

[Sarah McConnell](#): Just a few bars of music and many of us are instantly transported to the magical world of Harry Potter. Kids and adults around the world have been following in love with JK Rowling's books and movies for more than two decades. The books have a lot more to offer than just fun. We'll talk about issues such as othering, race, gender criticism, romanticism. I will talk about crime and punishment, censorship. I'm Sarah McConnell and today on With Good Reason we'll talk about what we can learn from Harry Potter later in the show.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Medieval scholars want you to know that Game of Thrones is not set in the Middle Ages. There are dragons in it, but it can help us take a closer look at what the Middle Ages were actually like.

[Gabriele, M.:](#) By the end of the Middle Ages, Europeans are trading in China, right? They're interacting with the Mongols. They've been to North Africa. The idea that this is an exclusively white place is just absolutely false.

[Sarah McConnell](#): First, we have an interview for every adult who's ever felt a bit embarrassed about their love of Harry Potter. Alicia DeFonzo says, "Don't be embarrassed." She teaches English at Old Dominion University. Every semester she explores some of the biggest questions in literature through Harry Potter and his friends. Alicia, tell me about your Muggles Abroad course. Where do you go that excites the student Harry Potter fans?

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): I teach this class at Old Dominion University called The Hogwarts Experience. We study Harry Potter for a couple of weeks. Then we take a trip to London. We do everything from the Harry Potter Studio tour to Platform 9 3/4. I also create like horcrux clues. We search throughout London for all of these hints and clues in the novels. The pinnacle, I should say, of our trip is the Harry Potter studio tour. It's all of the original set work from the films, so the costumes, the sets, the scripts, the drawings, everything you can think of. They even have the life sized model of the castle, the Hogwarts castle. That's at the end. That's where everyone cries, because they're playing the music and then you see the castle. Everything about that tour is just really emotional, going to Olivander's Wand Shop, Dumbledore's office, Snape's classroom.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Isn't it interesting that you say they're emotional on this tour? You go to a Disney site, and you don't expect people to be emotional, but these kids are.

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): Yeah, I think it's because Harry Potter and the series itself is so relatable. Whether you identify with Harry Potter or not, you find a character, and you see them through for years. It gives you something that maybe you haven't felt before. The sense of magic, of course, and wonders is always there. It's a child within. I think the emotion, the connection that students have has, well obviously it's been going on for a while, but it will go on for decades to come. I think this story is timeless.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Do you take grownups on this tour by any chance?

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): Everybody always asks me that. Can you take me? Can you take me? Even fellow professors want me to take them. Sorry, this is strictly undergraduate students coming. No, I mean, I love how adults get into it, because my greatest pet peeve about teaching Harry Potter, and this isn't for me, it's for other people, they think that it's low brow in terms of art and the humanities. Oh, it's Harry Potter. Because it's popular that it must not have a lot of rigor in terms of artistry in a way. It's not a kids book. This is a book for anyone.

[Sarah McConnell](#): What are some of the academically rigorous themes that you explore with your students that come from the novels?

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): We go through a variety of literary theory and topics that one might come across in an upper level literature class, because that's what it is. We'll talk about issues such as othering, race, gender criticism. We'll also discuss romanticism and this kind of romantics had a fervor for nature. We'll see how that's present. We'll talk about crime and punishment, censorship, all of these areas and themes that the novels discuss. For example, consider the difference between prejudice and racism first of all. How are the characters of pure blood, mixed bloods regarded and by whom?

[Sarah McConnell](#): Right.

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): How does this attitude compare with real prejudices and historical examples and explanations? We discuss race itself and othering for example, in the series. Then we'll also relate it to historical examples. What was Rowling drawing from when she put this in the series?

[Sarah McConnell](#): What was she drawing from?

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): Well, there's definitely a theme of World War II and Nazis in the text. There's no doubt that that's present. There's an ethnic cleansing vibe with Voldemort and pure bloods only believing that pure bloods are the best. There's other themes as well in regards to race. There's a hierarchy where you have giants, you have sent centaurs, house elves. Based on your race, that decides how much power you have.

[Sarah McConnell](#): What are some of the most exciting outcomes that your students have created as a result of this course over the years?

