

Utah author of 'Matched' trilogy aims her latest novel at grown-up readers

Renowned YA writer Ally Braithwaite Condie's "The Unwedding" is set to release Tuesday.

By PALAK JAYSWAL

After becoming famous for her young adult novels, Utah author Ally Braithwaite Condie never planned on writing a murder mystery.

"I always kind of thought, 'The one thing I'll never write is a murder mystery because I think it would be so hard to do really well,'" Condie said. Her numerous young adult and children's literature books include the popular "Matched" trilogy, which features a dystopian world where teenagers are matched with their life partners at the age of 17.

Yet, her 12th book, "The Unwedding" — is a murder mystery — and will be released on Tuesday. It's also Condie's first adult fiction book.

The mystery book seed first planted, Condie said, when her middle-grade book "Summerlost" was named one of five finalists for the Edgar Award in 2017. The Edgar Awards are special awards in the mystery genre, named after poet Edgar Allan Poe, from the Mystery Writers Association.

"I had felt like I'm putting a mystery in this book, but it's just not the whole plot. It's just a part of it, but the kids are solving a mystery," Condie recalls. "...to be recognized by my peers as a mystery writer felt shocking and also really awesome."

The journey of writing "The Unwedding" that followed was two-fold, signifying a new era of her career and life.

A lonely trip sparks an idea

Condie has been reading murder mysteries since she was a little kid.

"My dad took us on a trip to England, and he has always been really good about like, 'Let's go somewhere and you can read something about it, but he does it in a fun way,' she explains.

He didn't buy a history or guidebook on the trip, but a "brick-sized" Agatha Christie anthology for Condie and her sister. They drove around England, reading detective stories in the back seat while taking in the scenery.

"When you're a young reader and you're reading something like that, in the plane, it really soaks into your bones," Condie said. Even with a shelf full of mysteries in her office, Christie's work remains timeless to her.

In 2019, Condie's personal life took a shift. She went through a divorce, and her ex-husband ended up taking someone else on what was supposed to be their 20th anniversary trip.

"I was just gutted both by the divorce and by that happening," Condie explains. "So I thought, I'm going to take myself on a trip. All of the divorce literature or self-help stuff is like, 'Be your own person. You can do everything and be comfortable with yourself,'" she said. "I thought, I'm gonna do that."

She decided to go to southern Utah, where she is originally from, but she admitted the experience was "brutal."

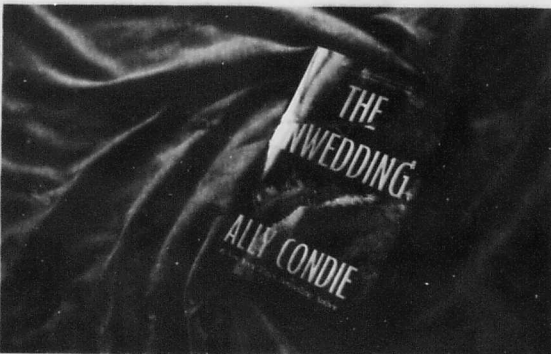
"The absence of my ex-husband, and particularly my children, and then also not having a purpose, of like, [a] book tour — I found that I was really lonely," Condie said.

She remembers sitting by herself at the place where she was staying,



Above and below » Utah author Ally Braithwaite Condie, shown in Provo on May 29, has written her first adult fiction novel — "The Unwedding."

PHOTOS BY FRANCISCO KJOLESTH | The Salt Lake Tribune



eating dinner alone, and seeing all these other people paired off as a wedding unfolded nearby.

"And then the writer part kicked in, without my really knowing it, as I started noticing things — and kind of without meaning to, [making] up stories about the different people," Condie said.

Things like, "Does that couple look very happy?" and "He's taking a lot of pictures of her, she's an Instagram influencer." The cheeky observations continued: A couple she decided was bound to get divorced one day. A backstory about a father-daughter duo. A family group.

"Then I had the thought, I was like, 'Oh, if there was a murderer here, I would be the best person to solve it, because everyone else is paying attention to the people they are with, and I'm paying attention to everybody else,'" Condie said.

That became the base inspiration for "The Unwedding," which her publisher in a news release said is reminiscent of HBO's "The White Lotus."

In the novel, character Ellery Wainwright was meant to spend her 20th wedding anniversary with her husband at a resort in Big Sur, which Condie visited in 2017. Wainwright

instead travels solo and at the resort, comes across a wedding.

But then the groom disappears, and Wainwright discovers his body. Another guest dies, too. Wainwright dedicates herself to finding out who the murderer is.

"This comes through in the book," Condie said. "Like the character is not me, but definitely there's some inspiration."

The significance of a name

Condie said she spent a year and a half going through edits on the book with her agent. Once ready, they took it to other publishers, since her current one was more young-adult focused. They ended up with the Hachette Book Group.

"I wasn't under contract to write a murder mystery. Nobody was asking me to write an adult murder mystery. It just kind of felt like that was where my mind and attention were," she said. "It was a delight to write, even though it was kind of born out of a really hard experience."

Another hard experience: Learning that her adult fiction would still have to be published under the name "Ally Condie," rather than her

new preference and maiden name, "Ally Braithwaite."

"Basically they wanted to keep it because of the 'Matched' association," Condie explained. Ultimately, she understood the decision, and said she isn't upset anymore.

"But I did have to grapple with it a little bit, because you're signing the name of someone that no longer wants you, over and over on a book, you're seeing it printed on a book cover and over," Condie said.

That's why she decided to open up about it in an August 2023 Instagram post.

