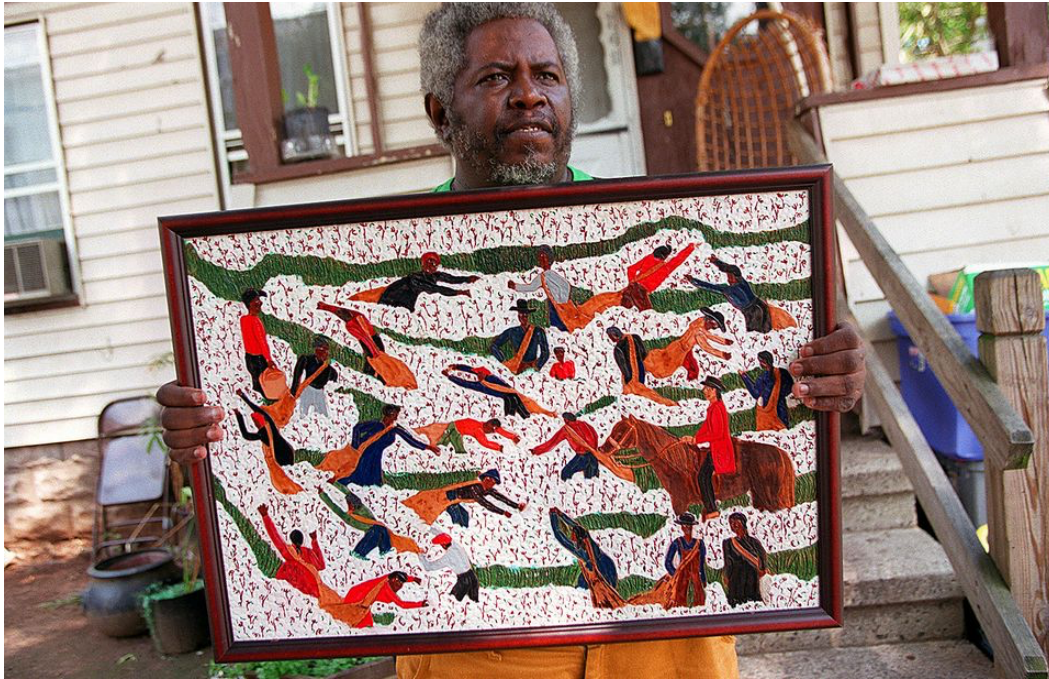


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The Boston Globe

Tufts philosopher Erin Kelly wins Pulitzer Prize for biography written with artist Winfred Rembert

Brittany Bowker – May 10, 2022



Winfred Rembert at his home in New Haven in 2000, photographed by Suzanne Dechillo. Courtesy of The New York Times.

Tufts University professor Erin Kelly received a Pulitzer Prize on Monday for the collaborative memoir she wrote with and about the late artist Winfred Rembert, “Chasing Me To My Grave: An Artist’s Memoir of the Jim Crow South.”

The biography, which was published in September, is a first-person account of Rembert’s life during the 1950s and 1960s. Kelly, who lives in Lincoln, met with Rembert at his New Haven home over the span of two years to help him tell his story. Rembert died at 75 in March 2021, a few months before the book came out.

Rembert grew up in a family of field laborers in Georgia during the Jim Crow era. He was arrested after fleeing a demonstration, survived a near lynching, and spent seven years in prison. Later on in his life, with the encouragement of his wife, Patsy, Rembert started drawing and painting scenes from his youth using leather tooling skills he learned in prison. Kelly, who teaches philosophy, came across Rembert’s work online while working on a book about criminal justice, and she wanted to learn more.

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“His paintings really caught my eye,” Kelly told the Globe over the phone on Tuesday, describing a series of Rembert’s works depicting inmates in prison stripes. “I realized they were painted by an artist who was incarcerated — they were autobiographical. I was interested in that subject matter, and when I found out the artist was Winfred and he lived in New Haven, I arranged to meet him at a bookstore.”

Kelly and Rembert first met in 2015 at McBlain Books in Hamden.

“I interviewed him and discovered he was a really interesting person with a remarkable life story,” Kelly said. They stayed in touch, and in March 2018, Kelly and Rembert decided to work together.

“He was very eager to do the book, and I had the honor of the opportunity to work with him,” Kelly said.

Rembert’s art was already nationally recognized, but his story hadn’t been told yet. Kelly visited Rembert at his home a couple of times a month between March 2018 and 2020. She’d interview him and tape the conversation, transcribe it, and then read the work aloud to Rembert.

“He’d elaborate and that would lead to further conversation, and the book began to evolve from there,” Kelly said.

The book, published by Bloomsbury Publishing, includes more than 75 color reproductions of Rembert’s paintings.

“Each painting tells a story of a significant life experience, and now that’s elaborated in the written narrative of the book,” Kelly said. “I was really excited we were able to put the book together in this way. I think it’s very unique.”

Kelly is sad Rembert isn’t here to receive the honor, but “it’s comforting to know we finished the book, and it was the book he wanted to write. It said what he wanted to say, so we can read it, learn from it, talk about it, and it’s out there in the world. It’s bittersweet. It would be very special to have him here talking about the book.”

Patsy Rembert, Winfred Rambert’s wife of 46 years, said she was “ecstatic” when she heard her husband was awarded the Pulitzer on Monday.

“I don’t know which one of us would have been screaming more, me or him,” she told the Globe over the phone on Tuesday. “To read his words and see pictures of his life that tell the story of so many others, I think he’d take great pleasure in this honor. His work was about being heard.”

Patsy was part of the reason why Rembert decided to pursue art and tell his story.

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“He had all the talent, and I could see he had the talent, and all he had to do was put it down,” said Patsy, who still lives in New Haven.

“This book tells a significant and recent part of American history, and Winfred’s story is part of our history as a country,” Kelly said. “The injustice he suffered under Jim Crow, his determination, insight, sense of beauty, sense of humor — I hope people will read and appreciate this book in the larger context of our culture and history.”