

# Author Talks: Michelle Duster on the legacy of Ida B. Wells

In a new book, Michelle Duster celebrates the life of Ida B. Wells, a journalist, suffragist, and antilynching crusader—and Duster's great-grandmother.



Photo by Philip Dembinski

**In this edition** of *Author Talks*, McKinsey Global Publishing's Raju Narisetti chats with Michelle Duster, writer, professor, and champion of racial and gender equity. Duster's new book, *Ida B. The Queen: The Extraordinary Life and Legacy of Ida B. Wells* (One Signal Publishers/Atria Books, January 2021), pays tribute to her great-grandmother Ida B. Wells, a pioneering woman who was often overlooked and underestimated. The unique visual celebration of Wells's life and of the Black American experience is especially relevant this Black History Month. An edited version of the conversation follows.

**What were you hoping your book would add to the well-known story of Wells?**

I really wanted to share and celebrate her truth and her enduring legacy with a new generation. And my hope is that readers will be inspired by her story and galvanized to continue to fight for a better world. I also wanted to help people understand the connection between the past and the present and, hopefully, see themselves in my great-grandmother's story.

**What surprised you the most when researching the book, which is also your own family history?**

One thing that I learned while I was researching *Ida B. the Queen* is how much my family was surveilled by the FBI [US Federal Bureau of Investigation]. I found the FBI files on my great-grandmother. And I really wanted to incorporate that into the book to give people a sense of what my great-grandmother's life was like, but also how it's impacted my family, to have somebody surveilled by the government.

**As we honor Black History Month, and in light of a tumultuous year for racial justice in America, what about Wells's life should be highlighted?**

Ida B. Wells was a trailblazing journalist. She was an antilynching crusader and a suffragist. She was a civil-rights icon. She cofounded several organizations, including the Alpha Suffrage Club, NAACP, and

Negro Fellowship League. She was a social worker. She had multiple careers during her lifetime.

Her quest was always to give full citizenship rights to Black Americans and women. And she was very successful in some ways. During her lifetime, women did gain the right to vote with the 19th Amendment. But she was 58 years old when that happened; most of her life, she did not have the right to vote.

She also experienced great progress during her lifetime, especially after slavery ended. During Reconstruction, she had the right to become formally educated. So she saw a lot of progress, but she also saw a lot of backlash to and violence toward Black Americans' progress. And we continue some of those struggles today.

**What enabled Wells to be positive in the face of adversity in what was—and still is—an uphill battle for justice?**

I think my great-grandmother was, inherently, an optimist. And one of the things I'm hoping people will get from *Ida B. the Queen* is her sense of optimism combined with indignation. She believed that challenging systems—by truth-telling, by exposing inequality—would lead to, ultimately, some kind of systemic change.

**What can Wells' life and this book teach us about accelerating progress for Black women today?**

There has been progress for Black women from 1862, when my great-grandmother was born, until 2020. I have way more opportunities than my great-grandmother did.

We can probably name the number of Black women who are in high levels of corporate management in a very short list, compared with the number of white men at those levels in 2020. For me, that shows heroic accomplishments by those individual women

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because, from my experience, the women who are advancing to these levels run circles around their competition. They have to be so much better, so much more qualified. The level of excellence that Black women have to exhibit is at a higher standard than what I have seen other people need to achieve.

And that, to me, is not a change—a systemic change when it comes to equality—it's the women's individual efforts that just makes them stand out so much. And until we get to a point where everybody is measured by the same criterion, we'll still be dealing with inequality.

**Michelle Duster** is adjunct professor at Columbia College Chicago. **Raju Narisetti**, based in McKinsey's New York office, is the publisher of McKinsey Global Publishing.

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