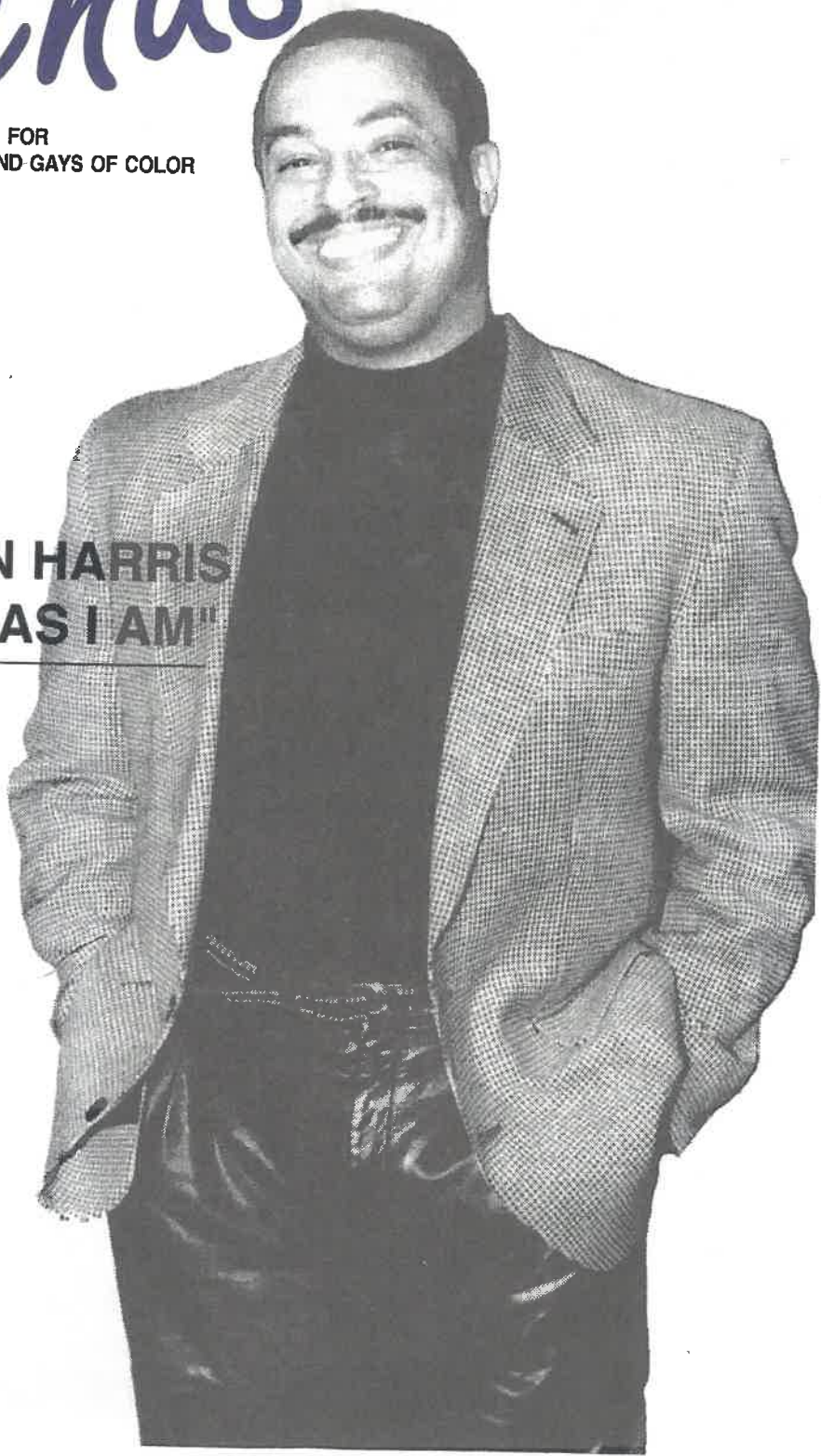


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E. LYNN HARRIS
"JUST AS I AM"



PERSPECTIVES

CONFRONTATION WITH SELF:

A Conversation with E. Lynn Harris

by Douglas E. Jones

His success has been nothing short of phenomenal, documented by his visibility to Black Gay America, Black America, as well as America in general.

Best-selling thirtysomething author E. Lynn Harris has captured the minds and hearts of thousands with his books *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*.

In a time when America has been catapulted backwards into the grips of staunch Republican conservatism, Mr. Harris has taken the opportunity to explain the truths of life, of differing realities, possibly opening the door towards the beginnings of community and societal wide healing. The opportunity to tell his story, to explain his truths, has not been without its own unique challenges, but Mr.

Harris relishes those memories. He has overcome those challenges and has used the combination of his sales savvy and 'down home' delivery to keep him connected and grounded to his audience. Lynn, as he is known—the 'E' is a secret which he must keep for himself, he notes with a twinkle of mischief in his eyes—has not assumed the mantle of fame endemic to an author who has exceeded anticipated sales of 10,000 books by almost twenty times that amount, with no end in sight. And this

on the eve of the paperback release of *Just As I Am*. Recently, he addressed a packed audience at Georgia State University; the bond between

he and the crowd was instantaneous and as I searched for a word to accurately describe him the mantra of 'Realness!' kept recurring in my mind. I invite you to read why.

