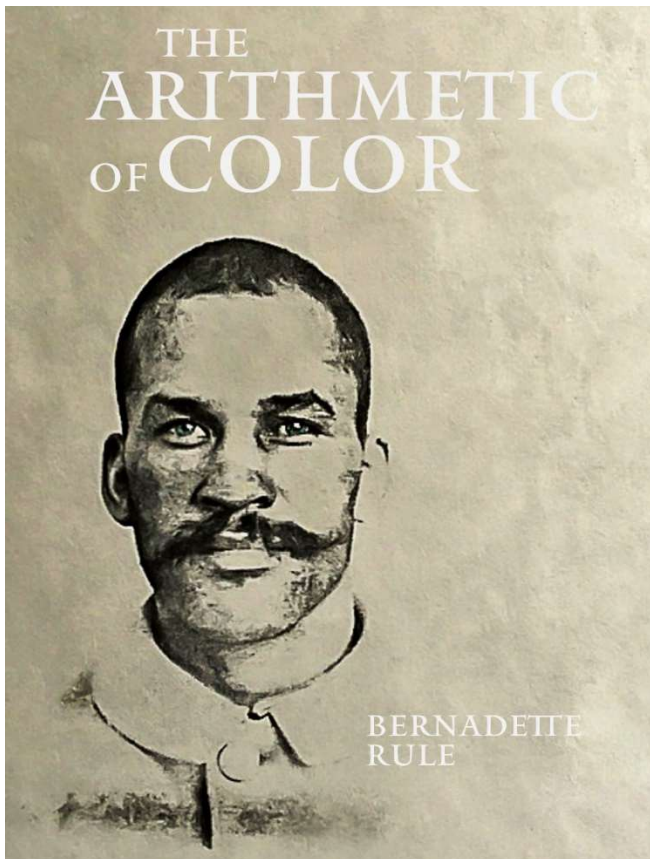


Rule's latest a brilliant montage

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"The Arithmetic of Color" by Bernadette Rule. Morrisville, NC: Lulu Press (Ironing Board Press), 2023, 266 pages, \$24.95 (paperback).



"The second white person to hurry to Tom Johnson's side the morning he became a millionaire was Judge Arch Wingate," Bernadette Rule explains at the beginning of "The Arithmetic of Color," one of the best nonfiction novels I've read in recent memory. "The judge's brother Ted, the banker, had telephoned him that morning to make sure he was hurrying out to Slayden's Crossing. Despite the fact that their grocer father died when they were young and they had received only an eighth grade education, the Wingates were possessed of iron ambition and shrewdness. The decade of the 1920s had seen their steady rise into two of the richest and most powerful men in western Kentucky... until that January morning when a black man seemed poised to pass them up."

"Arch turned his Model T onto the dirt road beside the railroad track where Johnson lived, and saw that crowds of people stood talking in the neighboring yards," Rule continues. "At the sound of the motor, three white hens squawked

and flapped under the porch next door to the one-and-a-half-story frame house. A dog ran forward, barking. Mixed breed, the judge noted. He could tell it didn't dare come near him, so he ignored the dog's ineffectual threats. As he walked through the gate and up to the porch steps, all conversation ceased. A pretty woman of about fifty opened the front door quietly as he raised his hand to knock. Her partially straightened hair framed a round, solemn face."

So begins the story of Tom Johnson, a Graves County native whose mixed heritage and life events serves to provide unique insights into the history of the ever-evolving American experience. Living through one of the most tumultuous eras in our nation's history (he was born in 1871 and passed away in 1929), his story is brought to life in meticulous detail through the captivating and exquisite literary style that has come to characterize Rule's substantial body of work. Those who live in Kentucky – or who have an intimate connection to the region many of us call home - will be especially interested in her latest offering. And if you are from the Mayfield area, you'll definitely want to add this one to your personal library.

Structurally, the book consists of a brief prologue followed by 50 relatively succinct episodic chapters; the novel concludes with two epilogues in which the author recounts her adventure

researching the story she is imparting. I found the timeline Rule includes as an appendix to be especially helpful in keeping the chronology intact as there is a lot going on here. Interspersed throughout the chapters are five verbatim recollections from Gladys Morse, Johnson's niece, who was in her 90s when she was interviewed for this remarkable work. Also included is a 10-page photo gallery of historical pictures that brings the narrative to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise; Johnson's mugshot and prison description from his time at Leavenworth was particularly intriguing.

By the time you make your way through this one, you'll feel like you know Tom and the rest of the characters that populate this enlightening foray into Americana intimately. Rule has that rare ability to transport you to a different time and place in such a visceral manner that you will swear you are actually there. Witness the following from the forty-fourth chapter:

"Tom spent most of the next day in his hotel room. He slept late since there was no court. He woke from a dream of Mary in bed beside him. As he lay there savoring the dream, he suddenly remembered a moment from his early days at Leavenworth. Shortly after he got there, he was issued a tablet of paper and a pencil for writing letters. He had written several letters to Mary before he received any from her. Fear that she might never contact him was one of the strongest emotions he'd had to grapple with during that dark period. On the second Sunday of his incarceration – Sunday mornings being one of the few periods in the schedule prisoners were given any time to themselves – he was lying in his bunk preparing to write her another letter, when he was swept by an intense physical longing for her. The idea that he had lost her forever bore down upon him until he thought his heart would break in two."

If you want to find out why he was at Leavenworth, and what happened next on that fateful Sunday morning, you'll have to buy the book. But trust me, it's worth the investment. I'll just say that some things about the human condition are universal.

A former professor of English at Mohawk College as well as the host of Art Waves, a weekly collegiate arts-interview radio program, Rule grew up in Kentucky but has spent her adult life in Canada. She is on the executive board of the Hamilton Association for the Advancement of Literature, Science & Art, one of the oldest cultural institutions in North America. She's had 10 collections of poetry published, most recently *"The Window Washer of Chartres,"* in 2023, and *"Deep Breath"* in 2021. I reviewed her first nonfiction novel, "Dark Fire," which was published in 2021, in the September 11, 2022, edition of the Daily News. That effort was shortlisted for a 2022 Hamilton Literary Award, as well as for a Whistler Independent Book Award. Both novels are based on true events, although Rule tells both stories through a creative fiction lens.

As Jeffery Donaldson, Professor of English & Cultural Studies at McMaster University, astutely observes, "The Arithmetic of Color is a brilliant montage of history, work, family connection, social justice, the spirits of generosity and avarice, and the heart-breaking ways of the world. Its lessons are as hard-earned as they are profoundly proven."

I could not agree more. Highly recommended. By-the-way, "The Arithmetic of Color" can be ordered through the author's website at: <https://www.bernadetterule.ca/> (or from your preferred online bookseller).

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