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): One of my favorite presentations discuss romanticism in nature, comparing it to some other romantic writers, for example, like William Wordsworth and *The World is Too Much With Us* talking about man's disconnection to nature, how man consumes goods. In that regard, we've forgotten nature, and said we want to produce, we want to make, but when we do, we also destroy nature. There's definitely the sense of power over nature, its lands, its creatures. We should consider mans connection or I should say disconnection to the natural world in the series. Many people read Harry Potter and they think that they are adoring

animals like the dragons, like the unicorns, right? There's these fantastical beasts. Those that have read the series thoroughly know very well that the dragons are shipped off to a separate land, that they're kept to be controlled. Unicorns are used for their blood, for their hair. There's always this sense of hierarchy in the magical world and oppression.

[Sarah McConnell](#): It's amazing how much this whole generation has been influenced by Harry Potter as a moral compass. It's their shared morality, and their shared way of seeing what their role is in the world. It incites them to stand up for good.

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): I believe so. I mean, because even though our protagonist Harry struggles himself sometimes to find his way. I mean, he's the hero, but he's the flawed hero. He can become vain. He can become selfish, right? He can become egotistical. He works through that. It's also a coming of age novel, right? We were all like that at one point in our lives. Most of us were anyway. For now, when we have this age of everyone reading Harry Potter, the millennials especially, I think we can start to see its profound effect on our culture. Of course, we all know that Harry Potter is still popular in films and now on Broadway, but to take it to a political level even, one might one might say, you could even see a Dumbledore's army present in the March or Our Lives kids.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Did you think about that?

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): Oh, absolutely. It was one of the first things I thought of when I saw those kids speaking out for what they believe is right, starting a revolution in a way against what they feel are dark forces. They're doing something that their elders, that the people that are the leaders in this country will not. That's exactly what happens in the Harry Potter series. Their teachers are helpless. There's politicians in the series that are held down and consumed by the vote. These students must rise up. They do so in the novel. They do so in real life now with the March for Our Lives. I think that there's definitely some influence there.

[Sarah McConnell](#): So many students clamor to take this course you have to sort of sort them. How do you let them know they got in?

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): Well, the first year we had such an overwhelming response, because this was the first time that the class was taught. It's one of, I believe, a dozen throughout the country, and one of a few that actually do the study abroad attached to it. We had about 50 applications within a month. What I did was I actually created a question. They had to write a short essay along with that. From the essay I decided who the 14 were that would come aboard. I didn't announce it to anyone. Instead what I did was I had my friend who was a calligrapher help me. We created letters of acceptance from the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We got the wax seal, everything was to the T. I even looked for owl stamps. I could not find an owl stamp anywhere. I was looking for that. They got it in the mail right around Christmas time. Many of the students that were accepted into the program were like, "I still have my letter. I cried when I got my

letter." I tried to recreate the experience as much as I can, because I know that even the child inside me wants that to happen so much.

[Sarah McConnell](#): I understand you recently lost your grandfather. I'm so sorry about that.

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): Thank you.

[Sarah McConnell](#): I know that you had planned on taking students on a trip to Europe to follow in his footsteps from World War II.

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): Yes. One of my ideas for a future study abroad class is to offer a World War II experience, like a cultural and historical study of World War II and rediscover it, the event itself, because it is so monumental. I believe that my generation and maybe some of the future generations are so far removed from it that they don't know much about it. That's actually what I found in myself when I started writing about World War II and my grandfather's experience. I'm hoping to turn that into something where perhaps we visit all of the major battle sites. For example, the Normandy beaches, Battle of the Bulge, the Bridge at Remagen, right? My grandfather also liberated concentration camps. I would love to take a tour and just like I do with Harry Potter, make it come alive, make history come off the page, see that this was a real place and also see that what America did here and what our allies did here changed the face of the world really. I think that students, some students might gravitate towards that. I mean I hope that they would. I'd like to add that personal touch with my grandfather, because a lot of my writing is about my grandfather's experience from World War II as an Army combat engineer.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Sounds wonderful. Alicia DeFonzo, thank you for sharing your thoughts with me on With Good Reason.

