



Book Club Guide

# The Final Revival of Opal & Nev

By Dawnie Walton

## About the Author

DAWNIE WALTON is a writer, editor, and author of the novel *The Final Revival of Opal & Nev*, winner of the Aspen Words Literary Prize, longlisted for the Women's Prize for Fiction, and named one of the best books of 2021 by *The Washington Post*, NPR, *Esquire*, and former U.S. President Barack Obama, among others. Her work explores identity, place, and the influence of pop culture. Formerly an editor at *Essence* and *Entertainment Weekly*, she has received fellowships in fiction from MacDowell and Tin House, and an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her writing has appeared in *Oxford American*, *Bon Appetit*, NPR, Lithub, and Black Ballad. Born and raised in Jacksonville, Florida, she lives in Brooklyn with her husband.

Retrieved from: <https://www.dawniewalton.com/#about>

## About the Book

Opal is a fiercely independent young woman pushing against the grain in her style and attitude, Afro-punk before that term existed. Coming of age in Detroit, she can't imagine settling for a 9-to-5 job—despite her unusual looks, Opal believes she can be a star. So when the aspiring British singer/songwriter Neville Charles discovers her at a bar's amateur night, she takes him up on his offer to make rock music together for the fledgling Rivington Records.

In early seventies New York City, just as she's finding her niche as part of a flamboyant and funky creative scene, a rival band signed to her label brandishes a Confederate flag at a promotional concert. Opal's bold protest and the violence that ensues set off a chain of events that will not only change the lives of those she loves, but also be a deadly reminder that repercussions are always harsher for women, especially black women, who dare to speak their truth.

Decades later, as Opal considers a 2016 reunion with Nev, music journalist S. Sunny Shelton seizes the chance to curate an oral history about her idols. Sunny thought she knew most of the stories leading up to the cult duo's most politicized chapter. But as her interviews dig deeper, a nasty new allegation from an unexpected source threatens to blow up everything.

Provocative and chilling, *The Final Revival of Opal & Nev* features a backup chorus of unforgettable voices, a heroine the likes of which we've not seen in storytelling, and a daring structure, and introduces a bold new voice in contemporary fiction.

Retrieved from: <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/The-Final-Revival-of-Opal-Nev/Dawnie-Walton/9781982140168>

## Discussion Questions

1. Sunny Shelton, after being named the editor-in-chief of Aural, is worried “that the reasons for my success would be questioned by even my most progressive white colleagues.” Why might Sunny feel anxious about her promotion as the first woman and first Black person in that role? In what ways do her anxieties turn out to be justified?
2. When Sunny interviews Nev Charles, she notices a tote that’s fallen on its side to reveal what Nev’s been reading: a copy of *The New Jim Crow*, a recent issue of *The Atlantic*, and a *New York Times* bestselling book of poetry. Sunny wonders if these were props chosen deliberately for her to see. What image or message might Nev be hoping to send? In what ways have books you’ve read affected your outlook on the world? And in the era of social media, to what degree do you think the books we share represent who we are?
3. Opal Jewel comes of age in Detroit, with the Vietnam War, the popular success of Motown, and resistance to police brutality as a backdrop. How do you think this shaped her personality, personal style, and life of protest? Compare and contrast Opal and Nev’s upbringings and how they influenced their actions later in life.
4. Bob Hize, who produced Opal and Nev’s first record, recalls that Nev “needed to be pushed, needed to be surrounded by fresh sorts of influences that would take him unfamiliar places.” Why do you think Opal was that “fresh sort of influence” Nev needed, and what unfamiliar places did she take him?
5. Nev writes a song he wants Opal to sing called “Black Coffee,” which causes some contention in their band. It is meant to be sung from the point of view of a poor, Black single mother, and Opal says she can’t stand the song. To her, Nev was “putting all these words in my mouth, literally, and they were so damn morose...musty and sad and old-school Negro.” What do you think Nev was trying to achieve by writing “Black Coffee?” How does this conflict reflect the debate about white artists telling others’ stories?
6. Chet Bond insists that the Bond Brothers’ display of the Confederate flag at the Rivington Showcase was not racist and they were not targeting Black people by displaying it. Discuss the usage of the Confederate flag throughout American history and what it has symbolized.
7. At the Showcase, Opal feels antagonized by the Bond Brothers’ display of the Confederate flag and doesn’t know if she should perform. On one side, her lover Jimmy suggests they don’t, but on the other, Nev urges her to carry on with the show. Opal’s decision to side with Nev is a turning point in her life. In what ways has a crucial decision affected the rest of your life?

