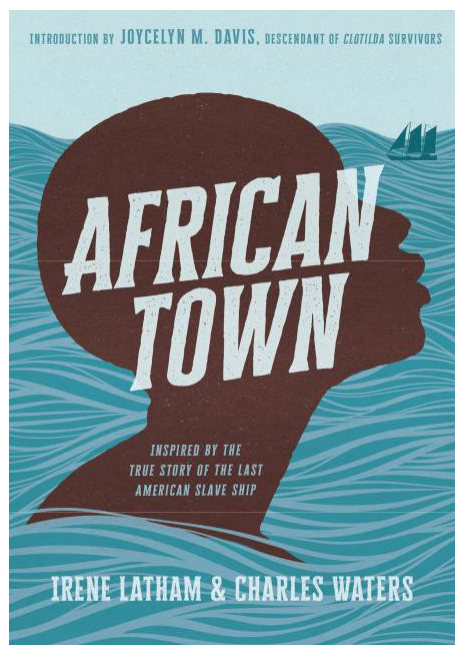


AFRICAN TOWN Authors Q & A

with Irene Latham and Charles Waters



1. How did the creation of this book begin?

We learned of this history when we were presenting together at Alabama Book Festival in Montgomery, Alabama, in spring of 2019. We were so inspired by these courageous humans, how they endured so much, and how bound they were to one another. They were ripped from their lives, and yet they continued to dream, and to do. Every step of the research brought us to another “wow” moment, and we wanted to help bring the story to young readers.

2. What kind of research did you do while writing this book?

We started with the book *Dreams of Africa in Alabama: The Slave Ship Clotilda and the Story of the Last Africans Brought to America* by Sylviane A. Diouf. That led us to other books, online research, and tracking down people. We were also able to do on-site research, which really impacted us. Thank the universe we were able to visit Mobile in late February 2020 about two weeks before the country shut down due to the pandemic. We visited Africatown*, spent time outside the Union Missionary Baptist Church founded by the Clotilda Survivors, stood next to the bust of Kossola outside the church,

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visited the Old Plateau Cemetery also founded by the Clotilda survivors, went on the Dora Franklin Finley African-American Heritage Trail <https://www.dffaaht.org/>, visited the History Museum of Mobile, pored over documents at the Mobile Library of Local History and Genealogy, where Ann Biggs and Valerie Ellis offered us tremendous help, and spent time at Kazoola Eatery & Entertainment meeting the kind people of Mobile and soaking up the atmosphere.

3. Why did you choose to tell this story as historical fiction?

From the get-go we knew we wanted to create a verse novel in multiple voices, in the vein of a book we both admire: *The Watch That Ends the Night: Voices from the Titanic* by Allan Wolf. Only in fiction can you give a voice to an iceberg as Allan did, or to the *Clotilda*, as we did. Fiction allows writers the freedom to fill in the gaps, and inhabiting these characters, their emotions, motivations and choices, offered us a powerful exercise in empathy. Why did they do what they did? How did they feel? What got them through the terrors and tragedies? It's not only time travel, it's a way to become a better human.

4. What does your collaboration process look like?

This was our third—and most ambitious—project together. We do all of our joint writing now on Google Docs, which is an excellent tool because both of us can work independently—or together—inside an active document in real time. Sometimes we'll also hammer away at a problem over the phone, with both of us making corrections in the manuscript. It can be intense in the best way! So much of collaborating involves listening; when you work solo, you only have to listen to yourself. Writing together is truly a dance. Sometimes it can be difficult to give up control. It helps to be forgiving, humble, and to have fun together! The best part is having an equally invested partner to both tunnel through the tough parts and also celebrate all the joys that come with book creation.

5. Why did you choose to tell the story in poems?

We are both poets first, though we got into it in entirely different ways! Irene's father read Shel Silverstein to her as a child; Charles knew nothing about poetry as it wasn't read to him as a child or

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taught to him in schools. It wasn't until he was hired as an actor to work for the theatrical touring troupe *Poetry Alive!* that poetry came into his life and has never left it. Poetry allows for an intimate, intense, and efficient reading experience. We both love the beauty of language, wordplay, and the freedom poetry provides readers and writers. We wanted nothing to get in the way of readers discovering this rich, heartbreaking, and triumphant history. Also, in really practical terms, choosing a different form for each character helped us to create more distinction between the voices—something both challenging and fun!