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): Thank you so much for having me. I really do appreciate it.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Alicia DeFonzo teaches English at Old Dominion University. Coming up next, the women of Westeros. Game of Thrones fans recently learned they'll have to wait until 2019 for the next and final season of the fantasy show. In the meantime, we've got your Game of Thrones fix. Matthew Gabriel is a historian at Virginia Tech. He uses Game of Thrones to explore gender and power in medieval times. Matthew, there are several powerful cultural themes that you like to bring out. One is about women in the show and power. What are some of the others?

[Alicia DeFonzo](#): The other is a more general theme about like, "Well, what are the elements of this that make us think it sets in the Middle Ages?" That can be the castles, the visuals. The other big theme that I always do is the fantasy element, is dragons. Why do we always think the dragons are set in the Middle Ages? Why do we think that there were monsters there? I think it has a lot to do with our perception of the period, which is still in common speech is calling it the dark ages, right? This is an era of superstition. People there didn't know anything.

The world is a church and religion and darkness and the end of learning after the ancient world. It just makes sense that these kind of superstitious, magical beings would dwell there with a population that just didn't know any better, didn't know science.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) What can we learn about the role of women from the show? What sorts of issues are really brought out?

[Alicia DeFonzo:](#) Sure, I think that this is one of the bigger themes within the show as a whole through its entire run is the way that women's roles change over the course of the season. You start to see them really coming into their own in the most recent season that just aired from people who were never able to make decisions really on their own to ones who were prime to take over the world of Westeros from Daenerys Targaryen to Cersei Lannister, Sansa and Arya Stark and people like that, Brienne of Tarth, other major figures is that they become the major movers of the show, the drivers of the plot, people who are willing to make difficult decisions who are willing to make ethical decisions., the ones that men, for whatever reason, over the past few seasons have failed at spectacularly in many cases.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) In the first season, women are in very different roles. They're prominent, but they're weaker.

[Alicia DeFonzo:](#) Yeah, no, absolutely. I think you see that for example, in this one great scene with a Catelyn Stark. Catelyn is the wife of one of the main characters, Ned Stark, a very important figure in her own right. During the course of the season, I should say, spoiler alert, her son is almost murdered. She is out for justice. She winds up at this inn and confronts the person, Tyrion Lannister who she thinks has committed the murder. It turns out he hasn't, but she thinks he has. In that scene, she manages to mobilize these strangers really by calling to mind or showing these invisible lines of power that she has based upon our familial connections, both her father's and her husband's.

[Catelyn Stark:](#) You sir, is that the Black Bat of Harrenhal I see embroidered on your coat?

[Speaker 5:](#) It is milady.

[Catelyn Stark:](#) And is Lady Whent a true and honest friend to my father, Lord Hoster Tully of Riverrun?

[Speaker 5:](#) She is.

[Catelyn Stark:](#) The Red Stallion was always a welcome sight at Riverrun.. My father counts Jonas Bracken amongst his oldest and most loyal bannerman.

[Speaker 6:](#) My lord is honored by his trust.

[Tyrion L.:](#) I envy your father, all his fine friends, Lady Stark, but I don't quite see the purpose of this.

[Catelyn Stark:](#) I know your sigil as well, the twin towers of Frey. How fairs your lord, sir?

[Speaker 8:](#) Lord Walder is well, milady. He's asked your father for the honor of his presence on his 90th name day. He plans to take another wife.

[Catelyn Stark:](#) This man came into my house as a guest and their conspired to murder my son, a boy of 10. In the name of King Robert and the good lords you serve, I call upon you to seize him and help me return him to Winterfell to await the King's justice.

[Gabriele, M.:](#) She's so calm in that scene, calling on these networks. She can't command them. She can't just tell someone to do something. She relies upon her father's power and her husband's power in order to mobilize those men. In direct contrast to that, there's another really interesting scene from early on in the show in which a Cersei Lannister who's another really powerful woman ... She was married to the king at the very beginning of the show, but when the king died, she becomes the mother of the current king. She's the daughter of one of the most powerful lords in the land. Separate from that, she sits on the king's council as one of his closest advisors and stuff like that. Yet, despite all of those positions, her dad decides she's going to marry to benefit the family. She has no say whatsoever. She protests. She directly protest and tries to claim that authority. Her dad just shuts her down. There's nothing absolutely that she can do.

[Tywin Lannister:](#) Tyrion will do as he's bid, as will you.

[Cersei L.:](#) What do you mean?

