



Can I

TOUCH

Your

Hair?

Poems
of Race,
Mistakes,
and
Friendship

Irene Latham & Charles Waters

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Author Q & A

with Irene Latham and Charles Waters



IRENE LATHAM

(Photo by Lynn Baker)



CHARLES WATERS

(Photo by Kim-Julie Hansen)

What inspired you to write this book?

IRENE: It started with the book of poems for adults *CITIZEN* by Claudia Rankine. My editor at Lerner, Carol Hinz and I had both read the book and were discussing what a brave piece of writing it is. Not long after, I received an email from Carol saying she had an idea, and could we connect by phone? This never happens -- an editor calling the writer with the idea! -- so I was immediately intrigued and excited. When we talked, Carol shared her idea of a poetry book that tackles the same subject -- systemic racism -- except for kids! She thought it might work best as a conversation, and she asked if there was a black children's poet with whom I would like to have this conversation. I immediately thought of Charles.

CHARLES: I was doing background work on the TV show *Power*. I was scrunched up with a bunch of other background actors in a small room in Brooklyn. It was freezing. I was learning lines for my *Poetry Time* show while avoiding the misery of being there, I hadn't checked my e-mail for a while, so I checked it on my phone, read Irene's e-mail and knew at that moment my life was going to change for the better. It was like what Oprah Winfrey talked about on her former show, that there's no such thing as luck, it's *opportunity meeting preparation*. Here was the *opportunity* and after years and years of work and a pile of rejected manuscripts in the field of children's poetry, I was *ready*.

How did your partnership come about?

Here is the e-mail that started this poetic journey to the book.

Thu, Jan 29, 2015 at 4:11 PM (Central Time)

Hi Charles - hope this email finds you well! I'm writing to you with a potentially exciting proposition. I just got off the phone with Carol Hinz, my editor at Millbrook Press, and she's interested in pairing two poets - one black, one white -- to write poems for children that address head-on the issue of race: how we experience and how we talk about race. These poems would not be ABOUT race, but through the filter of race. Somehow she wants this book to be a conversation. For instance, we might each write a poem on the topic of "hair," but the poem would address the racial aspects. Does this make sense? Other topics we talked about on the phone would revolve around everyday life: happening, fears, food, rituals, sports, grocery shopping, etc.

When I think about the message of the book, I think of celebrating differences, our hearts are the same, we've come a long way, we've a long way to go. Does any of this resonate with you?

She asked me to think about who I might like to work with on this, and I thought of you! So: do you have any interest in this sort of collaboration? With me? :) If so, I'd love to talk and brainstorm further!

*Thanks,
Irene*

p.s. this all came about after both Carol and I read CITIZEN by Claudia Rankine

Thu, Jan 29, 2015 at 5:27 PM

Hi Irene:

YES! I would love to collaborate with you on the book. I can't thank you enough for thinking of me! What an important topic. By learning to celebrate our differences we gain wisdom in understanding humanity.

I'll order the book CITIZEN from the library. I'll call you in the next day or so. :-)

IRENE: I was delighted when Charles said YES! We immediately got to work writing poems... I think we had the first draft together in about 3 weeks. It was fascinating to learn about each other's experiences and to share these sometimes painful and difficult memories with each other... I still consider it a great honor to have gotten to know Charles in this way. I should mention that most of our conversation was through e-mail. We did text some and also have enjoyed a handful of phone conversations over the course of working on this project. And we've gotten to know each other in a really special way. My husband and kids refer to Charles as Uncle Charles.

CHARLES: Along with attending the Highlights Foundation children's poetry retreats, this was the most freeing writing experience I've ever had in my life. Poems were pouring out of us. We wrote way more poems for the book that didn't make the cut. I would guess almost enough for two books instead of one. I was fascinated at what our editor, Carol Hinz, chose to keep and chose to cut as our manuscript took shape. It felt like we all were poetically building a house together and after a while if one piece was added or subtracted, the shape of the house would change completely.

Why write about race and racism?

CHARLES: In my opinion, this is one of, if not the most central issue facing our nation today. How do we talk about race, how to not be afraid of having hard, heartfelt, respectful conversations about how it affects us, both in the giving or receiving of it, how over-the-top racism can be as hurtful as subtle racism. How we can go to the heart of the matter on the three C's: *color, culture, class* and emerge with our humanity intact?

IRENE: As a white person living in Birmingham, Alabama, pretty much the epicenter of slavery and later civil rights, and now a vibrant, diverse city -- I am hyper-aware of the struggles related to race, as well as the overcoming of it. What I've discovered is that for a white person in Alabama, probably the worst thing you can say about someone is that they are racist. So what

happens is, white people don't talk about race or racism. It's too dangerous. What if we say the wrong thing? Or worse, what if we really ARE racist? The only way we are going to overcome this particular struggle is to push through it -- talk about it, write about it, risk the uncomfortable conversations, risk the mistakes, risk being called racist. I can't think of a more important issue, or a simpler way to improve the world -- let's talk about it, let's choose not to be offended, let's listen, let's apologize when we're wrong, let's at least TRY.

