

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

ISSARAE



**The Business
of Being Me**

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ISSA RAE

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of Being Me***

Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been re-created.

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Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781542036924 (digital)

Cover design by Tree Abraham
Cover illustration by Alexis Franklin



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When I was little, I was obsessed with briefcases. They were a sign of importance: A person carrying a briefcase was needed somewhere immediately. Maybe they were a spy, carrying items that could either save or destroy you. In any case, briefcases meant serious business, and I wanted to be a part of serious business. I wanted one so badly for my seventh birthday.

I blame the classic, hilarious, heartfelt, and robbed-of-awards movie *Twins*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger and Danny DeVito. There's a pivotal scene in which DeVito's character is in possession of a briefcase that could change the course of his life. Watching him desperately parade through a dark underground tunnel, clutching that briefcase for dear life, made me think: *I need one of those*. For what? I wasn't sure. But from that moment forward, whenever I saw a film or TV character or even a print ad model holding a briefcase, irrespective of context, it captivated me.

As I grew up, my association with "serious business" broadened to occupations, imagined and real. My older brothers had outgrown a Christmas gift called the VTech Small Talk phone, and my younger siblings and I inherited it alongside stilted Transformers, a wobbly-knobbed Etch A Sketch, and incomplete LEGO sets. That phone would serve as the launchpad of my entrepreneurial ambitions. My younger brother and I—but mostly me because I was bossy—started a fast-food, food-free restaurant called Hamburgers Everywhere that we operated out of my bedroom. The Small Talk was a large blue-and-yellow administrative-looking phone that consisted of a musical keyboard at the base; colorful shapes at the top; and, most intriguing of all, a keypad that featured little faces of service workers (e.g., Mailman, Fireman, Astronaut) and white family members. When you pressed a button, they each said something that correlated with their respective occupation or familial position. None of those sayings had anything to do with a restaurant, but it was one of those core times when me and my brother's wildly different imaginations perfectly aligned. At Hamburgers Everywhere, we put ourselves in the high-pressure situation of operating a demanding drive-through, where our customers would say things like: "Hello. This is Daddy. WHAT are you doing?" or "I'm an Astronaut. I love space." To us, it was an exercise in people management: "He has to get to space! Get his order up first!" or "This stern father is growing impatient! We have to help him feed his family!" It was

exhilarating. Despite the high-stakes demands of our popular restaurant, I was in charge, I was in control, and best of all, I loved working.

By high school, my definition of “serious business” matured with me—from toy phones to textbooks, from make-believe deadlines to college applications. My mom took me out of private school in Brentwood and enrolled me in King/Drew, a medical magnet school on the border of Compton and Watts, an area of Los Angeles just south of downtown. As a freshman, I was intrigued by the idea of getting to start over, and I set my sights on being a straight-A student for the sole purpose of eventually getting into a “good” school. I don’t know where that aspiration came from—maybe I was still in a silent competition with the white kids at my previous school—but it was the first real goal I ever remember setting for myself besides “get a six-pack like Janet Jackson.” I never achieved the latter, but after the first quarter of my ninth-grade year, my mom opened up my report card, proud to see all A’s.

After accomplishing my goal of getting straight A’s for the *entire year*, something in me clicked: All I have to do is *want it* and *work at it*, and I can make it happen. (I would learn very quickly that this only applied where professional discipline was concerned. It didn’t hold true for boys and relationships, alas. But soon, the feeling of personal achievement eclipsed my need to be desired by boys.)

Once I heard that colleges wanted students to be well rounded outside of academic accomplishments, I decided to try my hand at everything. Academic Decathlon? Sure, I love to complete math problems under pressure for fun! Playing for the volleyball team? Why not? I’m not scared of getting served in the face and losing my teeth! Writing for the school newspaper? Yes, but only if I can start a column talking mess.

While the other endeavors lasted a year or less, writing for the newspaper stuck. In addition to writing traditionally “serious” articles for our publication, I started my own column called How ’Bout You Don’t, where I was critical of the habits, culture, and fashion of our student body and faculty. *How ’bout you don’t keep volunteering to read out loud when you know you can’t read?* My raw candor made me an occasional target of hallway stares and almost got me beat up a few times, but generally people valued and saw the humor in what I wrote. Writing was my new outlet—a way of convincing others that I had something to say.