[Tywin Lannister:](#) You'll marry Sir Loras.

[Cersei L.:](#) I will not.

[Tywin Lannister:](#) The boy is heir to High Garden. Tyrion will secure the North. You will secure the Reach.

[Cersei L.:](#) No, I won't do it.

[Tywin Lannister:](#) Yes you will. You're still fertile. You need to marry again and breed.

[Cersei L.:](#) I'm Queen Regent not some brood mare.

[Tywin Lannister:](#) You're my daughter. You will do as I command and you will marry Loras Tyrell and put an end to the disgusting rumors about you once and for all.

[Cersei L.:](#) Father, don't make me do it again, please.

[Tywin Lannister:](#) Not another word.

[Gabriele, M.:](#) That's such an amazing scene for a lot of different ways is because you see the power dynamics of the family, which you learn about over the course of the series. Especially there is that the situation turns out almost exactly the opposite of Catelyn. It really shows, especially with women, especially early on in the show, how their power is really situational. What I mean by that is simply that it depends on the context in which they can operate power. Cersei thinks she's powerful for a certain reason because of her role. She's absolutely not. She's powerful because she's able to operate in a certain way. That's something that Catelyn understands in that first clip that Cersei absolutely doesn't. It really shows in that second clip.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Were women really powerful during the Middle Ages in any way?

[Gabriele, M.:](#) Well, that is a very complicated question, but a really great one. The short answer is yes. The longer answer is, of course, it's complicated. You have, just like we talked about with Cersei and Catelyn, for example, is that you have women who, depending on the context, could be immensely powerful and who could be immensely weak that the power that they thought they wielded would evaporate in a moment. For example, you have queens who rule in their own rights. A woman by name of Matilda of Tuscany who lived in the late 11th century, she became the power broker between the papacy and the empire at the end of the 11th century in which both emperor and pope needed her support, would go to her for favors and for her military, for her army's military support in the wars between them. Then you have women like Queen Judith who was the wife of Louis the Pious. She was immensely powerful because of the position she had, but ended up causing a revolt that caused the loss of many lives and almost the fall of the empire.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Do you think with Arya, who has the fantasy of wanting to be a knight, and we see this all the time in this the genre, is that, do you think, based on reality or at least based on literature from the era? Where are the writers of the book and the TV series going back to something they'd found?

[Gabriele, M.:](#) There is one shining example, which comes through. That's simply Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc, towards the end of the Middle Ages during the Hundred Years War for the French, led the French army in a rebellion against the English who had invaded and almost single handedly because of her power and her abilities, literally, as a warrior and as a military commander to turn the tide for the French. For that, she was tried as a heretic and burned by the English when she was captured.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) So many scenes in Game of Thrones are violent. A lot of the violence, not all of it, is perpetuated on the female characters. They are abused. They're assaulted.

[Gabriele, M.:](#) Absolutely.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) They're forced to do what the men tell them to do. Did that change as the seasons went by? Do you think the plot writers began to become more woke?

[Gabriele, M.:](#) I hope so. I think the violence against women that you see in the show, I think it's gone down a little bit over the course of the season. There has been a lot of popular commentary or anything really. Part of that is coming from historians who were saying the Middle Ages were indeed a super violent time. You're invoking this as a time that's other. It's not universally that way. It's not that there was senseless, needless violence that occurred against everyone all the time in this period. I also think it fits there, the narrative arc that the show is trying to get across, which is that women are really coming into their own and becoming rulers in the road right.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) The series also gets a lot of criticism for the way it handles race. It is primarily a very white cast. Does that have any historical grounding?

[Gabriele, M.:](#) No, absolutely not. I think that that gets a ... That's a really interesting discussion to have, because it really gets at our expectations about the Middle Ages much more than the actual Middle Ages themselves. When we talk about the Middle Ages, A, we're talking about an entire continent. We're talking about a thousand plus years of history. We're talking about not just Europe as a continent, but it's interactions across the entire Mediterranean world. By the end of the Middle Ages, Europeans are trading in China, right? They're interacting with the Mongols. They've been to North Africa. They've rounded, they've gone into sub Saharan Africa. By the very end of the Middle Ages we're talking about the encounter with the new world. The idea that this is an exclusively white place, is just absolutely, absolutely false.