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Magazine: When you started writing the books, did you have a target audience in my mind or did you write from personal experience?

Lynn Harris: I wrote the books from personal experience. I didn't necessarily have a target audience in mind. I just knew the truth of what I was writing about.

VM: We've spoken before about the stark nature of the fan mail that you've received relative to *Just As I Am*. In terms of Black gay men, would you comment on some of those responses?

LH: You know, it's amazing the amount of pain people are in—especially young, Black gay men. One person wrote me and said that he wished he had this book in high school. I've gotten a letter from a professional athlete who wrote me completely anonymously, he



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didn't want to use his name—he couldn't afford to 'come out'. But he said that the books Invisible Life and Just As I Am have touched him. He said that so much of the books were true and that, even though he couldn't come out, the books have helped him. I answer all of my mail, but I couldn't write him back—he just signed a single name to the letter. He just wanted me to know.

VM: That is so painful when you consider the issue of 'coming out' and the mental and emotional freedom that goes along with it. Certainly, the goal is not for everyone to come out, but everyone should at least have the freedom to do so if that's what they choose.

LH: I agree with you that everyone can't come out, but I think it's a shame because since I've written the book and since I've come out, my life has never been better. There is no pretense.

there are no more lies and it's just a wonderful way to live and I wish that for everyone. But, everyone still has to worry about jobs, they still have to worry about family, they have to worry about someone in their life. This is my job now, so I'm not threatened by anyone.

VM: How do we balance those points between family, jobs, and having someone in your life? How can that dilemma be negotiated? How much is 'too out'—how much 'out' can 'out' be?

LH: I think that people can find love while being in the closet, because a lot of Black men are in the closet and somehow we manage to find each other. But, I think that some of the things that lovers enjoy with each other become somewhat restricted. You know, like sharing being in love with your parents, your brothers and sisters, or just the people who are important to you. That is not a possibility if you're in the closet. It also minimizes or

negates how many of us there actually are. Recently, a friend—who I've known for a long time—told me her brother came out to her and she was totally in shock. She said she would have never guessed it in a million years and although she was able to accept it because of having known me, she thought that maybe I was different. But, she saw that this can

happen in a family where there is a mother and father, where there is a lot of love, where there are no harsh realities.

VM: The 'American Dream'.

LH: Right. She asked him how long he'd been gay and he said all his life. It shocked her because she finally realized that it wasn't due to some imbalance. You know, I always tell people, 'What do you think? That there's someone secretly taking our little Black boys in the middle of the night and making them gay?' That's not what's happening.

VM: Is that the point of beginnings at which we see Raymond, Jr. in Just As I Am? In Invisible Life we see he starts the process and in Just As I Am he continues trying to reconcile what is going on with Kyle, with what's going in his personal life, with how he's interacting with Nicole.

LH: Yeah, I wanted to see some growth with him, because he's like a lot of people. I still have a lot of friends who are in the closet. The majority of letters I get are from people who are in the closet. They just need someone they can talk to—the pain, you can almost feel it in the letters. Where do they go? It's really difficult because there really is no place for young, Black gay men and lesbian women to go. Our community isn't organized; there's no safe haven. The White gay community is definitely not a place where we can find a permanent home.

VM: Because of the challenges of racism,



LH: Right. You know, home should be a place where you feel completely safe and completely at home. And we may not feel that in the Black community as a whole because they don't understand us. Then, when we go into the White gay community, there is that problem of racism, be it overt or subtle.

VM: How can we bridge that gap? If the Black community is homophobic, where is our opportunity for healing?

LH: I don't think that the Black community is as much homophobic as they are uneducated and uninformed. The opportunity is for more people to share their lives with their families, with their churches, with those people who are important to them, then people would see that this is not something that people would willy-nilly go out and choose. Most of the Black lesbian and gay people that I know don't fit those stereotypes which cause fear in our community. If people were more honest and open about who they are the community would see that. That is what I tried to do with *Just As I Am*; if you have any kind of faith, if you have any kind of backbone, your faith tells you that God made you in your own image and that you really have to be true to yourself.

When this is all over—when we are dead—it really won't matter what you thought of me. What will matter most is what I knew to be true about myself and what God already knew. And how I lived my life. And how I lived my life. *And how I lived my life.* If you're living your life in the closet, I'm not saying that you're living a lie, but you're not really living your life.

There's so much difference in what a 'gay life' is, I mean, what is that? Just live your life the way you see fit—but, be comfortable with it, don't restrict your life and don't live your life in fear.

VM: You touched briefly on the need for Black gays and lesbians to share with our churches and spirituality is a strong theme in *Just As I Am*. Are you a member of New Birth Baptist Church?

LH: I'm getting ready to move my membership.

