

“Society’s disability: One way of thinking, being and living is the right way and the only way of thinking, being and living.”—Tennessee Reed, May 21, 2002

# SPELL ALBUQUERQUE:

## MEMOIR OF A “DIFFICULT” STUDENT

by Tennessee Reed

Ten years ago, the acclaimed novelist Ishmael Reed began to notice that most books about the experience of Black children in the nation’s school system were written by well-meaning white males. Hoping for an alternate view, Reed turned to someone a little closer to home: his daughter, Tennessee, a young bi-racial woman diagnosed with a learning disability so severe that some experts predicted she would never read or write. The resulting memoir, *Spell Albuquerque*, is a devastating indictment of the American educational system and, at the same time, a triumphant autobiographical account of one woman’s struggle to overcome racism and institutional authority and to achieve what everyone said was impossible.

Tennessee writes from the inside about an educational system incapable of dealing with her differences, a system so inflexibly racist that dropout rates among Black and Hispanic teenagers continue to rise at an unprecedented rate. Her stories are sometimes shocking, at other times hopeful, and the occasional heroic figure does emerge: outstanding teachers, creative educational administrators, and Tennessee, herself, whose courage and tenacity in the face of a system that defined her disabilities as laziness or stupidity is nothing short of inspirational.

### Tennessee’s account of growing up with a learning disability is different—she wrote it.

“Tennessee Reed is a brand new star in the galaxy of our spirit—shining for all of our people.”—Simon Ortiz, author of *Telling and Showing Her*

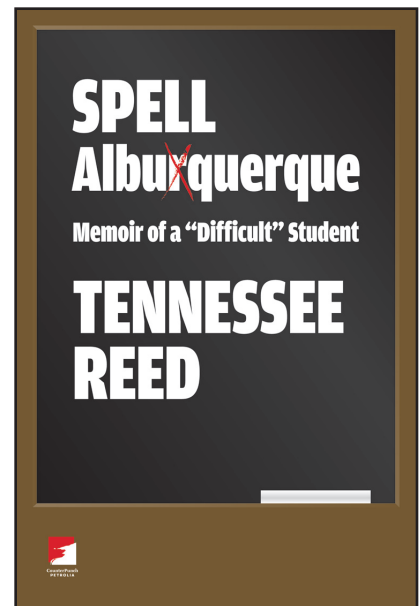
“Reed writes with clarity, witt, and wonder—and with an open-hearted passion that disarms, refreshes, and delights.” —Al Young, author of *Something About the Blues*

“Normally, I wouldn’t recommend a memoir I haven’t read, but Reed’s book *Spell Albuquerque* is supposedly about overcoming racism and institutional authority. Yes! Let’s do it!” —Liz Spikol, *Philadelphia Weekly*

“Ishmael Reed’s daughter writes about overcoming a diagnosis of learning disorders so severe that she would never be able to read or write, according to an educational system that often regarded her as stupid or lazy because of her disabilities. Not only were the experts wrong, but by the time she was a teenager, she had begun writing poetry—she’s written five books of verse—and texts for several Mercedith Monk performances.”— *Publishers Weekly*



**Tennessee Reed** published her first book of poetry at age ten. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley and Mills College, she is the author of five books, including *City Beautiful*, *Airborne*, and *Electric Chocolate*. Her essay, “Being Mixed in America,” appears in *MultiAmerica: Essays on Cultural Wars and Cultural Peace*. She is the daughter of acclaimed authors Ishmael Reed and Carla Blank, and currently resides in Oakland, CA. From 2002–2003, she worked as a consultant on high school curriculum and classroom presentations for the National Council of Teachers of English. In 2008, Tennessee ran for a seat on the District One School Board in Oakland, receiving 10% of the vote.



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