairs to her bedroom and held her hands over her ears. Then what seemed like hours later, her daddy had come up and tapped on her door. "Bek? You all right?" He always called her Bek, or Bekah which sometimes annoyed her mama because she thought shortened names didn't give you respect. "Nobody," she'd often say, "will ever call me Pat. Or Trish. My name is Patricia." But Rebekah liked it when he called her Bek – it was her daddy's special name for her – nobody else used it.

"I'll take you fishing, Bek, but first I wanna show you something in Somerset."

Her heart had lifted. Papa Malachi, her grandfather on her daddy's side, had a field there he used to farm and he had given it to her daddy. Maybe Daddy's gonna show me where he'll build a house, she'd thought. And then Mama will feel better.

"Honey, you're day dreaming!" her mama was saying now. "Where did you see this girl?"

"In Somerset, at Hogg's Bay, with Daddy."

"Oh," said her mother shortly. Rebekah could see on her face she didn't want to think about her daddy.

Rebekah wasn't sure she wanted to think about that day either but the field he had shown her off Hogg's Lane burned into her memory. The land stretched up to the top of a hillside lined with trees – casuarinas with feathery green leaves and pinkish brown fiddlewoods. She remembered seeing faint ploughed furrows but most of the dry red earth was covered with weeds, wild flowers and grasses – tufts of minute blue and magenta flowers.

"That's vetch," her daddy had said, walking next to her along the dips. "It's good for the soil – it puts nitrogen into the earth. You'll learn about that when you start chemistry in high school."

But she hadn't been interested – she was too worried about where her daddy would build the house, the house that her mama so desperately wanted. Her eyes took in the whole expanse of the field and for a moment she thought she saw dim figures bent double pulling stuff out of the ground. She wasn't sure what. Carrots maybe. Then the figures trickled out of vision.

"What do you think, Bek?"

The words had rushed out of her. "Mama will be most disappointed, you know. Because you can't see the water. And you know she wants a water view. Where you gonna put the house? On top of the hill?"

There was a little silence interrupted by the shrill, scratchy cries of the kiskadee birds. Then her daddy had dropped his bomb shell.

"There's not going to be houses. I'm going to follow in the footsteps of your grandpa. I'm going to farm this and the other fields he gave me, too."

No wonder Mama's so angry, Rebekah had thought miserably. No *wonder*. Papa Malachi and Grandma Kezia lived just outside St. George's, the old town on the eastern end of Bermuda, where they had a small farm with livestock. But Papa Malachi also had fields all over the island and the fields were the reason her mama and daddy argued so often. Because Papa was too old to cope with so many fields, he had given some of his land on the South Shore to his eldest son, Uncle Gabriel, and some in Somerset to her daddy. Uncle Gabriel had used part of his share to build a fabulous house with stunning views of the South Shore and a swimming pool. The rest he had sold to open a real estate office in Hamilton where her daddy worked as well.

"What about at Uncle Gabriel's? You gonna sell houses?"

"No, honey. I've quit."

Shock shot through the knots of her stomach and she heard her mama's outraged voice again. "How could you? How could you just walk out!"

"Mama won't like that," she said in a small voice.

"Well, no, she doesn't but Bek..."

"What about Uncle Gabriel? Won't he mind?"

"No – he understands me. We're brothers but we're different. We've always been different. And he knows that. We walk to a different beat."

She started to feel cold inside.

"Mama will mind. Mama will be *most* upset. She wants houses. She thinks farming

is, is – she says it’s demeaning. She says if you want to get some place, you’ve gotta be a lawyer – some position like that – with things nice – a nice house, nice stuff. That’s what she says.”

“Bekah,” he had said. “Where does your food come from? It grows, Bek. Where do you think it grows? In the supermarkets?”

She wanted to finish telling him what she knew her mama thought. Anyone can be a farmer. Her daddy could be something better. He was a real good student in school, he... But she knew she couldn’t carry on the conversation. His face was always gentle and quiet but his eyes, calm as ever, shone with determination that day. She had worried that if she tried to persuade him, he might think badly about her and that must never happen because she felt so close to her daddy, far closer than she felt to her mama.

“Was the child on her own, Rebekah? Rebekah?”

Mama’s voice brought her back to the present.

“What was she there for, Rebekah?”

“You still want to go fishing?” she remembered her daddy had asked her. “It’s not far.”

She had nodded and with buckets, fishing lines and bait, they had strolled up the lane past the field and then down again until they reached the water. Near to the shoreline was a blighted cedar thicket, with weathered smooth silver trunks and silver branches, sticking out like scarecrows’ arms waiting for coat sleeves. She had taken off her shoes, Rebekah remembered, and sat down on a flat piece of rock that protruded from the middle of the cove. The colours all came back to her – the violets and the ochres of the limestone in the sun, and the rich turquoise of the shining sea. She remembered wishing she had brought her sketch book, charcoal, pencils and crayons to capture the dancing light on the water, emerald rather than turquoise now because the light was always shifting, and the boats moored in the cove, one old and wooden and somehow appealing. One side of it was cast in shade so she couldn’t see the engine. But it was a simple boat with simple lines – a boat for doing stuff, she’d thought, not for showing off. She had liked the way the shadows played on the peeling green paint and the shining silver of the steering wheel.