[Gabriele, M.:](#) There's archeological evidence, which has been coming to light for the last 20 to 30 years about Africans living in Britain, for example, as early as the eighth or ninth century, maybe even before, etc., etc., etc. The reality of the Middle Ages is much more diverse than what Game of Thrones is portraying. When we talk about the Middle Ages, and a lot of this actually has to do with JRR Tolkien who had some really problematic views about race, about this really, lily white European only civilization, which had no contact with the outside world. That's just simply not true.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) One of the plot lines is that the mother of dragons rescues people who had been enslaved. These are people of color who take on powerful roles as we go along. Is even that insufficient as far as representing people of color from this era?

[Gabriele, M.:](#) Yeah, I mean, I think that's part of the line of criticism. I think a really important one is that it's always the people of color who are rescued. They're never the ones who have agency on their own. You have this very white woman, Daenerys

Targaryen. She's stereotypically very pale skinned, even though she lives in the desert, basically, for a while, very blond hair. Everyone she rescues is of darker skin. I think again, that plays on this colonialist 19th century fantasy about what Europe and what the Middle Ages were like is that slavery exists over there. Whereas there's lots of evidence ... I mean, slavery existed. It was the foundation of the Roman economy in antiquity in Europe in real life, and then continued throughout the Middle Ages. I mean, there's several great new books, which talk about the slave trade in Europe, not just importing Middle Easterners or Muslims but also I'm from eastern Europe and other whites and selling them across Europe just being a common occurrence.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Who were your favorite characters?

[Gabriele, M.:](#) I don't like any of them, honestly. They're all terrible in their own ways. I think that's intentional. I mean, one of the things that I think makes Game of Thrones very popular is that these people, despite their outrageous acts, they're relatable, right? They do good things. They do bad things. It depends on the context. You can always sympathize with them and hate them at the moment, depending. The Starks, for example, the family, the Starks who are the centerpiece of the story and certainly are wronged at the very beginning and start this whole civil war, which runs through the entire series. They're not blameless in any of this. I mean, they make really bad decisions. They do pretty awful things sometimes. Just like the Lannisters who are the arch villains at the very beginning that becomes sympathetic at times, certainly individuals of them do. I think that's really interesting. I mean, it makes me hate them all.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Well, Matthew, thank you so much for sharing your insights with me today on With Good Reason.

[Gabriele, M.:](#) My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Matthew Gabriele is a historian at Virginia Tech. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Welcome back, this is With Good Reason. Oscar Micheaux was one of the pioneers of African American film. In the early half of the 20th century, he produced more than 44 movies and was the very first African American to direct the talkie. His movies took on major themes facing the African American community. His 1938 film, God's Step Children ends with a light-skinned black woman who decides she's going to pass as a white woman.

[Naomi:](#) I'm running away, mother. I've left Clyde. You know I never loved the man, and I can stand it no longer. I've left him, and I'm leaving the Negro race. Oh, don't look at me like that. I've tried. Heaven knows I have, but I can't stand it any longer. My mind is made up, and I'm through.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Andy's not subtle about his own moral and political agenda.

[Andy:](#) You won't succeed on this fool's errand, Naomi, but I see your mind is made up, so I won't try to stop you. I tried so hard to save you from this. I did the best I could, but I failed. Now, I can only say I'm sorry for you Naomi. Sorry, from the bottom of my heart. I pray the Lord to try to forgive you and guide you on to God knows where.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Movies like God's Step Children were part of an early Indie film scene that grew out of the barriers African Americans faced in Hollywood. L. Roi Boyd studies this era of black film. He's a professor of speech and theater at Virginia State University and an adjunct professor of mass communications at Virginia Commonwealth University. Roi, when were the first Indie films made? How did they come about? These were called race movies.

[L. Roi Boyd:](#) Yes, they featured an African American cast and produced and written and distributed by African Americans. There was a need from the get go to present African Americans and African American life in America in an uplifting, dignified manner that of which was extremely rare.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Had this been triggered by that racist movie Birth of a Nation?