VM: So, it's true—that the church is foster-

ing a homophobic environment?

LH: Well, yes, Pastor Long said something recently in *Newsweek* or *Time Magazine* that really unnerved me and the last time I was there he was preaching on it. It seems like there's been a change because when I first started going there, I thought it was a wonderful place and I felt like the spirit was there and that there was a lot of love there. But, lately when I've gone I've felt this homophobic, hate, kind of atmosphere, so I am not going back there anymore and I'm going to move my membership. I'm really having a big battle with church right now because I think church should be a place where we preach love and the churches are not. They are absolutely not. My faith is stronger now than its ever been and I don't need human beings to dictate to me how I should be.

Church should be a place where we get love, where we go and celebrate the love that Christ has for us. It's become a political thing, it's become something that it should have never been. I'm looking for a place where all they preach are the teachings of Jesus Christ and love. And I really have a problem with the fact that so many gay brothers and lesbian sisters just sit in these homophobic churches and allow that stuff to go on.

VM: In terms of ground level acceptance of self, as Black gays, what are we doing to ourselves that will not allow us to come into each others' spaces when we are trying to build relationships.

LH: A fear of really revealing ourselves. It boggles the mind the way we treat each other—the way we have such unhealthy relationships. It's because we have no role models [in the context of being gay], we have no one to look up to and we run whenever there's a real risk of intimacy. Basically, I think it's because of how we're taught and how we're raised as men—gay men are no different from straight men in that respect. The same that Black women are crying about, Black gay men are crying about in terms of their treatment of each other.

VM: Do you consider yourself a role model?

LH: No.

VM: Why not?

LH: Simply because I think people need to

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find their role models at home.

VM: But, when you talk about structuring the reality of a Black gay man and him not having anyone to look up to, you're in a prime position to be that person.

LH: I accept it only if people realize that I'm human and that I make mistakes, that I'm not perfect, and that I'm still a work in progress. A role model in the sense of offering encouragement? Yeah, because I answer every bit of mail that I get—I don't give a form letter. It's getting overwhelming, but I still take that time because people write me and they share so much of their lives with me. I can't ignore that. It's funny, I've been thinking a lot about my grandmother, who just passed, and she always thought that I would be a minister or something and in a lot of respects I do feel like Christ is working through me. I ask myself, why me? I'm no different from anyone else, why am I getting this opportunity? There have been a few letters which really do make me cry, because people talk about how much I've helped them and I don't know what I've done. I've just basically given what I have learned to be true about myself and what I have learned to be true about life. So, I do take the designation of role model with a good deal of apprehension.

VM: There're numerous stories describing your challenges in bringing Invisible Life to the market place. Are publishers finally recognizing the potential of their Black gay and lesbian readership? Are there more opportunities for emerging Black lesbian and gay writers?

LH: I hope so. I definitely hope so. I think publishers have seen, with myself, with James Earl Hardy [author of *B-Boy Blues*], that those stories are definitely marketable and that we're looking for stories about ourselves. Publishing is a very closed society. Even for those who get in, you've got to make sure your publisher is behind you and will make a commitment to getting your book out there and getting you the same opportunities that other authors get. Even with the number of Black authors—both gay and straight—that are out there, there is only a small percentage of them that are getting the dollars behind advertising and marketing. I've been very blessed at Doubleday. I couldn't have found a better home, but that's not everyone's situation. Publishers are going to have learn about the diversity of our issues. E. Lynn Harris' story is not

the only story out there and what I've done is to show that there is a market for our kind of stories.

VM: What are your expectations of Black lesbians and gays as we move towards the objective of establishing a visible and viable Black gay community?

LH: I think it has to start with a oneness of self and then move to community. I just don't see a cohesive unit anywhere—in terms of the Black gay community. There are pockets of people trying to do things, trying to make changes, but no one has really captured the masses.

VM: You have success, you are recognized, what's important to you right now?

LH: Well, I realize that it's people who are my employer—the people with whom I come into contact everyday. I have to make myself accessible; I have to be out there talking to folks and answering their letters. If I took the high road and said, 'Well, I don't have to do this anymore,' I would be right back to where I started. The one thing that I prayed for after I prayed for success was to remain humble. I don't want to ever forget what a blessing this has been for me; it's not because I'm a great writer—it's just because this is my time. And there will be other people after me and I hope they respond to success in a similar way. To me that's the most important thing: That I stay grounded and that I not think, for one second, that I'm better than anyone else.

VM: What's in the future for you? Can we expect to hear anymore about Raymond, Jr.?

LH: You know, I was thinking about him today—wondering how he's doing. I think he and Trent are going to be happy. What I'd like to do with him in the future is to show his entire growth and to show that he's comfortable with himself and in a stable relationship. That's something that people have asked me to do: Try and provide some guidelines for a successful relationship. I think we could have successful relationships if we could be completely honest with ourselves and one another.

VM: So, that's the message—it starts with self.

LH: It starts with self.

VM: Thank you for your time and your example.

LH: You're very welcome. Thank you.