



**Great Books  
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*The Color Purple*

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Humanities  
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**THE UNIVERSITY OF  
MELBOURNE**

## An introduction from Associate Professor Kalissa Alexeyeff

*"You better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy.*

Dear God,

I am fourteen years old. ~~I am~~ I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me.... First he put his thing up gainst my hip and sort of wiggle it around. Then he grab hold my titties. Then he push his thing inside my pussy. When that hurt, I cry. He start to choke me, saying You better shut up and git used to it."

In the opening pages of Alice Walker's classic 1982 novel *The Color Purple*, we read a letter written by 14-year-old Celie, detailing the sexual abuse she experiences by the man she calls 'father'. When Celie is separated from her sister Nettie and forced to marry a cruel and abusive farmer, her letters to both God and Nettie sustain her hope for her sister's future, despite the barriers of distance, time, and silence. As this epistolary novel unfolds, the lives and experiences of Black women living in the American South reveal the power of female relationships, and the complicated dynamics of race, sexuality, and violence. This powerful feminist story explores a journey of self-realisation, empowerment, and self-worth, breaking the silence on domestic violence, and centring the resilience, bravery, and companionship of Black women.

*The Color Purple* has become a cornerstone of African-American literature and intersectional feminist writing. Walker was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1983, becoming the first African-American woman to receive this honour. The novel has also been highly controversial for its portrayal of incest, child rape, and domestic violence in Black communities, and for perpetuating the image of Black men as violent and sexually aggressive – an accusation that reached its zenith upon its adaptation to film in 1985, and its subsequent banning from schools across the United States. 2022 marked the 40th anniversary of the book and in this masterclass, we consider its significant legacy.



[Kalissa Alexeyeff](#) is an Associate Professor in Gender Studies with a background in Critical Theory and Anthropology. Her research explores questions of how culture and global change intersect through dance, performance, embodiment, kinship, and labour mobility, contributing to broader discussions in anthropology and critical development studies, on race and gender, sexualities and body politics, neoliberalism, rights and justice.

### Extra resources

[Untangling the Legacy of \*The Color Purple\*](#), *The New Republic*

An overview of Salamishah Tillet's 2021 book, which sorts through the controversies surrounding Alice Walker's seminal novel.

[Some Letters Went to God](#), *The New Yorker*

A 1982 review of *The Color Purple* by Mel Watkins.

[A reading from \*The Color Purple\*](#), Emory University

Alice Walker delivers a short reading and commentary on the book.

[Alice Walker on her classic novel](#), New Jersey Performing Arts Center

The author discusses the birth of her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Steven Spielberg's big-screen version, and her thoughts on the musical adaptation.

[Whoopi Goldberg on the controversy over the film](#), Television Academy



Alice Walker reading from *The Color Purple*.

## Discussion questions

- The subject matter of *The Color Purple* - black lives, sexuality and gender relations has made it a controversial novel since it was published forty years ago. If you read the book (or saw the film) at an earlier time, how does this reading compare? What characters and events stand out for you? Which aspects of the book reflect the time it was created, and which speak to present-day concerns and debates?
- There are scenes, events and lines in *The Color Purple*, that take my breath away because of the emotional effects they produce. When you are reading the book, perhaps pick out one or two examples to discuss when we meet at the live Q&A.
- Alice Walker has said no-one ever talks about this book as a book about God. Neither do I. What could an analysis of God, religion, spirituality and 'Nature', as Walker calls it, bring to our understanding of the novel?



*The Color Purple* (1985), directed by Steven Spielberg.