An Exploration into the Power Relations in Gal, A True Life *(1994): An Interview with Ruthie Bolton (April 18, 1999)*

Some adults who were victimized in their childhood are now taking up their pens either to come to terms with their past or simply to relate their actual experiences. A native of South Carolina, Ruthie Bolton—nicknamed "Gal"—is one of them and her autobiography, *Gal, A True Life* (1994)[1] is, in turn, built upon dialectics, lulls and rites of passage. With her aunties—whom Gal considers her sisters—Gal first undergoes appalling abuse and wretched poverty. The girls are no more than slaves and handmaidens to Clovis, Gal's step-grandfather. Gal eventually runs away, but soon marries badly and gets caught in her husband's family who takes her daughter away from her. After drifting to alcohol and drugs, Gal is eventually redeemed by Ray's unconditional love which starts the healing of her wounded childhood. One truth for certain, Ruthie Bolton manages to tell us that life is a professor of hope for those who endeavor to achieve a bright and purified existence, till the sun, in its boundless generosity, paves their way with pastel colors and awakens their promises.

Why did you choose the pseudonym of Ruthie Bolton?

It's because at the time I didn't want my family or friends or anyone to know that was me, because they wouldn't believe that anyway, and on top of that I wanted a pen name, something different and I thought about that too . . . . The main reason was because of my family. I didn't want to hurt anybody, whoever I use in the book . . . . I didn't want them to know that was me who was writing the book.

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[1] Ruthie Bolton, *Gal: A True Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).

How did you come up with "Bolton"? What were your motivations?

I am in love with Mickael Bolton. He sings the best black songs ever, even though the songs have been redone all over again . . . but he sings and he is so great . . . so I knew Bolton was to be my last name . . . and Josephine said, well, let's get a name similar to yours. She said "Ruthie," "Ruthie Bolton." So we did it within thirty seconds. It was like bang . . . . It was like we were meant to work together, that we were drawn together and this happened so quickly.

What is your relation with Josephine Humphreys right now? Are you still good friends?

Yes, definitely. We are great friends. Right now, she is trying to get a history book written.

Are you helping her with it?

Oh, no. It's all back in the war which was triggered off in Charleston. She wants to put a lot of black people in the book, those who were never mentioned, and she wants to talk more specifically about what they had done. She travels around to big libraries to get the information so that she can get the pieces together.

How did you first meet her?

I was working at a plant place where you sell plants and flowers. I met a guy on my job and I was telling him I was trying to get a book published. He said he probably knew somebody that knew someone famous. I said "whatever!" That man actually mentioned my name to this woman. I said "you're kidding me." I didn't believe it at all and I met her through my job, through another person who knew her . . . .

To what extent do you think that some parts of the book have been altered from the original story? How far is it from the truth? Is it fully and wholly authentic?

If Josephine wanted to remove some parts or cut some others, we would go back over everything that I had said. She would go back home and just type everything I would say, then the next day, she would give me the papers, and I would read them all over again, and if I didn't want something in it, I'd say take that out . . . . We would go like that. It was like teamwork all the way. I was dreaming really. It was like a mother-daughter thing. In a sense, she felt and she sensed that I was really her daughter . . .

Is she older than you?

Yes, she's about fifty-two, fifty-three or something . . . . You know, I am a country girl, but Josephine, she is always wearing sandals or an old pair of shoes and jeans. That's the way she is. She drives a big old van like me, I am serious! . . .

What kind of response have you gotten from readers so far?

I'll tell you what a lady said to me. She said she cried and then she laughed and then she got mad at me. She said, I was mad with you and then I loved you and then I threw the book away . . .

There is a lot of poverty in your book and actually you speak about how it is like to grow up poor in the South. What do you think the psychological consequences of growing up poor in the South could be? Was Clovis that poor? There are some clashing sentences about that point in your book too.

Oh, Clovis had a lot of money but we never knew that . . . . We thought we were poor because he never spent any money on us. He never did anything for the house, he never did anything whatsoever, so we figured out that we didn't have no money at all. Matter of fact, we lived in a real good neighborhood but to me, from some of the houses that were out there built and the house that we were in, it looked like an old wooden house. Lots of people had brick houses and lots of people like us had wood houses and those houses just looked like they were chicken houses to me. During that time, I thought we lived in a poor area, but today, as I look back on it, those people had money.