8. What is symbolic of the legendary photo of Opal riding on Nev's back out of the chaos of the Rivington Showcase? How does that photo resonate in modern times?
9. In an Editor's Note, Sunny describes the visceral experience of hearing Opal and Nev's records for the first time as a fourteen-year-old girl. Share your musical memories from a similar age. Which songs and albums left the deepest impressions on you, and why? Do you look at those artists and that music the same way now?
10. There is a question of exploitation as Opal and Nev achieve fame together. Sunny writes that "their art—in its thematic content and well-timed release, in the direct correlation between its outrageousness and their upticking level of fame—had exploited Black pain." Discuss which of their performances and songs were exploitative to Sunny's point.
11. After a startling revelation in the middle of the narrative, the issue of complicity comes to the forefront. In what ways is the act of complicity demonstrated by Opal and Nev as individuals and as a pair?
12. Sunny shares an article about Opal written after the Showcase, which bears some similarities to the article written about Sunny later on in the novel. Compare and contrast how both women are portrayed in these two separate articles written decades apart.
13. After an exhausting tour with Nev, Opal travels to Paris and, for a while, considers living there permanently. What kind of respite do you think she finds, and why does she ultimately choose to return to the United States? Do you think she made the right decision? How have your travels to other places affected your perspective on home?
14. Compare and contrast the events of both the Rivington Showcase and Derringdo. In what ways are they similar even if decades apart? In your opinion, how has the act of resistance and protest evolved over the years?
15. How were Opal and Nev's rises to fame different because of their races and genders? Why does Nev find more success later in his career than Opal?

Retrieved from: [https://d1hbl61hovme3a.cloudfront.net/assets\\_us/80182-finalrevivalopalnev-rgg-\(1\).pdf](https://d1hbl61hovme3a.cloudfront.net/assets_us/80182-finalrevivalopalnev-rgg-(1).pdf)

## Author Interview

**Alex Madison:** Since your novel is about a fictional rock 'n' roll duo, I wanted to ask about your own relationship with music. What did you grow up listening to?

**Dawnie Walton:** I come from a family of music fans—record collections were a thing in all my relatives' households. My grandparents were into jazz vocalists: Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington, Nat King Cole. And my parents were in their twenties in the 1970s, a very exciting time for Soul music, so Marvin Gaye and Stevie Wonder were such a big part of my childhood. My dad also listened to instrumental music, like jazz and fusion. I loved all of that stuff, but my own curiosity led me to other kinds of music.

When I was a teenager in the 1990s, what a person listened to was representative of so much—for better or worse. I fell in with the alternative, artsy kids. We were into post-punk, a lot of British music, and bands like the Cure and the Smiths. I also really loved the shoegaze band Ride and the indie-rock band Pavement. But it was complicated—there was nobody who looked like me in that scene. During my freshman year at Florida A&M, an HBCU, my musical tastes and my identity started to reconcile. This was 1994, the golden age of hip hop, and still an exciting time to be into rock 'n' roll. I started to understand that what I listened to didn't define me. It didn't change the fact that I was—and am—a proud Black person and comfortable in my own skin. And I was meeting other Black people who liked all kinds of things.

I've always been interested in those years of my life, when I didn't see myself in the things I was drawn to. I wanted to write something about it—and now I have—about that wish to have a figure. Someone you put up on your wall that you're proud of, as opposed to, like, hiding that poster under your bed. I often felt like the music I listened to was somehow contraband.

**AM:** Did your research uncover anything surprising?

**DW:** One of the things that's been really incredible and sad about writing this book is understanding that there were so many Black women in rock who've been erased. And I'm still learning about new ones. In fact, I just read about this band Bam Bam from Seattle. Have you heard of them? The band's style was a forerunner of grunge, and they were led by a Black woman named Tina Bell, who I had never heard of before. There are so many women like Bell who were foundational and people—even an enthusiast like me—just don't know about them.

**AM:** In your novel, Opal, the Black singer at the center of the story, has not been erased, but there's a lot the public doesn't know, or gets wrong, about her. Can you tell us about Sunny and her project?

**DW:** This is not a spoiler because it's the very first sentence of the book: Sunny is the daughter of Jimmy Curtis, who was Opal and Nev's drummer, and who was killed before Sunny was born. Jimmy was at the concert where Opal lodges a protest that

changes the trajectory of the band and the book. At that time, he was also having an affair with Opal. Sunny grows up thinking of Opal as a taboo figure, but she sneaks Opal and Nev's music and becomes a rock 'n' roll fan listening to these contraband albums. Sunny is fascinated by how fiery Opal is. She ends up becoming—to her mother's consternation—a music journalist. But she's paranoid in her professional life. She doesn't want people to know her family history because she doesn't want them to think that she's been *given* anything.

At the start of the book, she gets promoted to editor in chief of the music magazine she works for. And she thinks, *finally I can breathe, I can trust my own instincts*. She decides to write an oral history of Opal and Nev. As she talks to people involved with the band and looks into her own background, she goes back and forth between worshipping Opal and being very angry with her.