As I discovered my talent for cutting, comedic commentary in the school newspaper, I realized I was developing a new ambition entirely: making writing my business. The briefcase of my childhood dreams now carried something more valuable than important papers—it carried words that could influence, entertain, provoke, and occasionally infuriate. While straight A's gave me external validation, my column gave me something I hadn't known I needed: a platform where my perspective mattered. The serious business of academic achievement had unexpectedly led me to the serious art of self-expression.

In January 2011 I wrote, produced, and edited the first episode of my web series *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. From that point until today, I've been working my way up in this industry, grinding, growing, building, and dreaming. Most of that time has been extremely fulfilling and ridiculously fun. I've accomplished more than I ever imagined for myself. Still, there are times when I'm overwhelmed with fear that I will lose everything and be defined by my last moment. I'm obsessed with time and the limited window I have to achieve everything I want, and that fear has guided a lot of my business moves.

Awkward Black Girl provided the validation I needed that I could make writing my business. It also helped me realize that I actually didn't know how to do *good* business. After the initial success of the first few episodes, we raised nearly \$60,000 via Kickstarter to finish the second half of the season. And yet, even with that level of support, I was doing a lot of work and not making much money. So my producing partner at the time had the brilliant idea that we should tour colleges to promote the series and meet our supporters face-to-face. I "yes and-ed" by suggesting we put out a call online for students to request us to come to their schools. Hundreds of students responded, and schools started following up, inquiring about our "budget." We were ecstatic that we were in such high demand. We were also scared to turn people away, so we decided we would charge them a fee of \$200 for the two of us—but they would have to provide flights and accommodations. Almost every school accepted our proposal, and thus began our first college tour.

It took us until about the twentieth college visit to understand what a taxing, stupid mistake we'd made. This was after we'd spent the whole day in the airport due to our bookers opting for the cheapest flight instead of a direct one and that flight being delayed—and then spent the night crunched up in our top-bunk-bed "accommodations." For one, we'd let the colleges dictate the schedules, which meant we were flying zigzag across the country on any given date. Second, in addition to lowballing ourselves, we'd failed to implement a standard for our travel and hotels, so we frequently found ourselves on uncomfortable and oft-canceled Spirit flights or put up in someone's vacant dorm room. And finally, *we only charged people \$100 each*. It wasn't until a concerned college administrator, while personally giving us a ride to the airport (because we didn't include transportation in our rider), gently told us the obvious: "I think you guys may be underselling yourself." She then told us that the university had just hosted a relatively unknown poet to speak to students and paid them \$5,000. My head exploded. If we'd had the foresight to charge even a fifth of that price, we could've changed our lives immediately. So we upped our prices, and even though some schools fell off, it was generally better for our health—and it marked the first time I was getting paid legitimately for something I had created. It was a turning point from serious business to the business of being me.

By the time the second season of *Awkward Black Girl* finished shooting at the end of 2012, I'd made a lateral move from my motel-inspired apartment complex on a busy South LA intersection to a duplex my grandparents owned in the hood part of mid-city—where my grandmother charged only \$400 rent for me and the old lady tenant who had lived there for thirty years. I spent the years after *ABG*'s run continuing to try to make money from the projects I'd already written and creating a few other web series, including *The Choir* for Tracey Edmonds's short-lived YouTube channel, *AlrightTV*. One of my other self-produced web shows, *Ratchetpiece Theatre*, where I critically analyzed my favorite raunchy rap songs, led to a correspondence stint on a BET news show called *Don't Sleep! Hosted by T. J. Holmes*. They would fly me to New York every week to shoot my written segment. It was such a big deal to me to be featured, but I was always nervous as hell being myself on somebody else's platform, and I'm sure it showed. On top of that, as supportive as T. J. and the showrunner were, it became increasingly clear week to week as my

segment title changed that he wanted to be taken more seriously as a news journalist, which conflicted with BET's desire for something more entertainingly "youthful" and lighthearted. The show was canceled in less than a year, and I had to rely solely on season two of *Awkward Black Girl* to pay my bills.

