

CULTURE

Don't Look Away: A Q&A with *12 Years a Slave* Writer John Ridley

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Chiwetel Ejiofor in *12 Years a Slave*/Photo © Jaap Buitendijk, Fox Searchlight Pictures

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Race is not a word that gives John Ridley pause. From his earliest days in stand-up comedy through his work as a novelist (*A Conversation With the Mann*), comic book creator (*The American Way*), television writer (“Third Watch”), essayist (“[The Manifesto of Ascendancy for the Modern American Nigger](#)”), cultural commentator (CNN, [Huffington Post](#)) and screenwriter (“Undercover Brother,” “Red Tails”), the prolific forty-seven-year-old firebrand has frequently run right at the longest, deepest fissure in American society. So his latest work, the Steve McQueen-directed “[12 Years a Slave](#),” is merely the next logical step in a creative life that has increasingly

looked to “take these historical events, try to give them life and put them on their feet,” as he puts it.

Along with his own writing-directing effort "[All Is By My Side](#)," a detailed look at Jimi Hendrix's pre-fame years in London, "12 Years" had its premiere at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#). Based on [Solomon Northup's original account](#) of being a free man in pre-Civil War New York who is abducted and sold into slavery, the film stars Chiwetel Ejiofor ("Children of Men") as Northup and features Michael Fassbender, Alfre Woodard, Paul Giamatti, Paul Dano, Benedict Cumberbatch, and Quvenzhané Wallis, the fierce young center of "Beast of the Southern Wild," in the supporting cast. Produced by Brad Pitt's Plan B, "12 Years" will get a limited release October 18 from Fox Searchlight, which distributed McQueen's "Shame" two years ago.

In a wide-ranging interview with Signature, Ridley discusses the unique nature of adapting this particular story for today's audiences and how "12 Years" fits into the American cultural narrative of slavery established by works such as *Roots*, [Beloved](#) and more recently, "Lincoln." He admits that he was embarrassed at the realization of how little he really knew about it once he took a hard look. The brutal truth of his discoveries also put into perspective modern-day complaints that government is taking freedoms away. "We use that in a hyperbolic sense, but we really don't have any idea of what it means to have our rights and our liberty and our family and our friends taken away," Ridley says. "When you talk about those things, *this* is what you really mean. And is this what is happening to you? Because if not — modify yourself."

Signature: You've never shied away from addressing race directly in your novels and scripts. How does "12 Years a Slave" fit into the progression of your creative career?

John Ridley: When you're younger, you have a certain energy, and part of that is trying not to get caught up in or trapped by history and reality. As I got more mature and started doing more writing for [NPR](#) and [Esquire](#), I learned the value and the benefit and the how-to of digging deeper into history. And also, having a family. I love "U-Turn," "Undercover Brother," and "Three Kings," but to be able to leave behind some documents like "Red Tails," "All Is By My Side" and "12 Years a Slave," it shows maturity all the way around — maturity of self, maturity of ability and maturity in the things I want to say, at least at this phase of my career.

SIG: Now you want to leave a legacy in some way.

JR: It's funny, when I was younger and I'd hear people that I really admired talking about, "Oh, I have kids now and want to do this...," I kind of laughed. It just seemed soft. But it's definitely changed me. Taking my kids to the "Red Tails" premiere was a huge event. Not just that I'm so much smarter and

better. It's an evolution of self. And something like "12 Years a Slave" comes along and you go, "This I want to be part of. It's one thing to sit off in a corner and write what you want and not necessarily have anything that you have to compare it to. But to know that you're taking source material that is really powerful and compelling, you've got to step up and try to match that. And those kinds of challenges became more attractive as I got older, as well."

SIG: How much research did you do beyond Northup's book? Or did you feel that the story would be rich enough on its own?

JR: When I first sat down with Steve right after "Hunger" was done, Steve was the one that said, "I'd really like to do something that deals with slavery that is not a straight-up slave narrative and deals with a person who is of an exceptional ability and mind but who gets caught up in the system." So we went from a premise. I did a bunch of research, and I surprised myself because I assumed as a black American that I knew something about slavery. I realized as I was researching that I knew nothing but the basics, as probably pretty much everyone else does. And in researching it you find out a great deal about indentured servitude and how that became slavery, and then the injection of racial inferiority and why. You know, there were free blacks before there was slavery. Blacks were landowners and things. At some point, Steve's wife found the book. It wasn't like we had the book and we said, "Oh, this is great, let's do this." It was, "Let's really dig deep into this system that was America for so very long and try to find a way in," and then we found a true, real document that ticked all the boxes that we were looking to tick, but did it in a way that made it phenomenally real because it *was* real.

SIG: Once you dug in, was there anything about his story or your research that surprised you?

JR: What surprised me most was the very off-handed and accepted nature of the system. And the evolution of it. You sort of think that slavery came here and it was fully formed. That there were plantation owners and they started importing African slaves and that was just the system. It was not. It was a system that was built up over time, and it became really and truly ingrained in everyone's minds, black or white, that this system needs to be this way. Without proselytizing too much, it really becomes this top-down system of a very few who want to control a commerce and an economic platform but have to convince everybody else, whether they have skin in the game or not — no pun intended — that they need to be part of the system. And that was really the insidious thing. Not everyone was a slave owner. But everybody in the southern section of the United States at that time was convinced that this was not only important for the economy, it was a fundamental way of life, a fundamental fabric of society, of morality. And the second point that shocked me is that once it became so commonplace there was not a direct urgency to change the system. It took hundreds of years. I would read diaries of slave owners, where they would say, "*Bought a dozen pigs today, need to take them to market. Shot my slave. Planning a party for the weekend...*" It was just an item on a list,

how these individuals were treated, and no one by and large cared or saw it as being wrong. Those were the two things that shocked me — the system and how it became implemented, and how people were truly hoodwinked into believing it and accepting it.

SIG: Are there things you can and can't do when you're telling a story like this for today's audiences, in terms of depicting racial hatred and the brutality of slavery? Are there limits? And has that changed over the years?

JR: I don't think most people know how truly brutal and horrible the system was. It's not that there are limits. Certainly, Steve is not a creative person who limits himself in any way, shape or form. Working with him, I certainly felt like I did not have limits. I think there's a difference between being mindful of limits and luxuriating in violence, luxuriating in the pain and misery. To make a movie where every single moment is like that, it becomes difficult to modulate and show and remind people of the humanity, so you know why the pain hurts. But I think the tolerance is definitely higher for people being able to view and process and understand the need to view the levels of brutality and that representation on film. You look back at "Roots," and at the time people thought that was just brutal and there were questions of, is this appropriate for television?

SIG: I still remember catching a glimpse on TV of a man being whipped when I was young, and I'll never forget it.

JR: I remember "Good Morning America" had LeVar Burton on, and they were talking about the miniseries and they said, "It's a very difficult scene, so we're not going to actually show the footage, we're going to show stills with the audio." And so they went through the whole scene where he was whipped, "Say your name." "It's Kunta Kinte..." But they didn't show the footage, because at that time of the morning it was not appropriate. Now, I think people can accept it, whether it's because we're more desensitized and we have to go a little further or whether we as people recognize that it's not enough to just talk around certain horrors. It's not about the shock value but about, we are going to truly educate you on the pain, and if you in your seat curl just a little bit or grab your chest or have to look away, imagine what it was like for the real individuals at that time, when there was no looking away, there was no going out to dinner afterwards and discussing how horrible it was. That was your life day-to-day. Within the film, we certainly do not luxuriate in the violence, but we do not flinch from it either.

SIG: Where does "12 Years a Slave" fit into the larger narrative of slavery literature and cinema? Does it bring something new for anyone who's been exposed to "Roots" and "Beloved," but also "Glory," "Lincoln," and others.

JR: It does for me. “Roots” was phenomenal, but it was a real anthropological study. It was a person in the latter part of the twentieth century looking back on his family and a true African-American/black journey through history. “Beloved” takes this narrative, but is a creative account of what that is. Then with “Lincoln,” which I thought was brilliant, it is an outsider’s look at the system. It showed the drive to change, but it was at an arm’s distance. With this, you’re talking about a narrative of an individual, *his* story, not a creative story, not a look back at it, but one that was written in that time frame by someone who lived through it. Someone who himself prior to it was a little agnostic — not about slavery, but about freedom and about the right of self-determination — until it was visited upon him. The other thing to remember is, at that time, to be able to read and write and have an education as a person of color in the South was a death sentence, and the sentence could be carried out instantly. So there are not a great many of these written personal slave narratives. For an individual to write this in that time frame and attempt to render that perspective and bring that immediacy to the story, I think that’s where it becomes different from a “Beloved,” a “Roots,” or a “Lincoln.”

SIG: What’s your take on something like “Django Unchained?”

JR: I have not seen “Django,” and not because I was trying to avoid it. Unfortunately, we’re still at a place where things that come out with people of color, certainly when they dip into a historical place, get kind of lump-summed. People look at “Lincoln,” “Django” or “The Butler” and say, “How does this fit in? Does this step on what you’re doing?” I just want to know that the landscape as a whole leaves enough places where people of color can be heavily involved in or speak to other kinds of narratives.

SIG: Do you feel more black stories are getting out there now through movies? Has anything changed or improved from your perspective?

JR: This last year has been a really phenomenal year for film involving people of color. “Flight,” “The Call,” “Think Like a Man,” “After Earth,” “42,” “Fast & Furious,” “Middle of Nowhere,” “Beasts of the Southern Wild,” “Red Tails” — if you look at the films that have been done, we are truly all over the map. I think this has been the best fourteen months or so of cinema of people of color in quite a long time. You just look up and down the scope and scale of it, people are finding a way to step out of the system a little bit and get it done. The last couple years it’s really been brewing. And also because of the way the international box office is changing. People are more accepting of people who don’t look like them. I don’t think it’s an accident “Life of Pi” was huge in the world. I don’t think it’s an accident that “Fast & Furious” is huge in the world. What’s going away is that concept of, This is Black Cinema. Cinema is cinema.

"12 Years a Slave" opens in theaters on October 18, 2013.



COMMENT

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12 YEARS A SLAVE

JOHN RIDLEY

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