Do you know why Clovis hid the money away from you like that?

Oh, because he loved women. He loved to please his ladies and these ladies were 15 or 20 years younger than him. He was dating young girls and he would just cherish them. He cared for them so much that he could have four or five of them at a time . . .

And what was that incident that you relate about one of his mistresses and her daughter?

Oh, I hated her. She would demand from Clovis to buy her daughter those bangle bracelets and I had never had them in all my life. I remember her coming over one day, she spent the night and we cooked some grits that next morning, some eggs and sausages, and we gave it to her. She said,

"I'm not going to eat this slop" and I have never heard that because Clovis would never allow us to say something like that. To us, that was something cruel. I remember during that time, when we didn't want to eat any more food because we were full, we threw the rest inside the small slop box and we thought we would give it to this man across the street for his ox . . . . So we put it in this bucket for the man, and when Clovis came home that day, he said "who didn't eat the food?" And we all put our food in there, and some of them said "Gal didn't eat hers." He made us go into that slop, put it back on our plates and we had to eat it all over again . . . . That dawned back on me the moment that girl had said that. Clovis had liked the girl. He bought her bangle bracelets, then this old kind of telephone that you would hold with your hand and talk like this right here . . . . Then a color television while we just had a small black one, and we had to put a hanger on it to keep it on. That's why I hated her because they were getting things and we didn't get anything. One day, Clovis took us to her house and we thought it was a mansion. I could not believe what I saw. It wasn't real to me . . .

Have you ever seen her after that?

Yes, after Clovis died. I still don't like her. I don't care.

If you could start it all over again, would you like to reshape your life removing all the characters that meant suffering and sorrow to you?

No, I would not and the reason why I say that is because in some ways, I am kind of glad now that I went through a lot of those things. I believe that made me a better responsible person today. If I hadn't experienced some of those things even though they were cruel, right now today, I would never know myself. I would never know if someone else would say "this happened to me," I wouldn't understand . . . . But now, it does not bother or offend me. A lot of stuff made me the woman that I am now . . . . I only wished my mother knew me, that she didn't get killed and burnt.

Would you say you are a strong person then?

Yes, definitely . . . . I am a tough cookie from what I learned from Clovis. I give him extra credit for that only. If I think about it right today, maybe he was being tough with us because we were all females in the house. Maybe he was trying to teach us to be tough because he's gonna die one of these days. You get to think about all these things. He never told us

that, but if you just sit back and think about it, maybe he was trying to teach us to be strong, depending on ourselves and nobody else.

Was there any kind of communication between you?

There was no communication whatsoever. He was a slave driver. Either you pick up the brush to scrap his back or else you were kicked in the b . . . .

And did Clovis feel comfortable doing that?

Oh, yes, he loved it! He was the king. It was like being in power for him.

What do you think of the last years of his life? How did you react then?

Well, I thought, "do you remember the cruel things that you did to me?" I was saying cruel things like "look at you now, you can't even move. I don't feel afraid of you any more. You can't say anything to me now as when you were well and good. I am going to run my life." I figured I had an upper hand on him then. He had to look up on me because he was down and I was standing up. I felt kind of good on that part.

But don't you reckon that Clovis managed to make you suffer even after his death through his will?

Oh, yes, I wanted to die. I wanted to kill myself. I just felt that that was the worst pain ever. I never thought that was really going to happen. It's weird. That meant that man really hated me.

And what about your relationship with Evelyn?

She is just like Clovis. Yet, I don't want to blame her too much because those were Clovis's natural daughters . . . . But then I got angry again. They were part of the family. It's just that Evelyn had never done that to me before. It was like something came over her. It was like she suddenly hated me because she wanted to have everything. She was "the baby of the family" so she figured out she should have everything and since she didn't get what she wanted, she took it out on the first person and that was me . . .

Do you know what happened to your manuscript?

Oh, I got it. I still have it. It's in the garage in a box [Laughter.]. . . I don't hold things. You gonna think I am lying to you but I am like that. I got

boxes and boxes of things. My daughter keeps them all. I reckon it's a shame that I don't keep them in correct order. My kids keep everything that I have—just like right now, my daughter is looking at me from the kitchen, saying "I know where those pictures are" . . .

Did you have to send a letter to a literary agent? How did you get published?

What happened, I did it on tape. Josephine typed it out. She did the transcript for me. It lasted for six weeks or eight. I didn't do much work, all I did is what I am doing right now with you. I went back over every page until I would get mad at her. I was reading, reading, and reading . . . and Josephine got in touch with her own literary agent, Harriet Wasserman. . . . Oh, here is a picture of my grandmother . . .

Oh, she looks great and pretty . . .

And this is Clovis right here when he was younger in the Navy. I don't know who that other guy with him is, maybe a friend that was on the ship with him . . . . My grandmother, she ain't full black. She got some mixing in her family. She looks beautiful . . .

What memory do you have of her?

When I was waking up one morning, she was ironing my clothes to go to school. She told me to lie back down and go to sleep . . . . She would always feed us. She loved to feed people and I inherited that from her they say. . . . And she loved to entertain people, they say I took after her too.

And what about her death? From the first chapter, we already got a climactic scene, so why did you choose to tell this at the very beginning? How old were you then?

That was most terrible. I was in the second grade, probably in the third when it happened . . .

How did Clovis get away with it?

Oh, he lied. Nobody ever knew. She had had the last child just before that. And two months later, Clovis became violent again, but the doctors thought the sickness was from the child that she had had. She was already sick anyway. I don't know what kind of sickness she had until they had to cut all her hair off her head. She couldn't even get up to go to the bathroom and she was only in her early thirties. When she would get up,

she would be shaking all over. I was curious about what happened to her hair but Clovis never told us anything . . .

What do you think about Clovis now? Is it you who wrote the last part entitled "Father Dreams" or was it suggested by Josephine Humphreys?

Oh, I wrote it because that is exactly what he would have expected from us. No matter if we felt down, he wanted us to get back. In some ways, he expected us to be strong and never to pay attention to whatever people would say. I think that's really what he wanted to teach us but at the time, we were young and did not understand those things.

Why did you insert it at the end of the book? As a forceful conclusion?

Yes.

And this "Father Dreams" made me think about other episodes too when you seek an imaginary mother for instance.

Yes, I do that all the time. I always say, mamma, I sure wish you were here to see my kids. . . . It's like she's hearing me, you know . . .

How did you come to choose that particular picture for the front cover?

I had tiny pictures of Clovis, of my mamma and grandma and I had somebody enlarge them. . . . Here is the original ones and you know what the publisher told me, "I just want it that way, old and crinkled." He said, "don't even change it." It's like you even see fingerprints on it and I guess my mamma was holding the Bible. . . . My younger daughter, she looks just like my mamma: it's like she is coming back to me that way. And my oldest daughter, there is a certain way that she does her hair too and then she looks like my grandmother. . . . Like the Lord knows that I loved them both and is sending them back to me. . . . You can have copies of these if you wish, but you have to promise to send them back to me! [Laughter.]

Sure I will. . . . Did you keep any press article cuttings about you and your book?

Yes, tons of them. I got some of everything and I can get out some for you . . . . You know, I have always liked modeling . . . being an actress!

Why is that?

I guess that for some psychological reasons, I wanted more attention because I was neglected. I truly believe that is why I wanted to be an actress . . . . But now, with all those journalists, I wish I didn't get that much attention . . . . It didn't come at the right time . . . . It seems that there is nothing out there any more for me. I've done it all, I've seen it all and it's time for me to stay home. . . .

I am going to focus on Germaine Guex's abandonment syndrome while at the same time studying your book. She is a psychologist looking at the sources of abandonment in childhood and her conclusion is that such cases always occur within a dysfunctional family circle. Would you mind this theory being applied to you?

No, not at all, of course, I was abandoned! I used to always cry, saying I want some answers for what happened, but then I think about it. And I said, "if my mother had taken me with her, I would have been dead too because she was killed." All this was supposed to happen to me then. If it didn't, this book would have never been out anyway. . . . A lot of people have this feeling deep inside, saying I want to get this released off my chest and that is true. . . .

What do you think is universal about your book?

I guess breaking up the circle of violence we were talking about. . . .

Why did you take to smoking and drinking then?