In the meantime, I was taking general meetings that my agents were setting up for me with development executives at major studios and production companies—commonly referred to as "the water bottle tour." I would put on my most professional tops and don the business flats I'd bought for my corporate job and make the trek to West, North, or East Hollywood, or in the worst cases, Burbank, to chat with an executive at a major studio for less than an hour. Up to fifteen minutes of that hour would be spent in the lobby, waiting for them to finish their other meetings and being offered fancy water by a receptionist or assistant. Oftentimes my conversations with these executives would turn to a discussion about my favorite movies and reality television shows or a bond over fad diets we weren't ashamed to admit we'd tried (the Master Cleanse and the Military Diet, anyone?), but after a while, these meetings started to feel like unfruitful first dates. Like, are you going to pursue me or not? Despite my agents' insistence that it wasn't necessary, I discovered I fared better when I had a project or two to loosely present—something fleshed out for them to react to—as opposed to having an entire meeting based on my personality.

Then I got the opportunity of a lifetime. Shonda Rhimes and Betsy Beers wanted to have a meeting with me. And it was an incoming call! Even at that point, in 2012, Shonda Rhimes was one of the most successful showrunners on air, and the *only* Black woman showrunner with anything on the air that I could look to as a blueprint. The fact that she wanted to meet with me was reason enough to celebrate. I tried to dress business casual, which to me at that time meant a mullet-esque sandwich of professional up top, jeans on bottom, and business on the feet. I did not have a briefcase.

I walked through the halls of Shondaland mystified. She had the entire floor at a studio! *This* was what making a business out of your writing could look like? I was inspired, smiling too hard at every female employee I walked by, undoubtedly reeking of "I want to be where you are." As I sat in the temporary lobby with my water, waiting, I started to get nervous. I was about to meet a hero, and there was a whole saying dedicated to not doing

that. What if this went awry? Before I could get too deep in my thoughts, I was called into Betsy's office.

It was *immediately* a friendly room; their years of friendship put me at ease, and we shared stories about our families. I even got to share my *Scandal* theories. Then they got to business, asking me if I had anything I was working on. I honestly didn't have much beyond some loose ideas here and there, but I had just filmed a web series preview for my channel with the intention of drumming up excitement and securing some sponsorship money. The video had been up for only a month, and it relied heavily on the talents of my younger brother's friends, but I decided to go with it. "I've been thinking about how bad it is to date in LA, and I have a show idea called *I Hate LA Dudes*." They laughed instantly at the title and my recounting of how specifically terrible Los Angeles men are—it's a universal truth! At the end of my pitch, they said the words that meant business: "Let's do it." What? I must have looked perplexed. They had to spell it out for me: "We'd love to work with you on this." I was thrilled. Too thrilled. My chill went out the window, and I asked to take a picture with Shonda before I left. She seemed thrown off—"With me?" But I was in disbelief that we'd be working together and wanted to have the picture as physical proof that we had at least met. Her humble "With me?" reaffirmed that I'd be working with a fellow Capricorn and the stars were truly aligned. This wasn't just any writing gig—it was like securing prime real estate in the creative marketplace, a chance to build my writing business on a foundation someone else had already carefully laid.

Shonda and Betsy hoped *I Hate LA Dudes* would be the first comedy series for Shondaland. The concept was ripe for network television: *An aspiring journalist, new to Los Angeles, becomes the lone female voice on a budding male-driven internet talk show, while learning to decode the often humiliating and exasperating rules of the LA dating scene*. To have a shot at my own series at Shondaland motivated and terrified me. I had this big chance, and I had to get it right. The development process with Betsy Beers, Rachel Eggebeen, and Alison Eakle was a dream. They were incredibly patient and encouraging, believing in me at every turn. They helped me craft the pitch that I would ultimately sell to the network and the studio, with Shonda in attendance. And then I was off to write.

Again, it was 2012, and by "male-driven internet talk show," I basically meant a podcast. I was ahead of my time! In hindsight, the

problem I had with this show was with my lead character. I didn't know who she was. I was so determined for this project to be "makeable" that I removed myself from consideration as the lead. This wasn't encouraged by anyone but me. Back then, I had this crazy subconscious way of subtracting myself from the equation of any success my projects achieved. For the first season of *Awkward Black Girl*, I didn't credit myself as a producer, writer, director, or editor for any of the episodes until we actually brought on "real" producers, writers, directors, and editors. And then, when we developed season two for Pharrell's YouTube channel, I got the sense that we needed to delve more into other characters, because people would likely get tired of seeing me. In my mind, the *ABG* audience really enjoyed the talents and antics of the other characters, and I was just the gateway—the Piper to my own *Orange Is the New Black*. I have a genuine urge for others to shine, and sometimes I'll dim my own light for them to do just that. Even in that, there's an assumption that "others" *need* me to do so when they absolutely don't. I suppose part of me subscribes to the idea that a spotlight shines on only one—and for the good of the project, you need to take turns occupying it.