**AM:** What was it like to develop Opal and Nev as complementary characters?

**DW:** Back in 2013, I was watching footage from Talking Heads' concert movie, *Stop Making Sense* (1984). At one point, singer David Byrne is in the middle of the stage, being his weird self in his gray, boxy suit. Then the camera pans and you see his backup singers: two Black women whose names I've since learned are Lynn Mabry and Ednah Holt. They were giving it their all—so talented, so compelling—and wearing microbraids and bright-red lipstick and gray short suits to match Byrne's. I thought, "God, I wish I could pull one of them to center stage." It sparked a bunch of "what-if" questions. To friends, I pitched the novel as: imagine if David Bowie and Grace Jones made proto-punk music in 1970s New York City. What would that be like? I started riffing from there.

I began with Opal's voice, thinking about the city where she lived, Detroit, which was, at the time of her childhood, a place of wonderful empowerment and resistance for Black people. I wanted Nev to come from a different socioeconomic background. He's a funny one—he ended up surprising me often. As I was getting to know his voice, I thought of him as charming, but also a little slick—in the way that a celebrity would be. I was also thinking about his privilege in this context, and what the idea of certain rock stars being chameleons would ultimately mean for him.

**AM:** Has your background as a journalist factored into your fiction writing?

**DW:** I think bringing in history was key. For three years, I worked at Life.com, a photography site that was the resurrection of *Life* magazine. I spent a lot of time looking at old photos in the archives and trying to decipher the stories they were telling. I think that mode of processing history really affected the way I think as a writer. And at *Entertainment Weekly*, where I worked for six years, I became a fan of oral history and was interested in questions about imagery and celebrity: what is public versus private, issues of intent and art making, and how some things become incredibly popular while others just fall off—all things I explored in the novel. At the end of my

nine-to-five, like, executive media life, I was at *Essence*, which is a magazine and brand that, for more than fifty years now, has celebrated and uplifted Black women.

I was an editor at *Essence*; I didn't write very often, but I did write a feature based on a study about images of Black women in media. It broke down nine different categories of negative tropes from across television and movies. So, I was very cognizant, in writing this book, about creating a full and rich character who didn't fall into a "jezebel" trope or an "angry Black woman" trope. I wanted to create an iconic figure who was powerful and inspiring but also complicated and human and vulnerable.

**AM:** There are two timelines in the book: the main storyline takes place in the past, while the characters telling it live in America, circa 2016. How did you think about those two frames of reference?

**DW:** The biggest technical complication was that Opal and Nev were supposed to be famous people. Household names. I had to keep an idea of the book as a real document in the world of the novel as I was writing, and consider how a reader in that world would approach the book. I wanted to reveal new information and new context for that reader. But what information would go without saying? That was a tricky thing to get around. I didn't want to take it so far as to write something like, "You remember when this thing happened, and that thing." So, I started thinking of it more like Sunny does as a journalist: by laying out the myth of Opal and Nev and then deconstructing that myth.

**AM:** We also hear from real people who are alive now, like Gloria Steinem and Quentin Tarantino, alongside other familiar cultural figures. What were you hoping to show by placing Opal among this constellation of "real" data points?

**DW:** I'm putting on my journalist hat here—I was thinking about people who would have good commentary on how Opal and Nev were positioned in different cultural contexts and social movements. I was able to think about Opal as a feminist character by imagining Gloria Steinem talking about her being on *The Dick Cavett Show* and about intersectional feminism. I was interested in thinking about Opal's image as a badass and how that image was exploited in ways that aren't always comfortable. I was thinking about artists whom Opal might have influenced, such as Janelle Monáe. And Black Flag's Henry Rollins and Rage Against the Machine's Tom Morello also have moments in the novel talking about Opal's music, her place in the music world, and being very clear about her influence on punk.

At one point, I had Beyoncé make an appearance. I took her out simply because Beyoncé doesn't talk to the media very much.

Retrieved from: <https://www.bookforum.com/interviews/dawnie-walton-discusses-her-novel-about-an-iconic-proto-punk-singer-24436>



**Other Links and Resources:**

<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/dawnie-walton-final-revival-opal-nev-betty-davis-1337227/>

<https://artsfuse.org/227978/book-review-the-final-revival-of-opal-nev-who-controls-the-narrative/>

<https://womensprizeforfiction.co.uk/features/features/news/announcing-the-womens-prize-2022-longlist>

Music that inspired “The Final Revival of Opal & Nev on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0a6MAK1ycbv8oetTEbOwdo>

<https://www.esquire.com/lifestyle/g12199946/new-york-1970s/>

## Share your thoughts with other readers!

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BOOK TITLE: \_\_\_\_\_

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes      No      Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: