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Guest Co-Editor Interview with Dr. April Baker-Bell, Associate Professor of Language, Literacy, and English Education, Michigan State University

by Zuri Hudson Stanbrough



When I grow up, I want to be like my Mommy, Ada Twist, Scientist, Dr. Mae Jemison, and Dr. April Baker-Bell. They are all brave, smart, and beautiful! When Mommy and I talked about me interviewing Dr. Baker-Bell for our special issue with the *Michigan Reading Journal*, I was soooo excited! I even did a cartwheel! Dr. Baker-Bell is famous! I love seeing her on Zoom, and on stages. She is from Detroit, like me, and talks a lot about why everyone should care more about Black children and people, and how we best learn. And I agree with her. Mommy told me I was not going to have all day, so that I needed to think of a few questions that I wanted to ask Dr. Baker-Bell because she is a very busy woman. She is a Mommy and does a lot for her children, family, and students at Michigan State University (MSU).

The day before “313 Day,” a big day of celebrations and culture in Detroit, I had a chance to hug and sit down with Dr. Baker-Bell to talk to her about her life and what she has been up to. My Mommy woke me up early, so we could have breakfast and drive to the Michigan Reading Association Conference in Lansing, Michigan, to hear Dr. Baker-Bell give a speech at the Lansing Center. I have known about Dr. Baker-Bell being an awesome Black woman because my Mommy



**Zuri Hudson Stanbrough
and Dr. April Baker-Bell**

talks about her often, and how they used to ride to MSU together when they were working on their PhDs, before I was born. Dr. Baker-Bell is also the person who named me “Zuri,” and my Mommy named me “Hudson,” after her 3rd grade teacher, Ms. Faye Hudson. I love my name, and I am thankful that I am Zuri Hudson Stanbrough.

When we first arrived in the big room where all the conference people were, Mommy and I sat towards the back when we listened to the first few people speak. When I saw Dr. Baker-Bell get ready to go to the podium, I started clapping and asked Mommy if we could move closer to the front of the room. We did and it was great. Other people were clapping when she talked too. She played music, talked about Detroit,

and about her book, *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, which means she is an author. Sometimes, when Mommy takes me places, I always have paper, crayons, pens, and pencils in case I want to write or draw something. Before it was Dr. Baker-Bell's turn to speak to everyone, I made a new friend with a 1st grade teacher and we wrote sentences together, and played Tic-Tac-Toe, but when Mommy and I switched tables to sit at the front of the room, I did not write anymore sentences or play any games. I wanted to listen to Dr. Baker-Bell. After her speech, there was a long line of people wanting to talk to her. Minutes later, the three of us gave each other a BIG group hug! I was so happy! We stayed in the big room talking for a few minutes, but Dr. Baker-Bell suggested we get more comfortable and go to another location for the interview. Mommy needed to run back to our car first, so Dr. Baker-Bell and I went for a walk and shared many stories. She asked me about homeschooling and told me she liked my afro. I also remember telling her about space and how I love Mathematics and Science.

I really enjoyed interviewing her and hope that everyone who is reading this is reminded about how awesome Dr. Baker-Bell is and how she really cares for people in ways that matter. I was happy to learn that we are similar because we both love reading and eating vegan food. When she was a little girl, she also played school a lot. I do that now, too, because teachers are very important people.

Zuri Hudson Stanbrough: Hi, Dr. April Baker-Bell! I appreciate your time! How are you today?

Dr. April Baker-Bell: No, Thank you, Zuri! I appreciate your time! How are you?

ZHS: I'm doing well. Thank you so much for buying me this hot chocolate and muffin. They're definitely tasty.

ABB: You're welcome. I'm doing well, too—especially now that I've had my coffee!

ZHS: So, I have six questions to ask you! My first

question is: What are your favorite colors, places to eat, and travel to?

ABB: These are great questions! My favorite color since I was a little girl—it was purple. I still like purple a little bit, but I like other colors now, too! But I would say, purple. It means a lot to me. And you said, 'my favorite food?'

ZHS: Your favorite places to eat?

ABB: Oh, yes! I like to eat at vegan restaurants because for the last four years, I've been vegan and practicing a vegan food regimen. And so, I have a few favorite spots. One of my favorite spots in Detroit is, Seva. I also like a new place—I think it's called, Publics. It was really good. Those were the best vegan birthday cake French toast sticks I've ever had in my life. Even non-vegan French toast sticks can't compare to that! So, I like that place. And I think your next question is about places I like to travel?

ZHS: (Smiles and nods in agreement!)

ABB: I like to travel anywhere. I like to see different things. And new cultures. And different people. The last place I traveled to was Paris. And I traveled all by myself! And I loved it!

ZHS: (Eyes get big with excitement!) Whoaaaaa!!! Did you actually get to see the Eiffel Tower?

ABB: I did! And I have a picture. You want me to show you a picture?

ZHS: Not quite, yet!

ABB: (Laughs) Oh, I'm doin' the most. Ok!

ZHS: (Laughs with Dr. April Baker-Bell) The second question is: What did you like to play with or do when you were a little girl?