With *I Hate LA Dudes*, I wasn't concerned with being "the talent." I was focused on proving I had the skills to be taken seriously in the writing business. Unfortunately, neither of those things happened. In addition to not being able to properly craft a compelling main character, I also wasn't confident in what I wanted my show to say, beyond its title. Couple that with navigating a truly mind-boggling network TV process, and I was always doomed for failure.* (*NOTE: I don't actually believe in "failure" unless one gives up, but the expression here was useful.) It was my first painful lesson that in this business, work ethic alone isn't currency—you have to be savvy with where and how you spend your efforts.

For those unfamiliar with the now pretty archaic scripted-pilot process, I'll walk you through it. Once you sell your pitch, the real work begins. First comes the Story Arena (a brief version of the pitch), then the outline (mapping all storylines with sample dialogue), and only after multiple approvals can you write the actual script. I worked with Shondaland first, incorporating their feedback before my outline went to ABC Studios. After their approval, it moved to ABC Network. This cycle of notes and revisions repeated at each level until everyone approved—then the same tedious

process began again for the script itself. Shondaland to ABC Studios to ABC Network, notes at every turn.

Now, you'd *think* that ABC Studios and ABC Network would be on the same page during this process or at least talking to each other, given their company affiliation? Absolutely not! Sometimes they'd give conflicting notes, and I, as an inexperienced TV writer, would take *every single note* and try to make it work. This made me seem like I didn't know what the fuck I was doing—which I didn't. If I'd had any confidence at the time, or a creative backbone, I might have been able to have a conversation about my strong point of view and intentional choices (which I'd eventually learn is what all good creative executives want from the writers they work with), but I had neither. Desperate to please and far too aware that this was a rare opportunity, my final product was a big pile of loose, drab, voiceless mush. Of course, I didn't know it at the time. All I knew was that I had completed my first network pilot, and I was very proud of myself.

For the next few weeks of that January, leading into February 2013, I continued the business of *Awkward Black Girl*, editing and fine-tuning the final episodes of the series. I had just landed back home after a weekend speaking engagement at UPenn to promote the show, when I turned on my phone as the plane taxied to the gate. A voicemail from all of my reps? I felt my stomach drop before I even pressed play.

“Hey, it’s us. Call us back when you land.” I analyzed the tone of my agent’s voice. It was too *neutral*. Good news comes with excitement. But then again, would they *all* call me if it were bad news? As I exited the plane, I called my manager back first—he was most likely to answer the phone. He changed his tone to a decidedly less neutral one: “ABC is passing on the pilot. But you should be really proud of yourself for making it this far! I’m sorry.” The project I’d poured myself into for nearly a year. Gone. I don’t remember crying, though I must have. I’ve always been good at blocking out painful memories—a useful skill in this business. What I do remember is the crushing certainty that I’d blown my one big chance. When Shonda, Betsy, and Alison called to say they wanted to work together again, their kindness only made it worse. Their words felt like lip service, the polite consolation offered to someone who had clearly let them down.

Over the next couple of months, I begrudgingly resolved to figure out another internet play. But in the back of my mind, I kept fighting away the scariest thoughts: *What if Awkward Black Girl was all I had in me? What if I peaked at that moment and I didn't know it? What if my journey was just meant to inspire someone else who was more talented than me?*

And then I got another call of a lifetime. Casey Bloys and Amy Gravitt from HBO wanted me to pitch an idea. We'd met before my Shondaland project, but I'd assumed nothing came of it. I had nothing to pitch but quickly created something for the meeting. What I offered was an early version of what would become *Insecure*, pitched primarily as an office show set at We Got Y'all, with Issa Dee secretly aspiring to rap. HBO bought it immediately. My reps then connected me with Larry Wilmore, an experienced showrunner who would guide me through the writing process. We clicked instantly, and he agreed to write the pilot with me.