What do you hope readers will take away from this book?

CHARLES: That it's okay to ask questions, it's okay to mess up in the understanding of something you might not understand, like in the "Black Belt" poem or in the "Ghost" poem.

IRENE: And that before economics or ethnicity, we are all humans with the same feelings -- love, fear, anger -- let us "err on the side of love," as my mother always says.

Did you make any mistakes writing this book? (What was the collaborative process like?)

CHARLES: I don't remember us making mistakes with each other in terms of what we said or wrote. We found it easy to have a positive poetic back and forth with the book. Maybe that has to do with us being adults and not 5th graders in real life, as well as us being temperamentally suited to writing back and forth to each other on such personal topics without fear of being judged.

Me and Irene would pick general topics and write different versions of poems and send them back and forth to each other. Sometimes, we'd edit each other's poems. That took our trust to a whole new level. It's one thing to write pleasant e-mails to each other, but when you start rewriting another person's poems, that's a whole other road to plow. That's trust personified. We didn't work on each other poems often but it did happen, for the better I might add. :-)

IRENE: First, a few words from Jane Yolen on the topic. She said in a blog interview that collaborating is like twice the work for half the pay. :) That's true! BUT. I loved working with Charles. This was my first adventure in collaboration, and it couldn't have been better. One of the best parts is sharing the enthusiasm over each new development... like the cover, etc. It's

like when you have kids; no one but the other parent cares as much. With books, we're usually single parents. But with this book, it's been a great big celebration. And Charles and I had a near-instant trust with one another. I'd love to work on another book with Charles.

How did the collaborative writing and editing process change your thoughts about race and racism?

IRENE: This process definitely changed me and deepened my understanding of my own inaccurate or limited thinking. A couple of instances leap to mind: In one of the poems that got cut, I described visiting the homes of my black friends, and how often I would see the same 3 photos on the wall: Jesus, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Obama -- or before Obama, JFK.

When Charles ran it by his mom, who has more experience visiting different black people's homes, she said that wasn't familiar to her. I was like, oh, wow, maybe it's a Southern thing? The poem ended up getting cut, but I did see in the Denzel Washington version of *FENCES* that in one shot on the kitchen wall, there they were, Jesus, MLK, and JFK. This helped me remember that there are obviously individual differences in how we experience race, but also regional.

The second example that comes to mind is from the poem "Summer Reading." In an earlier version I referred to the horse as "The Black," which is how the horse is referred to in the book. Charles hadn't read the book, and he felt like this was possibly offensive. I hadn't thought of that. I revised the poem.

CHARLES: The one instance I can think of is encouraging Irene to have the Shonda character apologize to the Irene character in the "Bedtime Reading" poem for talking harshly to her earlier on in the "Playground" poem. Since Shonda is the lone black girl in the book I was concerned of it possibly looking like Shonda was fitting into the "all black girls have an bad attitude" stereotype. That may have been overly cautious on my part. It may also have to do with me liking storylines, big and small, coming together in the end.

How much of the book is "true"?

IRENE AND CHARLES: A fair number of the poems are true, in that they reflect events that actually happened at some point in our lives. In all of the poems, the spirit is true. For example:

CHARLES: I had a teacher named Mrs. Vandenberg who pushed me to be my best self both in and out of the classroom. She was my high school teacher though, not my 5th grade one.

“Shopping with Dad” - Me and my Dad would go shopping for shoes and sneakers, he wasn't much on fancy clothes or footwear. If shoes/sneakers/clothes fit and the price was right, then that was that. No one in our household was going to be dropping \$100 plus for a pair of Jordans unless those sneakers came with a free dining room set, washer/dryer and kitchen appliances.

“Sunday Service” - The church I went to growing up wasn't all black, it was mixed race, however questioning the white Jesus I saw at the altar is true. I thought it was odd based on what I read. I'm no theologian but I had a feeling something didn't add up.

“Dinner Conversation” - I became vegan as an adult not as a child, however, there was more than one occasion where tensions arose during family dinners.

“Fresh Start” - Happened exactly as in the poem with the exception of it being on a class trip in 9th grade instead of on the playground in 5th grade. Oh, and I didn't have anyone to emotionally lean on like the Charles character does with Irene.

IRENE: Just like in the book, I was a quiet kid, in part, due to moving 9 times and attending 11 different schools by the time I was 14. When I wasn't reading, I was writing. When I wasn't doing those things, I was in the pasture with the horses.