ABB: (Smiles) Oooohhh, I absolutely love this question! So, when I was a little girl, I loved to do the things

I do now in my career. I liked to read. I liked to write. And I liked to teach my younger siblings. I used to play school. I was the teacher, and I would teach them how to read and how to write. And I had my own chalkboard and books in my classroom. And I liked to write for my mom. Like, I wrote my first book probably when I was your age—about seven. I wrote my mom a book for Mother’s Day about how she became a mom. And I used to write her poetry and different things like that. That was my favorite thing to do.

ZHS: (Smiles) Alright! Thank you. And what makes you happy now?

ABB: (Smiles) That’s a good question! Your questions are so good. What makes me happy now? Mhmmm. Let me think about that. I mean, it’s to see other people happy. And you know, that’s selfless of me too, so, I need to think about what makes me happy. What makes me happy, honestly, is to have time alone, sometimes. To just reflect and to be in community with my ancestors. And to relax. Those kinds of things.

ZHS: (Smiles and nods in agreement). Ok. Do you remember your favorite books or stories from when you were younger?

ABB: Oh yes! I used to like the Judy Blume books when I was a young girl. I read her for a while in elementary school. And the reason I liked those books was because it was about a little girl, and sometimes you didn’t see books about little girls. And so, she talked about the different things little girls go through—differences in your body, and I really liked that because it helped me to learn about my body, too. But the only thing I wish I would’ve saw in those books were girls that looked like me, were Brown like me. So, I liked those books, but I wish I saw other books from Brown girls talking about the same things.

ZHS: Alrighhht! So, do you think reading is important? And Why?

ABB: I absolutely think reading is important. I think reading is important because you can connect to other

people, other things, and other worlds through reading. It just helps you connect to people you might not ever really meet, but you can read about their stories, read about their life. I also think that sometimes we just think of reading a book or an alphabetic text, but I also think we have to think about reading the world, being able to look at a situation that happens in the world, that influences different things, and that’s a read of the world. When I was younger, like your age, my parents taught me how to read the world, and how to understand myself and my role in it. And that’s another way of reading that’s not reading a book, but it’s like looking at the world and being able to read the type of things we see happening before us and try to understand them better.

ZHS: (Nods in agreement) Niceee! Alright, so question number four is what do you like most about being from Detroit?

ABB: (Smiles widely) Awwww man. I just LOVE Detroit! One of the things I like most about being from Detroit is the community of Detroit, the people. We have our own kinda language, like, ‘What Up Doe!’ We have our own way of talking and greeting. But Detroit is so colorful to me. The way people dress—you know, our style of hair, the different places, and things we can do there. Like, Belle Isle was one of my favorite places when I was little. It still is one of my favorite places. I think it’s the people, being a part of the people—that you feel are underdogs, too. That have always been left out but made sure we were on the top! That was a really good question, Zuri!

ZHS: (Smiles). Thank you!

ABB: I also like the museums. I love to eat in Detroit. It’s just so many different things. I love that I went to Detroit schools. I still have friends from those schools that I still connect with today. A lot of good memories in Detroit. Some other sad memories, but a lot of good memories, too.

ZHS: Okay. Thank you. My next question is, how can children and parents work together to have more fun?

ABB: I think it's so important for parents and children to work together to center joy! Just being able to do fun things together as a family, that's sometimes outside of schoolwork and different things like that. If it's that you want to go swim—go swimming. If you want to go traveling together—go travel! I think there's ways of learning, sometimes, that might not happen in school spaces. For example, if a child wants to learn about a place they've never been, I think it's good for parents and kids to travel together. I always have the best experiences with my family, with my kids when we go travel to new places and learn new things. That's always the best thing, but I also think reading together is something good that we can do as a family. Our family just recently read *The 1619 Project*, but the children's book. And we kinda created this roundtable, where we each went around, and we read two pages. And that was really fun because we were able to learn about our history, but also hear each other read and laugh together.

ZHS: Wow. Okay. My last question is, what advice do you have for people to live out their dreams?

ABB: Mmmmmm. Okay. I think...when I was a kid, I did a lot of imagining. I always knew I wanted to be a teacher, and one of the first things, not only did I play school, but in my mind and head, I'd imagine me being a teacher and teaching other students. That was one thing to help me live out my dreams because whenever things got hard when I'd try to become a teacher, I always saw that vision of me being in a classroom, and me teaching kids, and that helped me to stick to my goal. I think that's something that should happen. Just keep moving forward—whatever it is that your dream is—just keep working towards it, and you will get it. But you also have to keep making sure that you're imagining, and that you're seeing it, and that you're telling yourself that you can do it—that you can achieve your dreams and it will happen. Speak it into existence!

ZHS: (Smiles widely) Right! Thank you so much for your time!

ABB: Thank you for your time! It was beautiful! We have to do this again!

ZHS: (Hugs Dr. Baker-Bell)

On our way back home to Detroit after the conference, Mommy asked me what I liked most about spending time with and interviewing Dr. Baker-Bell. I said, "Well, I appreciate that she loves me. And I know she loves me because she gave me her time!" Mommy's response was, "Wow, that's beautiful, baby! You're absolutely right!" I hope that everyone reading this will show more love to others and make time for people and ideas that make them happy!

Thank you,
Zuri Hudson Stanbrough

