

Shmanners 271: Ida B. Wells

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Travis: Hey, everybody! Quick content warning here. We're going to be talking about racism and racism-motivated violence, so if that is something that you have a hard time listening to, this may not be the episode for you. Uh, and you might wanna skip to a different one.

[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to *Shmanners*!

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette...

Travis: For ordinary occasions! Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: Before we started recording there was a brief pause there where I tried to remember if we did jokes for biography episodes.

Teresa: No, not really.

Travis: Because, like, I was trying to figure out something. 'Cause we're talking about Ida B. Wells, and I was trying to think of, like, I don't know, "Ida know," "Well, Ida know," something like that?

Teresa: Hmm.

Travis: I was almost there but then I was like, "You know what? I'm reaching for it. It's not there. It's not in my heart."

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Hi, everybody! Welcome back for the second episode this week.

Teresa: We do what we oughta do.

Travis: Yeah! And if you missed it because you're like, "*Shmanners* comes out on Fridays," then make sure you go back and listen to that wigs episode, because I thought it was a real hoot and a half.

Teresa: Oh boy.

Travis: But this time we're doing another one of our, I'm just gonna say it, hit biography episodes.

Teresa: Oh yeah!

Travis: 'Cause we're talking about Ida B. Wells. And I'm not going into this one completely blind.

Teresa: Good!

Travis: 'Cause I know Ida B. Wells was a journalist.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: I know that she was a woman of color.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: And... I know she was awesome.

Teresa: Yes, all those are true. Um, and she was a journalist and activist. Uh, you know, you might've heard about it in 7th grade civics class. She's normally lumped together with people like Ida Tarbell and Upton Sinclair.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Uh, but Wells was, as we will go on to discuss later, famous for particularly her work on exposing racism and lynching in post-Civil War America.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: So ultimately her life is one of risk and courage and ultimately the power of journalism.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Well, I am excited.

Teresa: Yeah! Good.

Travis: And I'm ready.

Teresa: Alright.

Travis: And I'm here. And I'm present.

Teresa: You—you are.

Travis: And I'm ready.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Let's do it.

Teresa: Alright. Ida B. Wells was born an enslaved person in Holy Springs, Mississippi, on July, 16th 1862. She was the oldest daughter of James and Lizzie Wells, who would go on to have six children in total.

About six months after Ida's birth, the Emancipation Proclamation freed her family from their bondage, but that didn't mean that things were easy.

Travis: Yes. I mean... hey.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: That's—spoiler, folks, that's not how it worked.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: The Wells family stayed in Mississippi for a while, so they faced some intense discrimination. And luckily, Ida's parents were an incredible role model when it came to fighting for change. Um, both her mom and dad were politically active during the Reconstruction era, and her father James worked closely with the Freedmen's Aid Society, which supported bringing in teachers from northern states to educate newly freed enslaved people and their children.

Travis: That's cool. I think that's a great thing—

Teresa: Totally.

Travis: —and I'm glad it happened.

Teresa: And he went so far as to help start a school for the newly freed people called Shaw University.

Travis: Cool!

Teresa: I mean, and it is cool, 'cause it's still around today.

Travis: Get out of the town!

Teresa: Shaw University became Rust College, and it still operates as a liberal arts college in Mississippi, dedicated to Black excellence.

Travis: Nice! Okay!

Teresa: Yeah! Little setback.

Travis: Oh no.

Teresa: Around this time is when yellow fever began to ravage the area.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: It started in New Orleans in the 1870's, and it just spread up and down the region.

Travis: Oh boy.

Teresa: Um, so her family suffered some losses. Both of her parents and one of her younger brothers.

Travis: Aw, man.

Teresa: Right. Um, but Ida was determined and resourceful. Um, and—so at this point, right? She was born in 1862, and this was the mid-1870's, right? So that makes her...

Travis: Maybe, like, 14 or 15?

Teresa: Maybe 14 or 15. Um, she convinced the administrator of a nearby county school that she was 18.

Travis: Nice.

Teresa: And with some smooth talking and demonstration of how intelligent she was, she got them to hire her as a teacher.

Travis: Okay! Alright!

Teresa: That's, like, some origin story, like... high points.

Travis: I mean, here's the thing. People have made movies with less of a premise than that, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Totally. In 1882, she moved to Memphis with her sisters to live with her aunt and be close to brothers who had worked as carpenter apprentices in the area.

Travis: Okay. So still kind of hanging out with family.

Teresa: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Travis: Seems close. I like that. Okay. Working—working with siblings. [holding back laughter] I appreciate that. Okay, great.

Teresa: Yes. [laughs] And that's where she attended Fisk University in Nashville.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And this is when Ida puts pen to paper and really starts her work as a journalist.

Travis: I just love, by the way—it just occurred to me that the structure being—the order was, "I'm gonna work as a teacher for a while, and then go to college." [laughs] Just, I—I just—I like her already. I like her tenacity.

Teresa: Indeed.

Travis: Her moxie.

Teresa: Moxie!

Travis: Herchutzpah.

Teresa: Oh!

Travis: Her... vim and vigor.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Her... brassiness.

Teresa: Hm.

Travis: Her... cool stuff.

Teresa: [laughs] So close. Um—

Travis: I just went one too far, you know? Just like walking down a dock.

Teresa: [laughs] And then—

Travis: One plank too far.

Teresa: —plop. Plop into the water.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Um, this is when she started writing under the pen name Iola, and a number of her articles were published in the early 1890's in Black newspapers. She really started to gain a voice for fighting against racial injustice. Uh, she became the co-owner and editor of the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight Newspaper*, and later of the *Free Speech*.

Travis: Okay. That was—that's probably a better, more succinct way to say it.

Teresa: Yes, yes.

Travis: Yeah. A lot of—there were a lot of words in there.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, so we mention the subject of most of her writings. And it is because that is what her experience in the world was like.

Travis: Mm-hmm.

Teresa: Um, for example, in 1883 she bought a first class train ticket from Memphis to Woodstock Tennessee, where she was going to go teach. She had paid for a high class ticket, but the train crew ordered her to move to the segregated car, designated for Black people.

Travis: [frustrated grumble]

Teresa: Um, understandably—because, I mean, money spends, right?

Travis: Yeah, right!

Teresa: Understandably, she was outraged and openly refused. Um, then they forcibly removed her, and she bit one of them.

Travis: [through laughter] Yeah! Okay!

Teresa: Yep. She—

Travis: I—everything except for that last part I was like, "Aw, man. Oh, no, no, no." And then she bit one. "Ohh!"

Teresa: Oh yeah!

Travis: Okay!

Teresa: She went on to sue the railroad company with the help of Black lawyer Thomas Frank Cassels. She won a 500 dollar settlement in a circuit court case, but the decision was later overturned—

Travis: Wow.

Teresa: —by the Tennessee Supreme Court, because nothing gold can stay.

Travis: Yeah. Okay.

Teresa: So this may sound familiar to some people, but she was dedicated to fighting not only physical injustices but also vote suppression, vandalism of Black-owned businesses, um, and then lynching.

Travis: Okay. Good—all good things to be against.

Teresa: Indeed.

Travis: [sighs]

Teresa: She wrote her first lynching piece in 1892, when three African-American men named Tom Moss, Calvin McDowell, and Will Stewart, who owned a grocery store in Memphis—they were very popular in the area, and highly successful. But there was another major grocery store in the area owned by a white guy.

Travis: Mm-hmm.

Teresa: And his supporters and the white guy, they clashed with these men on several occasions. Um, but at one point, the three Black men had to physically defend their store from attacking white vandals. They were arrested and brought to jail, but they didn't get a chance to have their day in court, because a lynch mob broke into their cells and murdered.

Travis: Oh, God.

Teresa: Each one of those men had been friends with Ida. And she vowed that she wouldn't take another murder lying down.

Travis: That's one of those moments of, like, how do you even respond to that? Like—

Teresa: Well, Ida knew how to respond. She launched herself into probably, like, the most difficult investigative reporting she'd ever done. She set out to do a complete expose. She analyzed specific cases through newspaper reports and police records, and interviewed people throughout the South who had lost friends and family to these mobs, and overall she spent two months gathering throughout the South gathering information on other lynching incidents.

This sounds like what I do when I get upset.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: I research.

Travis: Research.

Teresa: Dive into a book, figure it out.

Travis: Find the truth.

Teresa: Find the truth!

Travis: And not only that, though, I would say that—not to take away from you—

Teresa: Oh, of course not.

Travis: —but to give to Ida B. Wells, it seems like even one step further of it's not just "I need to understand the truth myself, I need to understand the truth and then take that and make other people understand it, too."

Teresa: Absolutely. Absolutely. Now, it was very dangerous, as it's also kind of dangerous today, right?

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Uh, to be a Black person traveling alone throughout a hotbed of racism.

Travis: Especially a woman of color, especially a Black woman.

Teresa: Indeed, indeed. Uh, and she published these findings in several places, but one editorial seemed to really get the Memphis—the ears of Memphis cocked towards her. A mob stormed her office in her newspaper, destroying all of her equipment and threatening that if she ever returned to Memphis, they'd get her.

Thankfully she was spared, because she was in New York City at the time. But the news of her destroyed newspaper office was still upsetting.

Travis: Mm-hmm.

Teresa: Um, but she never stopped writing. She stayed in New York for a while and wrote an in depth report on lynching in America for the *New York Age*, which is an African-American newspaper run by another former enslaved person, T. Thomas Fortune.

Travis: I am so eager, I'm edge of my seat, I can't wait to learn more about Ida B. Wells. But first, we do need to take a short break for some thank you notes, but we'll be right back.

Teresa: We'll be back!

[theme music plays]

Travis: We want to write a thank you note to Function of Beauty. Thank you for sponsoring the show this week, Function of Beauty, and thank you for making my hair look and smell fantastic!

Teresa: It really does. It's one of those things where, like, I can walk past you and go, "Mmm!"

Travis: Yeah, you get a—

Teresa: "I like that smell!"

Travis: —you get a whiff of my scent cloud.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And they've got—

Teresa: Like Li—like—what's it—is it... who's the guy with the—on *Peanuts* with the cloud?

Travis: Pigpen, you're thinking about Pigpen.

Teresa: Pigpen!

Travis: But his is a dirty cloud.

Teresa: Right. Yours is a scent cloud.

Travis: That's right, and you could smell like mango, rose, pear, eucalyptus, any of those, right? Because the way Function of Beauty works, you go and you take a short but thorough quiz, and then they create a unique, customized hair formula to give your hair everything it needs to look and feel its best. So, like, I have a bit of, like, dryness in my hair, and I also have, you know, dye in my hair. And so I get something that's specially formulated for that, and I get to pick that smell! Plus, every product is sulfate and paraben free, vegan, and cruelty free. And you can—like I said, mango, sweet peach, crisp pear, even subtler scents such as lavender, rose, eucalyptus. You're gonna find it, and you can also get unscented. You can get it in a bunch of different forms.

Teresa: So if you don't want a scent cloud you can still use Function of Beauty.

Travis: That's okay too. Yeah, that's okay too. I'm a big fan, and I think you will be too, so go to functionofbeauty.com/shmanners to take your quiz and save 20% on your first order. That applies to their full range of customized hair, skin,

and body products. That's functionofbeauty.com/shmanners to let them know you heard about it here and to get 20% off your order.
Functionofbeauty.com/shmanners.

[dramatic music plays]

Freddie: Since the dawn of time, screenwriters have taken months to craft their stories, but now, three Hollywood professionals shall attempt the impossible: break a story in one hour!

[jazzy music plays]

That's right. Here on *Story Break*, I, Freddie Wong...

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Will: And Will Campos...

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Matt: Have one hour to turn a humble idea into an awesome movie.

Will: Now, an awesome movie starts with an awesome title.

Matt: I chose *The Billionaire's Marriage Valley*.

Will: Mine was *Christmas Pregnant Paradise*.

[all laugh]

Matt: Okay. Next, we need a protagonist.

Will: So, I've heard Wario best described as libertarian Mario?

[all laugh]

Freddie: And, of course, every great movie needs a stellar pitch.

Will: In order to get to heaven, sometimes you gotta raise a little hell.

Freddie: [laughs] That's the tagline!

Check out *Story Break* every week on Maximumfun.org, or wherever you get your podcasts.

[music and ad end]

Travis: Okay, I'm on the edge of my seat, here. Tell me more about Ida B. Wells.

Teresa: She not only wrote for newspapers and magazines, she wrote a book in 1893 called *A Red Record*, which was a personal examination of lynching in America. She lectured, she taught, and when she heard that Black exhibitors were banned from the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition, also known as Chicago World's Fair—

Travis: [gasps] Uh-huh?

Teresa: She wrote and circulated a pamphlet, on her own, entitled *The Reason why the Colored American is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition*.

Uh, she was funded and supported by two other famed abolitionists, Frederick Douglass and Ferdinand Barnett.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And of course, if you thought that Ida was engaging...

Travis: I do!

Teresa: [holding back laughter] So did Ferdinand.

Travis: Ohhh?

Teresa: Hmm.

Travis: Ohhh? Is there some romance?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: She did agree to marry him, even though it really wasn't something that she, like... she confessed to aspiring to marriage.

Travis: Okay. So she wasn't, like, interested, in marriage, but it's like, "Alright. You seem cool."

Teresa: Yeah, she was—she was a self-professed career woman. You know, she didn't want anything to get in the way of that, and incidentally she postponed their marriage three times in order to keep up with her rigorous speaking schedule.

Travis: Okay, yeah! Get it.

Teresa: So he was obviously very supportive. Um, and they got married on June 27th, 1895. Um, and this is what she wrote about.

"The interest of the public in the affair seemed to be so great that not only was the church filled to overflowing, but the streets surrounding the church were so packed with humanity that it was almost impossible for the carriage bearing the bridal party to reach the church door."

Travis: Okay. Okay!

Teresa: They had four children together, and they were married for the rest of their lives. Um, but like I said, getting married did not slow her down at all. Um, she in 1898 brought her campaign to the White House, leading a protest in Washington DC and calling for President William McKinley to intervene to stop the violence against Black people.

Travis: Until you said McKinley I was sitting there thinking, "Who was President at that time?" And I had no idea.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Could've guessed a hundred times. So she went to McKinley for a campaign to stop violence against Black people.

Teresa: Right. She went on to establish several civil rights organizations, and in 1896 she formed the National Association for Colored Women.

Travis: Okay. She—once again—I always feel like—and obviously, 'cause we're doing biographies on these people, but I also sit there and, like, I'm—it always seems like so much to do. And at this point, if I'm doing my math correct, she's, like, 30's, right? Like, 95—right? Like, 1890-something she would be in her 30's?

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: And it seems like she's already done a lot?

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: And, like... [sighs] I guess I've done some stuff. [laughs] But I'm, like, 37, and it just seems like she's done a lot more than me, and she seems super cool.

Teresa: Yeah. And here's even more that she did. [laughs]

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: I mean, you could fill a book, and she did.

Travis: And I bet other people have, too!

Teresa: Indeed. Um, she worked with the National Equal Rights League, again calling on the current President Woodrow Wilson this time—

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: [laughs quietly]

Travis: Sure. I mean, I believe you.

Teresa: [laughs] To put an end to discriminatory hiring practices for government jobs. Um, she created the first African-American kindergarten in her community, and in 1930 she even made a bid for the Illinois state Senate.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: It didn't pan out. But she said, "Having always been busy at some work of my own, I decided to continue to work as a journalist, for this was my first love, and, might be said, my only love."

Travis: Sorry, Ferdinand!

Teresa: Sorry! But...

Travis: Sorry, Ferdinand!

Teresa: He knew what he was getting into.

Travis: That's fair, yeah. That's true.

Teresa: Obviously, Wells is no longer with us.

Travis: Oh. Okay, yeah.

Teresa: Yes. She died of kidney disease on March 25th, 1931. She was 68 years old, and was living in Chicago. Her husband died almost exactly five years later. Um, but like we said, she left behind an impressive legacy of social and political heroism, courageously fighting on behalf of the underserved.

In 1971, there was a posthumous publication of her autobiography.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And that led to a lot of, you know, new interest in her life and work. Um, and so at that time there were several awards established in her name, uh, by the National Association of Black Journalists, the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern, the University of Louisville, the New York County Lawyer's Association, and countless others.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, and in 2016 the Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting was created.

Travis: Cool!

Teresa: Let's see. She holds spots in the National Women's Hall of Fame, the Chicago Women's Hall of Fame, the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame, and was included on the list of 100 Greatest African-Americans in 2002.

Travis: Wow. So she's cool is what you're saying.

Teresa: Totally cool.

Travis: She was really great.

Teresa: Has her own museum in her Mississippi hometown, and in 2012 on the 88th anniversary of her death, it was declared that March 25th would be Ida B. Wells Day in the state of Illinois.

Travis: Awesome.

Teresa: I feel like that's just like a mic drop. Right?

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: That's awesome.

Travis: A day. A day for you. But more, you deserve more.

Teresa: Indeed! And in 2021, there was a statue unveiled in a Chicago neighborhood. Um, it was personally fundraised by her granddaughter. Um, and it is breathtaking. So it's not like a bust or anything, it is three large squared pillars holding up a brass, like, circle, and inside the circle there is kind of an abstract... it almost looks like kind of like fountain spray? So it is definitely very abstract, right? And a lot of the accounts of people who watched it unveiled saw things like, uh, a rope ladder leading up to heaven—

Travis: Oh, wow!

Teresa: —or an explosion of celebratory ribbons, or they saw arms reaching down from heaven to welcome her up as she met them in the middle, or things like that. Um, so the hope for that community is that it would become a gathering place, a place to, you know, reach out to people and talk about the racial injustice that still is pretty rampant across the United States.

Travis: Alright, folks. Listen, this was a bit of a shorter episode, but absolutely jam packed with really cool stuff. Once again, we do a biography and I come away... I don't know, wanting to put, like, a poster on my wall of the person we talked about!

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Uh, just feeling like a big fan of Ida B. Wells. Uh, so thank you. Thank you to everybody who recommended Ida B. Wells. Thank you to Alex for helping us out with the research. We wouldn't be able to do it without you. Thank you to Max Fun, our podcast home. Thank you to all of you for listening. Uh, thank you Teresa, for presenting another wonderful episode. You can support this show and other shows like it at Maximumfun.org/join if you want to become a Max Fun member. Your membership allows us to continue to put out episodes like this, and to pay our researcher, Alex, because you should pay people for their work.

Uh, you can go check out other McElroy shows at mcelroy.family. You can go to mcelroymerch.com to check out really cool McElroy merch. What else, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. We also thank Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art. That is @shmannerscast, and that's where we put the call out for questions when we do etiquette based episodes. We also wanna thank Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook group, *Shmanners Fanners*. If you love to give and get excellent advice from and to other fans, go ahead and join that group.

And hey!

Travis: What?

Teresa: Submit your topics!

Travis: Yeah!

Teresa: Write us an email, shmannerscast@gmail.com, and we might feature your idea on the show. Um, and we always love those idioms, so send in an idiom and it might get on the show.

Travis: And that's gonna do it for us. Join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to *Shmanners*...

Teresa: Manners... *Shmanners*. Get it.

[theme music plays]

[chord]

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[music plays]

Jordan: Hey! I'm Jordan Morris, creator of the Max Fun scripted sci-fi comedy podcast *Bubble*. We just released a special episode of *Bubble* to celebrate the launch of our new graphic novel. At SF Sketchfest in 2019 we recorded a live show with Alison Becker, Eliza Skinner, Mike Mitchell, Cristela Alonzo, and special guests Jean Grae, Jonathon Coulton, Jesse Thorn, Nick Wiger, and a bunch of other cool folks.

Speaker 2: We suspect he'll show signs of mutation when in a state of excitement. Now, Annie matched with him on Tinder, so she's gonna act as the honeypot.

[scattered laughter]

Annie: I do enjoy being called a honeypot.

[audience laughs]

Speaker 4: Hey. Know what's better than honey? Gravy.

Annie: [gasps] Ooh, yeah, can I be the gravy sack?

[audience laughs]

Jordan: Out now on Maximumfun.org and wherever you get podcasts. And, pick up the graphic novel at your local bookstore today.

[music and ad end]