Because it started at home and also just to show Clovis I could do better. . . and all the time too, he would ask us all to turn on the stove to light him a cigarette, because he never had a match or a lighter. So we had to turn on the stove and wait till it turned red but, I would never smoke at first, just sit there waiting. . . . Briefly though, I got curious . . . and we could get anything we wanted because he would bring home cigarettes, beer, cheap stuff from the Coast Guard. The closet was full of liquor so we just helped ourselves. Yet, when I was at home, I noticed that when I was smoking that beer and smoking that marijuana, my mind was cleared. I wasn't thinking about the beatings at all. It just wiped it all away, but then, when it was gone, I had to think about that again, when Clovis would beat me and as soon as he would disappear, I would get high and drink to wipe it off my mind.

Would you mind people saying that you are a symbol or at least some very instructive and teaching model?

Well, you know, I am a very simple and ordinary person. I just happen to have written a book. . . .

Yes, but maybe all great writers are very humble too. . . .

Well, what am I supposed to say? [Laughter.]

Do you consider yourself as a writer then?

Yes, I do like writing. I don't really know how I am supposed to feel as a writer but I intend to write a sequel to *Gal*, just to let the readers know what has happened to *Gal*, to her sisters and her life since.

Are you going to mention Ray too?

Oh, no, just eight lines and he is out of there! Because I am afraid he might want to sue me or want the money I am making. . . .

Did he read the book?

I saw him glance at it a couple of times indeed.

Did he ever think about writing his own book?

Yes, he did, after I started traveling around the country. He got more demanding. He wanted me to get Josephine help him write his own book, but she doesn't do that for everybody! For me somehow, it was different. Josephine said to herself she had to help me. She has a thousand calls each day but says she would never do it again. . . .

Have you ever traveled before?

No, that is why I was so curious about the clouds and wanted to keep them in a jar. But I would never tell people where I was going, or for what reason. I went to London and people asked me if I had family up there, and I said yes: I just didn't want them to know. Even now, people in Charleston, when I go to the store, they do not know who I am. I heard a conversation once. That person was talking to the grocer and asked: "did you ever read that book called *Gal*?" and the grocer replied: "Do you think she is here?" The other said, "Oh no, she is somewhere in California of course," while I was just standing right there. . . and the grocer's wife said: "Look that's her over there!" The grocer said, "dressed in jeans!" [Laughter.]. . . And still another time, I went to Barnes and Nobles, and I wanted

to see where my book was at. My literary agent was with me and asked the shop-assistant to see it. Harriet added: "You know she was number 1 for 13 weeks," and he said: "She is not any more," and I am just standing right there. . . . And Harriet said, "well, look this is Ruthie Bolton here." And he said: "If this is Ruthie, well, then I am the President of the United States!" I told my agent, I said: "Harriet, let's leave!" She said: "no, wait a minute." The guy wanted to see my driving license or something but it says my true name on it. I wanted to run out of that place and hide but then later on Barnes and Nobles called to apologize and sent me flowers. . . .

What about the audiobooks?

Oh, you can hardly find them. The reason why I wanted them is because there is a lot of people who can't read so I decided to have it recorded. And it's that famous actress who speaks on it . . . . I forgot her name right now but . . . she is very good. I would have liked to do it myself, but that's OK.

What about the first mini-cassettes on which you recorded your first memories?

We have them in a safe. There are the tiny ones but we keep them aside. I can't show them to you. . . .

There are many racial conflicts and issues in your book. What about that?

The first time I realized that was when I was sitting on the floor looking at Martin Luther King on TV. It was during that time when they were walking on the streets and I had loved his speech. I never knew about racism until I saw that really. I was going to a mixed school and even then, it didn't strike me, but then later on, I understood what was happening. It was like I could feel everything down in my soul. . . .

What about that episode in Tolley?

Well, that really happened to me. But we changed the names. . . .

You said at the time, you were the first black woman to get a job there!

