



Rebirthing Self, JULY 2024

by: Shaundale Rénā

At a time when so much is going on in life, summer is the perfect time to slow down with a good book. The kids are out of school. Extracurricular activities decrease. And, hopefully, our lives have some semblance of calm. That's where I am. Grant it, my baby is 14. Still, whether you have a 14-day-old, a 14-week-old or a 14-month-old, take time to realign—to recenter, to refocus, to experience a rebirth. That's what Zariah L. Banks gave me with this quarter's new release. *Beauty Beheld* is the reboot I needed. So, here we go!

I enjoyed and appreciated the warmth, realness and humor of this story. *Beauty Beheld* was such a refreshing and heartfelt read. I laughed, like literally hollered. I also gasped a time or two. Having this book to fall back on between clients, chores, errands and other mundane tasks—the occasional meal prep and grocery store runs—was life! If you need a good summer distraction, Zariah L. Banks did indeed serve up the goodness! This book is hotter than fireworks on the Fourth of July!

For starters, *Beauty Beheld* is for the hopeless romantic. I still believe in “happily ever after,” even at 50. And I usually find it in great stories, like this one! I could feel Lenox, but I empathized with Patience. The depth of their conversations and their sexual tension, I won't even say more. Then there's that doggone Daniel, the ex-boyfriend gone wild. *Too darn real!*

From the opening page until the closing line, I was invested in this book. The cover design is beautiful, and this author is worthy of all the accolades and attention she's getting. I looked forward to reading every day, waiting to see what would happen next and wondering what Lenox or Patience would do later. Patience has a sexual appetite that Lenox is dead set against indulging in, and for anyone struggling with abstinence/ceibacy, this is likely not the read because when they do finally get together, Zariah does not disappoint.

To see his internal struggle and to watch his growth, to know Lenox is committed to his highest self, was refreshing. He knew exactly who he was, what he wanted and didn't want, and he wasn't up for Patience and her shenanigans. Lenox kept shutting her down until he was ready. And I appreciated how it was the guy taking the lead to not sexually advance the relationship. I respected how well he stood his ground. *Where they at?*

Patience does eventually start to realize how she goes from one relationship to another. And Lennox slowly reveals why he chooses to get to know a woman before “getting to know her.”

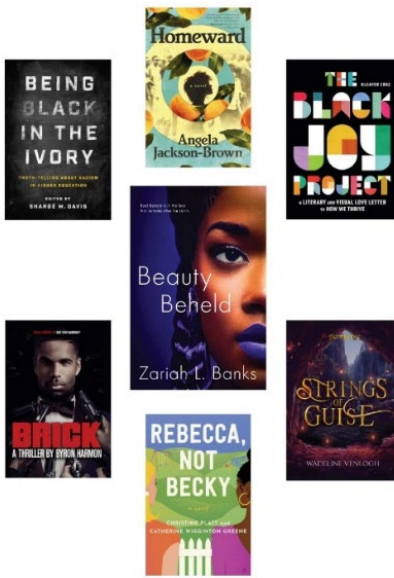
Beauty Beheld teaches us that everybody grows in their own way. For Lenox, it's his relationship with his dad. For Patience, it's her relationship with herself. But, Lordie-lord-lord-lord-lord Lovelie! It took Daniel's mom to take me out! If a mother ever did the most, it was her. *I'll let y'all read and figure all that out.*

Another thing I valued about this book is the cultural flavor. I lived for the French-Haitian Creole, which I later learned is actually Kreyol. As a native Louisiana girl, I was surprised that I understood some of it and was mesmerized by how flawlessly the author wrote it. The family dinner set the entire stage for the whole book—the characters (minus Lenox), the backstory (need to know who we're dealing with) and the hint of what was coming. When I say get ready, I mean get ready! I wanted to choke Lovelie. That is the power of a great writer!

I have to say I enjoyed this book for many reasons: writing, storytelling, realism, characters. *All. Of. It.* But, I really love books that teach me stuff. I Googled artists, watched YouTube videos, researched Kreyol and even clicked my way over to GoodReads. This author is not shy of giving other creatives their spotlight! I liked new videos and even added new artists to my Amazon music favorites. Shoot, I was sleeping on some good music, some nice cocktails and some great wine.