Her daddy had sat next to her. "It's nice, Bek." She had nodded, ravenous for the colours around her, wishing she could produce them somehow. But even if she had remembered to bring her crayons, their waxiness wasn't right. She wanted pastels and paint.

"I can't work in an office, Bek, I can't. I have to breathe. I can't breathe in an office. You like working with your charcoal? You're an artist by nature, right?"

She nodded. That was true because for her, life was all about drawing and painting. She didn't feel right without at the very least, a sketchbook and charcoal.

"Well, I'm a farmer by nature. I love working with the earth, I have all my life. When I was your age, I worked with Papa Malachi. All of us children did. But I was the one that loved it. It's kind of spiritual – you reap what you grow. You know what I mean? You work with nature. But whatever happens, you remember, you're my number one, you hear me?"

Then he had told her he was moving out to stay with Papa Malachi and Grandma Kezia until he found his feet and that he would farm the land. "Your mama and I both love you, Bek, you've got to believe that. But we've grown into two different people – she wants things I don't care about."

She knew that was true. Mama always wanted stuff like the swimming pool and the ocean view. It was irritating. She never went in Uncle Gabriel's pool anyway in case her hair frizzed up. And although they couldn't see the water from their apartment, the ocean was just round the corner.

"My, you're in a funny mood, Rebekah!" her mama was saying now as she placed the drawing back on the countertop. "All I want to know is what the child was doing there. Did you talk to her?"

Daddy had forgotten the hooks, Rebekah remembered. He'd left her alone while he went back to the car to get them. Suddenly, her face and arms had felt clammy even though the sun was still high. She'd turned towards the cedars and gasped. They weren't dead anymore, they weren't silver! Dusky green feathery leaves clothed the branches. The air fell silent – not a kiskadee within hearing range, let alone within sight. A chill had run through her, clenching her heart. She had turned again to look at the bay and gasped once more. The green boat in the cove had disappeared and

so had the others except for one small unpainted rowing boat she had not noticed before. It was tied with rope to a spike hammered into a rock near the shoreline and the rope looked strange – it wasn't as white as the rope Papa Malachi used – it looked as if it had been made out of twisted and plaited palmetto leaves. And that was when she had seen the child. A small girl had darted out from the trees, made her way barefoot to the bay and then clambered onto the jagged rocks as easily as if she was wearing shoes. Rebekah could see her face quite clearly, an elfin face. She had a light coffee complexion and almond shaped, green coloured eyes. What a pretty child, Rebekah had thought, but kind of strange, too. Her hair was a tumble of tight curls tucked under a turban cap. And her dress – Rebekah had never seen anything like it. It was a roughly made dirty white shift. The child's head was on one side and she was smiling at something she could see in the water – a fish, an angel fish perhaps. Her lips parted and Rebekah had thought she could just see the child's front teeth – one baby tooth next to a large one growing through. Then the girl had turned towards Rebekah, looked straight into her eyes. But she'd said not a word. The silence was so deep that somehow Rebekah had not dared to break it. It would have been like breaking a spell. But how she wished she had brought her pad and charcoal so that she could draw her. I must remember what she looks like, Rebekah had thought. I don't know why, but I must.

The child had turned her face away from Rebekah's and gazed out to sea. Then she'd slithered down into the ocean, splashing her way into the water.

"Bek!" her daddy had called. And when Rebekah swivelled towards the direction of his voice, there he had been, waving and coming towards her, past the cedars, now their normal naked selves. She had looked back at the bay. The green boat was there again. The one with the palmetto rope had disappeared. And so had the child.

## About the Writer

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Elizabeth J. Jones studied English and American Literature at the University of East Anglia, before moving to Bermuda. She became a freelance writer, editor and tutor after teaching English at The Berkeley Institute and at the Bermuda College. She writes a regular nature column for *The Bermudian* magazine and has written numerous articles for magazines,



newspapers and guide books about all aspects of Bermuda, including its wildlife, history, culture and people. Her commissioned published books include *Bermuda Recollections*, an anthology of oral history; *Bermuda's Famous Talbot Brothers*, a biography of a Bermudian calypso band; *Bermuda Post Office Bicentennial 1812-2012*, a history; and *Fair Play*, a biography of Bermudian former senator and FIFA referee, Charlie Marshall. Her short story "The Ceremony" has recently been published in the anthology, *New Worlds, Old Ways: Speculative Tales from the Caribbean*, edited by Karen Lord. Her short story "Breathing Space" was included in *I Wish I Could Tell You*, Bermuda Anthology of Children's Literature and Young Adult Stories as was a short memoir, "Pink" in *Take This Journey With Me*, Bermuda Anthology of Memoir and Creative Non-Fiction.

She hopes *A Dark Iris's* young heroine, Rebekah, will represent Bermuda in readers' minds the way Heidi, for example, represents Switzerland.