“Shoes” - My mother definitely taught me to get practical shoes. This was in part due to financial limitations.

“Hair” - I wanted -- and got -- an Afro. My brothers, who are largely responsible for making me the strong woman I am today, did call me a clown.

“Church” - I went to an all-white church, but I was exposed to different cultures from early in my life. We lived for 2 ½ years in Saudi Arabia, for most of that time in an Arab neighborhood. We traveled extensively worldwide before coming back to the States. One of my best friends in 7th and 8th grades was a black girl named Katrina Pete. During my high school years my parents were foster parents to mostly black babies. None of this is in the book, but these experiences were really important in shaping my experience/thoughts about race/culture/differences.

“Best and Worst” - This practice was something I did with my kids, not with my family of origin.

“Geography” - This happened in a classroom when I was there sharing my book LEAVING GEE'S BEND. (Not to me, but to a student attending my presentation.)

“News” - My father definitely taught me to take comfort in nature. He also taught me that sometimes the best thing we can do is turn off the news and focus on loving better our own small corners of the world -- smile, say thank you, listen, be kind.

How does the friendship in the book mirror the real-life friendship between Charles & Irene?

CHARLES: We didn't know each other well before we embarked on this poetic journey. Thank goodness for the Poetry Friday community, <http://kidlitosphere.org/poetry-friday/> which brings together children's poets from all over America. We did some online community writing projects with a host of other children's poets for National Poetry Month, however, Irene took a chance on me regarding this book and sharing her personal and professional life with me, and knowing I could trust her, it was my pleasure to do the same. I've shared things about my life I haven't shared with anyone else and she's been nothing but encouraging.

IRENE: I wish I'd known Charles as a kid. I'm so so grateful to know Charles now. I can't think of a better partner to have shared this experience with. Just like the fictional characters, we are bound by our different-ness, and also by our love of words and books. Just like the fictional characters, we are learning new things every day. Also, I suspect both the fictional and real-life Charles and Irene will continue to have more adventures together!

Were there any surprises during the writing process?

IRENE and CHARLES: One thing that surprised us both is how we landed at using our own names in the book. First our characters were nameless, and there wasn't a story at all. We were writing about timeless topics digging deep about our own childhood experiences: some realer than real, some invented with sprinklings of childhood memories. Then we put placeholder names: Charles and Irene. As the manuscript developed, it was so intensely personal, we couldn't bring ourselves to rename the characters. With the guidance of our editor, Carol Hinz, we found the engine that made the story drive its way into existence. In so many ways, they were US -- Charles the outgoing, vegan reader, Irene the shy, horse-loving girl.

IRENE: Another surprise was the email I received from our editor just after the book had returned from the printer. She'd been reading the book to her son, and because one of my poems mentions THE BLACK STALLION by Walter Farley, she decided to share that book with her son as well. She wrote me a note to let me know that she was uncomfortable with the early chapters in the book which refer to the man on the ship as “dark-skinned.” She wondered if I'd want to edit the inclusion of this title in future printings. It made me smile, because here was evidence of how far we've come: no way would that kind of language/characterization fly in

today's books for children. And here we were, having this additional conversation about race and racism. We decided we wouldn't make any changes and instead share this story. (THE BLACK STALLION really was my favorite book when I was in 5th grade.)

How can we help create a more loving, tolerant world?

CHARLES: First off by doing something that, I think, goes against most of our instincts which is to *listen* and not interrupt every ten seconds when something is said that the other person disagrees with. Also, by somehow finding within us to be respectful to good, albeit flawed people, just like each of us are, who we disagree with on a soul level on a myriad of topics from politics to belief systems, as well as calling out folks who are spewing hate filled thoughts or attacking someone physically for questionable reasons like peaceful protesting.

IRENE: Listen. Create an environment for kids that doesn't shut down conversation (like the "Geography" poem) but instead acknowledges where a person might be coming from and gently, lovingly showing them another way of see something. Choose not to be offended. How can we know how to do this in a world of systemic racism? We have to un-learn the old, and that takes time. Welcome people's efforts and interest. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Err on the side of love. More hugs!

How will your writing and process help you reach a more diverse audience?

IRENE and CHARLES: The fact that we're different genders and grew up with different backgrounds means our storytelling tapestry is potentially richer as a result. Instead of our book being singular (*the micro*) it expands to a broader reach (*the macro*) because of our different cultural experiences.

It's also important to note that for all our differences we both grew up in big families (each of us is one of five kids), were blessed with loving parents, went to public schools, loved to read, had and still have curious minds which means, ultimately, we're more alike than we are different.

It's our hope that our similarities and differences makes us the change agents to not only each other but to our readers as well.

Happy reading!