Beauty Beheld is so full of life, so filled with truth. I laughed aloud when Patience fell in the park. I near 'bout cried when she told Lenox to leave so she could “handle things” herself after a night out. The one-liners are definitely it, and the comedic relief is very on point. I literally screamed a few times. Like, “desperate and dehydrated.” Who says that? *Dead!*





Aside from *Beauty Beheld* being a truly great story, it was written during COVID-19 without ONE mention, intentionally! There was no mask, no disinfecting, nada. *Nonna 'dat!* The author wanted readers to forget the pandemic was happening, and she did that in her own way. At this point, we can all say, “Here to stay!” From the thirstiness of the main character and the ratchetness of her ex-boyfriend to the guy I’m pretty sure every woman would love to have, Zariah L. Banks put it down. *Beauty Beheld* is just so freaking good. It was hilarious! And also, thought-provoking. There’s an element of “shock and awe” to it. And we need that, from time to time.

Yes, a good book can shock new life into us. Particularly, if we’re striving to both be and do better. Which is why, on top of everything else, this book also packs a few self-healing punches.

If you’re like Patience, then maybe you’re tired of being in a space of repetitiveness in love, life and relationships. It wasn’t until Lenox challenged her that she evolved. And while I know this is a fictional story, let’s be honest. This stuff happens. Relationships can be messy. Love can be messy. Hell, sex can be messy. But that don’t make it good, right? *Right!*

Perhaps Zariah L. Banks can offer us all just a little more to think about. While Patience and Lenox had real sexual tension, Patience was forced to accept that he wanted more than sex and to explore why she needed sex so badly.

Rightfully so, this read was a good mixture of Al Green with a healthy dose of Frankie Beverly & Maze: “Love & Happiness” meets “Joy & Pain.” It was like cornbread to collard greens! I love how Zariah tied all the stories together and each character wrestled with their own closure. *This is the book of summer.* It’s the book to have in your tote bag, your backpack, your purse—wherever. Take a daycation! Just don’t forget to pack the willingness to immerse yourself in a multi-award-winning novel. That’s right! *Beauty Beheld* has won two BookFest awards and one Firebird award. The beautiful thing is, Beauty’s just getting started!

If you’re interested in other readings this summer, check out the following. The first three are reason enough to pause and pay respect to the legalization of Juneteenth, as #BlackintheIvory went viral in 2020 after Black voices came together to speak on racial inequality in academia and was the catalyst for a college course. Into social justice? *Homeward* will fan the flames of activism as young people are moved to stand up in this fictitious but true-to-life story that introduces the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) after watching news stories spewed across television networks about resistance efforts taking place in America. Like picture books? The NAACP Image Award-winning finalist for Outstanding Literary Work, *The Joy Project*, includes 117 full-color photos and eight amazing essays that will both inform and inspire, as this book is said to be “a source of healing and regeneration for Black people” from all walks of life.

For a summer thriller, you may find Byron Harmon’s *Brick* to have just enough edge to keep you cool, and for the fantasy reader, Wadelne Venlooh’s *Strings of Guise* will tickle your mystical fancy with characters out to learn the truth about what’s real and what’s not when they find themselves caught between two worlds. And finally, for comedic relief and the occasional “things that make you go, humn,” consider Christine Platt’s *Rebecca, Not Becky* in collaboration with Catherine Wigginton. This partnership brings us the story of two suburban moms—one Black, one White—living a shared experience they don’t realize they share. To read just how much more alike we are than different, kick off your shoes and grab your favorite beverage. Because, sometimes, the only difference is perspective.



Shaundale Rénā (@iShaundale) is a multi-award-winning freelance developmental editor specializing in romantic comedy, historical, contemporary and women’s fiction, and nonfiction self-help and memoir. With six international awards under her belt, Shaundale has collaborated with imprints like Adams Media/Simon & Schuster and Lake Union Publishing/Amazon Publishing on bestsellers like *Self-Care for Black Women* and *Scarlet Carnation*. Her most successful self-published clients, Kimberlee Yolanda Williams and Zariah L. Banks, have won multiple awards for their work, *Dear White Woman*, *Please Come Home* and *Beauty Beheld*, respectively. Shaundale’s passion for connecting the big picture of a story shines through in her work with indie and traditionally published authors alike. www.ShaundaleRena.com