[L. Roi Boyd:](#) Absolutely. Because of how African Americans were portrayed in that movie as lazy, oversexed, gluttonous and corrupt and politically irrelevant, there was definitely a move, "Let's go and let's put positive images of ourselves and have them all over America." That was 1915. Roughly 1918, there was a gentleman in Omaha, Nebraska. His name was Noble Johnson. He founded the Lincoln Motion Picture company named after the great emancipator. Noble Johnson was an actor from the Hollywood system. He took that experience and put it into the films that he produced. These films had a professional look to them. They were the very first films that had serious dramatic story with good actors in performance. His mission was to up lift the Negro race. His very first film was called The Realization of a Negroe's Ambition. Even in the title, that right there will tell you what his mission was. It got rave reviews.

[L. Roi Boyd:](#) There was also Luther Rollins of the Ebony Film Corporation. He was a pioneer in that he created comedy shorts. He believed that I am going to make comedy films. I'm going to make sure comedy films, but these African Americans in these films, they will not be stealing chickens, they will not be shooting crops. I can make good comedy apart from all of that. Of course, Ebony Films did not last very long, because black audience still felt that his films were perpetuating negative stereotypes.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) That's so interesting, isn't it?

[L. Roi Boyd:](#) Yeah, and I also see a lot of parallels with what we have going on today. A lot of people are uneasy with the work of Tyler Perry and feel that there must be more of an intellectual stimulation and the extrapolation of the African American people than such. I really wonder with the success of Black Panther

this winter, what Noble Johnson would have thought for being the first African American filmmaker to produce an all black cast and an all black crew of a serious dramatic motion picture in the same way that Black Panther is.

[Sarah McConnell](#): One argument that is made is really the independent film industry, which we hear so much about was begun by black filmmakers during the Jim Crow era.

[L. Roi Boyd](#): Absolutely, there had to be some kind of empowerment because of the desolation that was going on all around you. Now, not only because of what was happening politically, the black codes and the Jim Crow, there was also the time we were experiencing what is called the Great Migration where a lot of African Americans were leaving the south to go up north. From 1892 up until 1968, there were 3,944 lynchings in this country. In the year of 1900 alone, there were 100 lynchings in this country. There had to be an exodus. You go up north. When you go up north, there is the need for affirmation. With migration there is a sense of dislocation. You need affirmation. You need race art. You need race movies. You need race records. You need soul food. We have to find the group again. There is a burgeoning middle class of African Americans. This group of people wanted to see images of themselves.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Where were the studios? What parts of the country? What developed this ground zero for making these films?

[L. Roi Boyd](#): The studios were all over the nation. There were studios in Los Angeles. There were studios in New York City, Jacksonville, Florida, Omaha, Nebraska, Chicago. Chicago was the hub. A lot of them were produced in Fort Lee, New Jersey. The directors at that time, especially Oscar Micheaux, he would get a lot of the black actors who were performing in New York City. He would work around their schedules. Fort Lee was very close to the city. He could get these black Broadway actors, bring them into the studio and get those quality performances out of them.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Tell me about Oscar Micheaux. Why is he such an instrumental figure in the history of black film?

[L. Roi Boyd](#): He wrote books. He sold them door-to-door. Lincoln Motion Picture Company contacted him to take his novel, The Homesteader, and make it into a movie. He insisted that he was going to direct. Well, that fell through with Lincoln Motion Picture Company. However, within a few months he got actors from Chicago. He got a crew from Chicago. He put up The Homesteader in 1918. It was released in 1919. From there he became the leader of the industry. He produced a little more than 43 films. They always had a social message.

[L. Roi Boyd](#): He was obsessed with an issue. He was obsessed with interracial romance. A lot of his films tended to deal with interracial romance. He was obsessed with colorism, the conflict within the African American race between those who are dark skinned and between those who are light skinned. He wanted to go into

the psyche of the issue or the psyche of the African American. It was viewed then as A, the great taboo and B, what all African Americans were curious about or wanted to do but couldn't do it.

[L. Roi Boyd:](#)

If I can talk about a scene in the film *Within Our Gates*, if you don't mind. *Within our gates* was filmed in 1919. It was the answer to *Birth of a Nation* in which there was a sharecropper farmer who wanted to get his part of the profits from the white landowner. They argued in the office. Another disgruntled farmer shot the land owner. Well, the farmer who was black was very scared, of course, did not kill him. Of course, we know it was another white farmer that killed him. He ran. Well, white lynch mob forms. They're Landry and his wife who did not do anything other than just being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Now, the land owner's brother goes into the home where there is a light skinned, African American female and proceeds to rape her. Now, if you ever were to look at that scene, the rape scene in that film mirrors the rape scene in *Birth of a Nation*.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

We have a white man raping a black woman.