Being vulnerable with her readers ended up being "super healing," she said, because people messaged her or commented and said things like, "This is your name. Ally Condie is your name as much as it is anyone else's."

"I had not thought of it that way. Like of course I knew it was my name, but they were like, 'This body of work. All the work you've done, you take that. It no longer has any association with anyone but you and who you want it to,'" she said.

And, as someone pointed out, it's her children's last name, too, and she wants them to be proud of it. "I want

people to be able to make that connection to my kids, because they're my favorite thing I've ever created," she said.

In the fall, when she was signing copies of her new YA book, "The Only Girl in Town," she said she started putting just "Ally," and that experience was fun, too.

"It's only something that women really have to tend to think about, historically at least, and I do find that frustrating," Condie reflects. When it comes to names — the ones people take, keep, give or choose, she said, those choices are made because of the "connections we want to make."

"For me, I chose that name because of the connection I was making then, but now I'm choosing it again because it's the connection I have with my readers and with my children — and that feels nice, frankly," she said.

Condie said writing "The Unwedding" was "hard, frustrating and —" and she hopes readers have fun putting the puzzle together. She said one of the main themes of the story is that "even when you lose someone, there are other people who will show up and come to help you... you're very rarely as alone as you think you are."

Every year, Condie chooses a word for the year. This year, that word is "space," inspired by a space documentary she saw, "Deep Sky."

"I want space to do different things. Space to just be quiet. Space to give the people in my life, particularly my kids, the space that they want to be in need to be independent of anything else that's happening," she said.

"That does come into play in the book quite a bit. Or in the books I'm writing now, where I never thought I had all the answers. I've even more convinced that I don't know. But at the same time, I do feel like I know more than I ever did," she said.

Condie will host an author event on the book's release date Tuesday at the Provo Library from 7-9 p.m. (Condie is on the board of the library). Pre-order, signed copies of the book are available from The King's English Bookshop.

PUZZLE ANSWERS • FIND THE SUDOKU ON D4, OTHER PUZZLES ON D6

Los Angeles Times Crossword

1. GARY TESSA SHAM CARLOS
 2. OAR KLAUS IMPER ALEVE
 3. STC OLYMPIC MEDAL METAL
 4. TRAP STEPH GOOP TIL
 5. ONE NEW CONQUEROR SWEET
 6. BLAISE BLOOMER GAMES
 7. PLANS NAIVE STOUT
 8. RENE DIRAC LEILA URL
 9. APART COUNTDOWN FAIRFARE
 10. REACT WEDDING ADDITION
 11. SECOND EDITION ADDITION
 12. REG KOALA ESSNU
 13. WINDOW PANE FAIN SCOTT
 14. DALL MARLO SNAKE ADOOS
 15. PLED GO GOLF BLISS
 16. FIBER MAMA CLUNCH
 17. ELECTRONIC CASH SHACHE
 18. RAY ASIA TRIPLE LEILA
 19. GULL BLISS EIGHT USD
 20. SNAIL SAGE CUS
 21. SPEED SEEN OEND BUR

Theme Crossword

1. BARD BRIER PALED DARN
 2. ALAB ACOTIA FINE AGUE
 3. SUMS STEAL LINDA
 4. EMPHASIS SALSAL DWIGHT
 5. ERE HELOT GLAN
 6. ILLUSTROOD WASHINGTON
 7. NARE B GIE ZINNA
 8. ALIVE CLARO BLADE PRIM
 9. LAD SHAMS MOORE DOONE
 10. LINE OUT GAMBA BURIED
 11. COIT FOALAN BOHOPE
 12. SMILES FOALAN BOHOPE
 13. TAMAS FOALAN BOHOPE
 14. ANAT AVASE SARIO SLUR
 15. SOT ENJO APRES APODA
 16. FLOWN BOLE BOWMOVEY
 17. ESPY ENDOCH A
 18. APPEAL BRANT LEMONADE
 19. RATO ABEAM REALM FROG
 20. TILL CASTLE ARISE ULNA
 21. ELFE EOSEL LATER LOAO

Sudoku

E 4 0 9 3 D 1 B 8 5 C F 2 7 A 6
 3 7 B 6 2 8 A E 9 D 4 1 0 F C 5
 8 A C 5 4 6 F 0 7 E 3 2 D B 9 1
 D 2 F 1 5 9 C 7 B A 0 6 3 4 8 E
 6 F 1 D A 3 9 C 4 7 5 E B 2 0 8
 4 8 3 A B 5 E 0 D 1 2 C 6 9 7 F
 9 5 2 0 6 4 7 1 F B 8 D E C 3 A
 7 C E B 0 2 8 F 6 3 9 A 5 D 1 4
 F 0 6 8 D A 5 4 3 C E B 9 1 2 7
 B 1 9 C 7 E 0 2 A 6 D 8 4 5 F 3
 A 3 4 7 8 1 6 9 5 2 F 0 C E B D
 2 0 5 C F B 3 1 9 7 4 A B 6 0
 0 E 8 4 1 B 2 A D F 6 9 7 3 5 C
 5 8 7 2 E 0 4 6 C 8 1 3 F A D 9
 C 9 A 3 F 7 D 8 E 0 B 5 1 6 4 2
 1 6 D F 9 C 3 5 2 4 A 7 8 0 E B

Jumble

NOODLE
 INDUCT
 BLOTCH
 GROCER
 SOCIAL
 FENNEL
 They forgot what was needed to connect the electric guitar, so —
 NO CORD, NO CHORDS

Wuzzies

1. Water hole
 2. Two pieces of pie