

# BOOK REVIEWS

Rachel Décoste's new audio-book

## The Year of Return, A Black Woman's African Homecoming

Rachel Décoste



**THE YEAR OF RETURN:**  
A Black Woman's  
African Homecoming

DIANNE WING

Rachel Décoste is many things, a software engineer with a Masters in Public Administration, a community activist, a motivational speaker, a Black History enthusiast, an Obama supporter, an Old Ottawa East resident, and a self-proclaimed diva.

In 2010, when her parents fortuitously survived the devastating Haiti earthquake, she recognized that “tomorrow is not promised” and it was time to follow her dreams, to go for the life she really wanted.

With its vibrant Black community and the excitement of an Obama White House, Washington, DC beckoned. Décoste enrolled at George Washington

University and soon found herself working in the American capital. When her visa was about to expire, she took advantage of a six month contract extension to work remotely - six months to follow another dream, to explore her roots.

Like most descendants of enslaved Africans, Décoste could not pinpoint her origins until technology evolved. Guided by her DNA ancestry test, she made plans to visit Senegal, Ivory Coast, Benin, Togo and Ghana. She admits that negative preconceptions about Africa, her assumptions of violence, sexism and political instability, scared her, but also made her more determined to discover her ancestry.

She anticipated that her first steps on African soil would be emotional, and they were. But not quite how she expected. The sight of two long-legged birds on the early morning horizon outside Dakar made her think of The Lion King, and Disney music filled her head.

In her newly-released audio-book, *The Year of Return, A Black Woman's African Homecoming*, Décoste tells of her journey and efforts to decolonize her mind and reclaim her heritage. In *The Year of Return*, Décoste speaks passionately about the tragic history of the slave trade and colonialism in West Africa. Her visit to Benin brings her to tears as she pays homage to

the slave prison where her ancestors were held before the voyages to the Americas. Only the strongest survived imprisonment, and they were the ones deemed fit to make the harrowing journey. Décoste sees faces in Benin that look like family members and she comes to the realization that she is a walking, talking miracle of a long history of survival. She believes that she owes it to her ancestral family to make the most of her life.

Even while learning about the tragic history of her ancestors, Décoste finds time to appreciate the everyday pleasures of travel. She braves the largest outdoor market in West Africa to find fabric and buy authentic African dresses tailor-made. In a world where nothing is fast or convenient, she is forced to slow down, look into the eyes of the people around her and really listen. Travel from town to town is made most often, hanging on for dear life to the back of her motorcycle driver. She eats in local spots, and samples yams in many forms during a yam holiday. On a brief jaunt to Togo, she enjoys a spoken word evening in a nightclub. And spoiler alert, this feisty, independent Canadian woman even finds love along the way.

Décoste's homecoming to Africa includes meeting royalty in Allada, Benin. It is here she learns that Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader



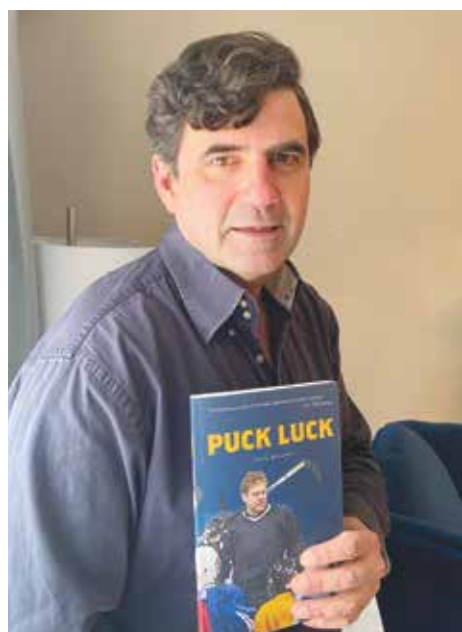
SUPPLIED PHOTO

**Descendant of enslaved Africans, Old Ottawa East's Rachel Décoste spent six months tracing her family's roots across Africa.**

of Haitian independence, is a direct descendant of this royal line. Later, in Porto Novo, she finds a quotation from L'Ouverture inscribed on the gates of the African History Museum: “In overthrowing me, only the trunk of the tree of black liberty has been cut down; its branches will shoot up again for its roots are numerous and deep.”

While Black History Month is celebrated each year in February, Décoste's exploration into her own Haitian/African history resonates year round and is well worth a listen.

## Puck Luck is rollicking, reconciliatory, redemptive, ridiculous - and a good read



AFTON WYLYNKO PHOTO

**Local author, David Wylynko, tells a tale from the beer league.**

JOHN DANCE

In December, Old Ottawa South author Dave Wylynko's “Puck Luck” rolled off the presses and snuck into Christmas stockings around Ottawa.

It's a fine addition to the Canadian literary trove of hockey heroics and hysteria - in the tradition of Paul Quarrington's “King Leary” and “Logan in Overtime.”

But this hockey epic is about minor hockey rather than the quest for gold or the Cup. And it's the minor hockey that we parents have experienced as we huddled - pre-COVID days - in Brewer Arena and as we explored the eastern Ontario countryside with our hockey-playing children tagging along for the tournament. Wylynko's book

mocks and celebrates the shenanigans of parents, coaches and the curious bureaucracies that keep the enterprise tottering along.

Danny Wilde is the dubious hero of the book. He's been banished from his beer league, his marriage is a shambles, and his daughter is trying to pursue her passions. But one-time Junior B player Wilde gets to redeem himself by taking over behind the bench as coach of a floundering midget team (or are they, fortunately, no longer called midgets?). There is nothing politically correct about Wilde. He's an occasionally charming reprobate who, with a cigarette in hand and a drink nearby, manages to rip-off many of the parents while getting the players to mostly enjoy themselves. For those whose kids have graduated from the minor leagues

to real life but who still love that rather special game of hockey, Wylynko brings back the good, bad and humorous memories.

After the last Capital Ward Cup - emblematic of shinny supremacy in the nation's capital - Wylynko, who is the long-time general manager of the Old Ottawa South Moose, the team that somehow beat the Old Ottawa East Hosers that year, muttered that he was going to write a novel about the travesties of minor hockey. Well he has, and it's a fun read.

Wylynko's book is available at Black Squirrel Books on Bank Street and at Octopus Books on Third Avenue.