6. What's your connection to Africatown?

Although Irene's been a resident of Alabama for nearly 40 years, neither of us had ever even heard of Africatown until we started working on this book. We're doing our best to make up for lost time! We're grateful to have the opportunity to get to know some of the current residents of Africatown and descendants of the Clotilda survivors. We're particularly grateful that Joycelyn Davis, a direct descendant of Oluale, also known as Charlie Lewis and his wife Maggie, wrote the Introduction of the book and Altevese Rosario, a direct descendant of Kossola and Abilè, wrote the Teacher's Guide. Special shout-out to Africatown resident Major Joe Womack, USMCR (ret.) for his knowledgeable emails, support and guiding force.

Joycelyn is a delight! We had a Zoom meeting with her before she agreed to write the introduction and found her to be so kind. Her breadth of knowledge about her ancestors and her mission to share their story with the world is humbling and inspiring. Also, we would be remiss not to mention having a delightful, and also inspiring, Zoom visit with Altevese Rosario who wrote the Teacher's Guide. Altevese is a gracious, inquisitive and lovely person. The fact she's also an educator in Philadelphia, just like Charles' mother used to be, felt like kismet to us. Emailing and speaking with both of them felt like we were meeting rock stars after the amount of research we've done over the past 2 ½ years about their ancestors and the other extraordinary humans of Africatown.

7. What was most challenging about telling this story?

Both of us knew since we were writing about many instances that happened to real people, it was vital to be as thorough as possible in research so that we might “get it right.” The mantle of responsibility felt a lot heavier than our previous two books, which dealt with our own lives. We spent hours and hours discussing personality, relationships, and motivation—which due to gaps in information available was often left for us to imagine. It’s been important to us to involve the descendants as much as possible, and we’re so grateful for the warm welcome we have received from the community. Our hope is to honor their ancestors, to work with them to make this history more accessible, and to share with young readers a story that impacted us on a very personal level. It wasn’t always easy to join these courageous humans on their journey, but it was life-changing. We feel so lucky to “know” these characters so intimately. Their resilience continues to inspire us.

8. How did you select the poetry forms?

We worked hard to “match” form with personality. With so many voices, we were looking for ways to distinguish each one. Varying the form and shape of the poem on the page helped a great deal. This is where writing our previous book *Dictionary For A Better World: Poems, Quotes and Anecdotes from A - Z* proved helpful because that book had 47 different poetry forms. We both tend to favor free verse when writing but we have to come to enjoy nonets and tricubes, among others. Even though it was challenging to craft, we've come to respect and be proud of using tankas for the character of James. It's such an elegant and difficult form to pull off. We were partially inspired by the verse novel *Garvey's Choice* by Nikki Grimes which is written only in tankas. We felt the form matched James' personality and mien. Another one we're proud of is the form used for Cudjo, Jr. It was a combination of the poetic styles of E.E. Cummings and Arnold Adoff—with our own twist on it.

9. What are your hopes for the book?

We approached this as a “family” story. We imagine intergenerational families sharing this book and having rich discussions about our past, our future, and how resilience and hope are cultivated at home —however (and wherever) one defines that word. We’re proud to be ambassadors of this important history, and we hope to join the descendants in their work of sharing this story. Their blessing of this project matters greatly to us, and we were greatly relieved and delighted when we got enthusiastic thumbs up from descendants Joycelyn Davis and Altevese Rosario after they’d read review copies of the book. It doesn’t get much better than that!



PHOTO CREDIT: Charles Waters.

The authors with Kossola’s bust, located outside the Union Missionary Baptist Church—formerly called Old Landmark Church by the town’s founders—during a research trip to Africatown (February, 2020).

About the Authors: Irene Latham and Charles Waters are “Poetic Forever Friends” first and collaborators second. They are the writing team behind *Can I Touch Your Hair? Poems of Race, Mistakes, and Friendship*, which was awarded a Charlotte Huck Honor, and *Dictionary for a Better World: Poems, Quotes, and Anecdotes from A to Z*, an NCTE Notable Poetry book. They share a passion for poetry and are committed to creating meaningful books for young readers. This is their first novel together.