In another example of synchronicity, Larry was renting a home office diagonal from the downtown apartment I had just moved into—a building I passed daily on my way to write at a coffee shop we both loved. He brought me to the rooftop, where the busy streets that normally demanded my attention seemed to dissolve into silence beneath a sprawling skyline—the perfect backdrop for creativity. “So what the fuck’s been going on in Issa world? You got a lot going on, girl. I love it!” And that was Larry, observant, disarming. He was the perfect blend of serious and kind of unserious business.

Larry has a genius writing process. While we waited the several weeks it took for our deal to close with HBO, we'd meet at his rooftop and just talk for hours. He was getting to know me and I was getting to know him in a way that I assumed was just organic. Over time those conversations became more intimate. I was sharing things about my life, my friendships, my relationships, my insecurities, my quirks, the worst parts of me. And he was doing the same. By the time the deal closed, we had a foundation for the show and a clear point of view for our lead character. He kept saying, “This is a show about a girl who doesn’t know who she is or where she’s going.” Our pilot needed to make the best case for that. He came up with a brilliant title for the show: *Non-Prophet*. Get it? Because she worked in a nonprofit, but she also is definitely not a prophet because she doesn’t even know her own future? Hahaha. Okay, anyway.

Whereas my experience with Shondaland provided a safe (albeit self-induced high-pressure) space for me to learn how the network pilot process works, my experience with Larry taught me how to find and shape my voice. Larry is really great with story, and I discovered that I'm really good with characters; our collaboration was a beautiful creative marriage. Larry and I were very confident about the story we were telling, and in the outline phase, HBO was too. After the deal was officially closed, we wrote the outline in less than five days. We were just as efficient while writing the script, but the extensive notes process revealed that although HBO had initially loved the outline, the script wasn't working for them. So where was the disconnect? As I observed Larry receive notes from our creative execs, it finally dawned on me that they weren't meant to be prescriptive directions —they were suggestions meant to spark dialogue in hopes of finding a fix. It sounds obvious, but during my ABC experience, I thought the executives were experts and knew the answers to my creative issues. With Larry, I learned to find “the note behind the note” or the root of the “bump” an executive may experience while reading your work. That translation is the key to determining why your work isn't connecting.

Unfortunately, this back-and-forth was a yearslong process—an unexpected apprenticeship in the business of television that delayed my creative entrepreneurship aspirations. While the script fee was keeping me afloat, the internet creator in me was furiously impatient: “I could shoot this draft right now, put it online, and the streets would love it!” Part of this frustration was from the anxiety I felt thinking I was squandering yet another opportunity by being creatively inept; the other part was my worry that they just didn't get it. I wanted a show on HBO more than anything, and this show was actually *starring* me. It was a workplace comedy that could go down in history as the next *The Office*. Why couldn't they see that the pilot was ready to shoot?

During that year and a half we spent developing *Non-Prophet*, Larry got an opportunity to co-showrun a modern-day *Cosby Show* pilot called *Black-ish*. It was a family show on ABC starring Black people. That only fueled my frustration. Not only did I have to share his time with some grown, experienced man named Kenya Barris, but it was also for the network that had previously rejected me. I had a gripe. Barris, a veteran, had cocreated *America's Next Top Model* and written on *Girlfriends* and

some of my other favorite TV shows—the fuck did he need Larry for? I was the needier of the two of us! But Larry made it work, so I was fine with it.

That pilot was much further along than ours. It was in preproduction, and they were casting, so I'd get to hear the latest updates whenever Larry and I would meet up. *Tracee Ellis Ross auditioned? Wow, cool. Love her . . . What?! Laurence Fishburne?! Since when does he do network TV?!* However jealous I may have been, it was invaluable insight into a process I was unfamiliar with, and it only made me fantasize about what *Non-Prophet*'s casting process would look like—what big celebrities would audition for our show? Did I even want to stunt cast it with “known” names? Larry was already going to play the boss character in our show, and maybe that was all the star power I wanted. That was the one thing *Black-ish* didn't have: Larry acting on-screen. So take that, Kenya.