That's true. I was so determined. I went there and I spoke to the manager. It matters the way you talk to people and I filled the application out. But

next day, I saw they got that new white girl there. So I went to see the manager again and told him. He said, "you really want to work, don't you." I said: "Yes, I do," and I got the job. At first, people were just stunned to see a black girl working there but I am that type of person. I can get all the jobs I want. I don't know what it is about me. I don't care. If I see all white people in a building but they have a sign saying, "help wanted," I am not gonna be scared not going in that building. . . . I am going right on because I am so determined, and you know what those people are going to say: "let's get that girl because she is bold." Just like you were in insisting to see me. My first job was as a waitress. It's not that the black people cannot get the job. It's just because they don't go in there. So then, you cannot blame the company. If it's meant to be, I'll get it and I get it so . . . and you know what I tell my kids, that's how the Lord made us, everybody of different color. And if you really want people to be separated, trust me, you would have never met me. There are colored people in the world and you don't know what your future is. You might end up in a place that you never thought of, meet someone there of a different "race" and you end up liking them very much. I have always wanted to see someone like you, coming from so far away. There are a lot of places where I would like to go too, like to Africa. But I am going to wear a shirt with "United States" on it just in case they might think I am a prisoner of war [Laughter.]. . . I also went to the Bahamas and that place is really scary. My sister and I were just joking and she said, "she is an alien," pointing at me . . . and you know, those people took it seriously. . . . They took long before trusting us, and I had a headache all that day.

Have you ever thought about being a counselor?

I love children and I love talking to them, but being a counselor . . . . no. My heart wouldn't take it, that's all. When I think of all the misery in the world, I just can't. . . .

But I thought you were a strong person?

Yes, but still . . . when I see all those flies around a child or a mother like the other day slapped her daughter in the street, I wish I could grab that girl away from her. . . . My stomach simply can't take it . . . . But I want to help people and my kids are the same. They say: "Mamma, there is that kid at school we want to help. He ain't no coat nor no money." The friends of my kids tell them: "I wish I had your mamma," but I say, I can't help everybody. There is something I teach them, I say: "Look here, never

laugh at nobody because you don't know what you gonna have yourself." So my kids don't laugh at people. And the neighbors will also come to me and say: "We never see your kids." It's just that I tell them you needn't to be seen wild, loud and rowdy about . . . . I think they are pretty much like me in that sense. . . .

Were there any other African-American authors who inspired you?

Yes, Dori Sanders. I like her book *Clover*. She is really good. And I have met Danielle Steele too. We were on a show together once. And I felt so bad. She had all these books to sign and I had only one person. She can win people just like that, she is in a real writing position, but me, I need to be a comedian of some sort. There is a lot of black romantic people, wanting to write a love story and I'd like to write one too. I also loved that book, *Baby of the Family*.

Would you like now to turn over a page and read whichever passage you want for me?

Yes. . . . [Ms Bolton goes on reading the passage about the fingernail polish]. If there was one passage I didn't read at all, it's this one though, because I've hated green polish since then. One day, my younger daughter, she said: "Mamma, can I put some finger nail polish on?" and just as I turned back, she had already done it, and guess what color it was . . . GREEN. That freaked me out and I asked her: "what do you think you're doing?" She said: "Oh mamma, it's all right, I'll take it off." I said: "No, no, just keep it on." And I was just realizing what was happening, just a sign to me to see if I was going to react the same as Clovis or not. But all this is behind now. . . . Although there are certain things that I cannot help [tears in her eyes.]. . . like my grandmother and my mother. . . .

Have you seen that film,* The Colour Purple*?

Yes, and I was anxious people would come to that part, asking if Clovis had never sexually abused us, but he never did that. That's the only good thing I see about it. Seeing how evil he was, I always thought why he didn't come to it anyway. . . . He would just make us tell him when our periods were on because he didn't want to have babies in his house. He wanted us to graduate from high school. That was his dream. Every month, he would say: "Gal, you're not telling me something this month," and I would say: "It's not on yet." And he would say: "That's because

you're pregnant, I am going to take you to the doctor." But he never did. . . .

And what about the flower symbolism at the end of the book?

I love flowers, specially sunflowers. . . . Every time the sun turns, it's like the sunflower follows it. I remember I used to take all the plants that were half-dead at the nursery I was working at back home . . . and I would nurse them back to life. I just can't help it!

Would you like to add something else now to conclude?

Well. . . . I still cannot believe you have come that far. I cannot believe you are here. To think of you buying your book in Australia and then tracing me back to here. Isn't that something? . . .

Yes, probably. Thank you very much, Ruthie.

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