[L. Roi Boyd:](#)

Right. What Micheaux is saying here, I'm going to show you who really rapes who, not the way it was erroneously depicted in *Birth of a Nation* that African American's are lustful and over sexed and raping. No, this is how this reality really is. Of course, the white man is shocked to find as he is grabbing this woman that she has a mark on her chest and which tells him that the woman is his illegitimate daughter. I mean, Micheaux hit you like a wrecking ball with a lot of his themes.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

It's so interesting, because I can imagine white audiences never saw this.

[L. Roi Boyd:](#)

Yes and no. Some of them did. 1919 was an awful year in African American history, because World War I brought a lot of great positive benefits. To come back and to be barraged by the sense of racism and also by the feeling of being threatened by white men in this country, that there weren't enough jobs, then there were race riots. There was a terrible race riot in Chicago. 6,000 policemen had to be called. You show a film like *Within Our Gates* at the Pekin Theater where a few weeks earlier there was a race riot, a lot of people are going to feel, "Oh my God. Okay, we have this movie here. Is this going to happen again?"

[L. Roi Boyd:](#)

Also with a lot of Michaux's films, somethings that a lot of people are not aware of is that African Americans complexion wise are not monolithic. There are set fro shades of African American complexion. There may be a female featured in these films who is very, very close to being mistaken as Caucasian or what they used to call back in the day passing. Audiences, not just whites, blacks too, they would be upset when they would see a dark skinned man kissing this woman who is black. They would say, "Look at him. He's kissing a white woman." The truth is she's just as black as you and me.

[Sarah McConnell](#): What was Micheaux doing with that? Was he trying to show the complexity and the arbitrariness of judging us by our skin color?

[L. Roi Boyd](#): Absolutely, I really do believe that he was showing them many different sides of the conundrum, the enigma of racism and colorism wrapped inside of its own enigma. I think he wanted us to step outside of it and to take a look at ourselves. Oftentimes within the culture, and it's often viewed as such outside that it's always a black-white thing. There's always tension between black and white. Well, there's also tension between a cream and mahogany.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Was there any evidence that white filmmakers would see these films themselves and borrow any ideas or techniques or actors from, get inspiration from them in any way?

[L. Roi Boyd](#): Sarah, a whole industry came and sucked in like a vacuum everything that you have just mentioned. I'm going to give you a year. This year is 1929. Two years earlier, we had a huge advancement in motion pictures. We had sound to Al Jolson, the jazz singer. Okay? In 1929, Hollywood comes out with two films, Hearts in Dixie. Then on August 20th, 1929 was a film called Hallelujah. These were the first two all black cast films from Hollywood, from Fox and MGM. Okay? They took the actors from the race movies. Uh, Nina Mae McKinney, Stepin Fetchit and a host of many others. Now we have a new film genre. We have the Hollywood, all black cast film. We have the race movie genre, the independent race movie genre.

[L. Roi Boyd](#): There's a number of things that the Hollywood, all black cast film genre did to race movies, okay? Number one, it went away from the images of upper middle class, African American life and decorum and focused primarily on the entertainment, the singing and the dancing, okay? They tried to recreate those big, glossy song and dance numbers that Hollywood was known for. The other thing was the race movies found themselves going backward instead of moving forward. It wasn't about the message anymore. It was going simply into entertaining. The third thing is when you go into the 1940s, the difference between what was a race movie and what was an all black Hollywood picture, it began to blur, okay? After a while these films would come out. A lot of people would just feel that they were just the same. This contributed to and it was signaling the beginning of the end of the race movie genre.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Why did Hollywood in 1929 want to make all black cast films?

[L. Roi Boyd](#): Very easy. Money. They saw that there was a lot of money to be made in all black cast films.

[Sarah McConnell](#): Who would watch those all black cast films?

[L. Roi Boyd](#): African Americans. What was also going on was, see in the '20s there were a lot of independent black theaters on what was called the Chitlin Circuit, okay? The

Chitlin Circuit is a name that black [inaudible 00:44:19] gave to a string of theaters all around the Jim Crow south where you could perform with no trouble, okay? It was truly called The Theater of Black America Circuit, TOBA, okay? Today, we call it the Urban Circuit.