On a crisp fall afternoon, at one of our regularly scheduled writing meetings on his rooftop, Larry and I would have the first of our final meetings for *Non-Prophet*. The plan was to address HBO's latest round of notes and work on a path for what we hoped would be our last draft. We were around six versions in at this point. When I arrived, Larry dropped a bomb on me. Jon Stewart was looking for a companion to *The Daily Show* and wanted Larry to host it. It was going to be called *The Nightly Show*, and it was the opportunity of Larry's dreams. He was ecstatic. I couldn't NOT be happy for him, but I was devastated for myself. How would I continue this process without him? Could I?

Larry reassured me. Surely with the news of his big opportunity, which I was to keep “top secret” for now, HBO would be pressured to pick up the pilot in an attempt to keep him attached. This made so much sense to me. While I was crushed to potentially lose him as a day-to-day creative partner, if we could leverage his pending departure to finally shoot a pilot, then it'd be worth it.

We wrote the final draft, and I passive-aggressively labeled it as such. This was the one *and* it was good. We were guaranteed a pilot! Except we weren't. HBO still didn't think our draft was right. When I got the call from my managers, I was on the set of one of my pilots for ColorCreative, a venture I founded to help other writers bypass the network pilot process that had scarred me, allowing them to share their work online and build an audience that could attract the attention of networks. We were in the middle of a turnaround (a timely process when the crew switches the position of the

cameras and lights, usually to shoot on the opposite side) when they told me the bad news. I pleasantly hung up, then excused myself from set to go outside and cry near some bushes. I was going to lose Larry, who at least had his next gig lined up. Without him, how was I going to get the draft to where they wanted? Would they even *want* to keep working with just me? The business of me was in a bear market, and I was just about ready to cave.

A week later, Casey and Amy called me in for a meeting to discuss the show. There were elements that were working for them, but they wanted to lean more into the friendship and relationship aspects of the show. For one, they wanted to learn more about Molly, who was based on one of my real-life best friends. She had only a minor role in the pilot, but Casey asked what the show would look like if we centered her stories too. My manager Jonathan piped up: “So you are saying you want a Black *Laverne & Shirley*, but for HBO?” Casey gave an enthusiastic “Yes!” I had never seen an episode of *Laverne & Shirley* in my life, but I deduced that it was about white women friends. If HBO wanted me to make a show about me and my best friend, I was all the way down. I had stories for days!

While I felt creatively inspired and rejuvenated, I gathered that this was truly my last chance to get it right. So I went to a coffee shop every day and wrote my ass off. I layered in very current elements of my real life, my relationships, my friendships, and my insecurities while preserving parts of the original script I knew I wanted to keep—the “Broken Pussy” rap; the name of the nonprofit, We Got Y’all (formerly We Got You, but apparently BET had the rights to that); and the love interest Darnell (who would become Daniel). I added my boyfriend character and named him Lawrence (in homage to Larry) and added more of Molly’s world, including her law firm and relationship tribulations. And boom: After a few tweaks, HBO green-lit my pilot script on December 20, 2014. It was my little sister’s birthday and one of the happiest days of my life.

My boyfriend at the time left work early so we could celebrate at my family’s favorite Mexican restaurant, El Cholo. Over margaritas and guacamole, I finally exhaled. I was able to get to that next step with Larry’s help, for sure, but *I* had crossed that finish line alone. And no one could take it away from me: My victory was locked in a briefcase with the keys hidden far out of reach.

From imaginary hamburger orders to ABC disappointments to HBO triumphs, each experience taught me something critical about the business of creativity. What began as a childhood understanding of “serious business” evolved into something much more nuanced: the knowledge that success in creative industries requires more than just hard work. It demands resilience after rejection, the confidence to preserve your voice amid conflicting feedback, and the wisdom to distinguish between being a team player and being the captain of your own creative ship. Most importantly, I learned that making writing my business meant treating it as such—being strategic about opportunities, valuing my contributions appropriately, and ultimately believing that my perspective was worth putting in that briefcase I’d wanted since I was seven years old.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © 2025 Kyle Ellis

Issa Rae is a multi-award-winning actress, writer, creator, and the founder of the production company HOORAE. Issa's numerous credits, in front of and behind the camera, include the HBO series *Insecure* and the films *One of Them Days*, *Barbie*, and *American Fiction*. She is also the author of the *New York Times* bestseller *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*.