[L. Roi Boyd:](#)

In the '40s now, because of the power of Hollywood, Hollywood is now owning so many theaters all over the country, loads, United artists and so forth. These corporations and these studios are controlling what pictures are being shown all over the nation. If they can bring a huge crowd of African Americans to these theaters that they were controlling, then they were going to benefit from that financial gain. This Sarah is where we see the beginning of starlets like Lena Horne. This was also were a star like Stepin Fetchit is going to enjoy dual success not only in the independent race movie market, but also in the Hollywood market as well. There were a lot of them that we're doing this. Hattie McDaniel was one too. Sammy Davis Jr.'s first film was a race movie. Sammy Davis Jr was seven years old. He performed in the short called Rufus Davis for President in which he was tap dancing and singing. It's a delightful film. Butterfly McQueen, who was Prissy in Gone with the Wind, played in a couple of films. Of course, Paul Robeson. Paul Robeson's very first acting job was a race movie directed by Oscar Micheaux. It was a film and titled Body and Soul in which he played a drunken, lecherous minister.

[Sarah McConnell:](#)

If race movies reached their peak during the Jim Crow era, because African Americans in one sense, we're shut out of Hollywood, and also there was just so much racism in mainstream movies, when did the making of race movies pretty much come to a close? Was it the end of segregation?

[L. Roi Boyd:](#)

It started at the end of World War II. After experiencing racism firsthand the way that we did in Europe, when we came back, we were like, "Okay, maybe this isn't working. Maybe we really need to rethink how we're doing things in this country." That was sort of the air. Of course, what that means is it's going to take a while to see anything. Well, what happens nine years later? Brown versus Board of Education, okay? 10 years after World War II was the Montgomery Bus Boycott. There was something in the year that something was going to have to change.

[L. Roi Boyd:](#)

In 1948, Hollywood puts out three motion pictures, Intruder in the Dust, Pinky, and Lost Boundaries in which there were serious scenarios dealing with African Americans in these films. In short, these films introduced what was called the new Negro, indirectly admitting that they created the old Negro, which the race movies protested against. They cleaned up their act. They presented this new Negro. As that was going on, the black audience was moving more toward these new Negro motion pictures. Also, there was a feeling and the culture that there was a low quality web production. The sound isn't too good. The film is too grainy. I want the better experience and such.

[L. Roi Boyd:](#) In the '50s, we began to integrate. With integration comes freedom. Let me experience something that I was more curious about. Let me go to a theater that I've never been to before. Let me experience this, that and the other. The need for such affirmation begins to trail off. Oscar Micheaux passes in 1951. The last known race movie was a film produced in 1954 call Carib Gold. We go through a period of roughly 14-15 years in which some film historians called the no Negro period until the late sixties when Gordon Parks, Melvin Van Peebles and Ossie Davis create a new genre, which would eventually become known as blaxploitation.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Going back to that earlier time and the so called race movies, how many of those were made?

[L. Roi Boyd:](#) 500, and right now only 100 survive.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Why?

[L. Roi Boyd:](#) Deterioration. In the '80s a lot of these were found in boxes in warehouses. They're all public domain, so we're putting them out as educational use right now. Boy, is it for our benefit. You could say culture is important because it expresses the life of a people. These films express the life of these Americans. Americans who used their skills in the arts and the humanities. This was a cultural, artistic way to stand tall.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) Roi Boyd, thank you for sharing your insights with me on With Good Reason.

[L. Roi Boyd:](#) My pleasure. Thank you for having me, Sarah.

[Sarah McConnell:](#) L. Roi Boyd is a professor of speech and theater at Virginia State University and an adjunct professor of mass communications at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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[Sarah McConnell:](#) With Good Reason is produced in Charlottesville by Virginia Humanities. Our production team is Alison Quantz, Elliot Majerczyk, and Kelley Libby. Jeannie Palin handles listener services. Our interns are Georgianna Read and Emily Hayes. Special thanks this week to Bill Foye at Virginia Tech. For the podcast, go to iTunes or to WithGoodReasonRadio.org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.

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