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Alabama author stitches Gee's Bend story

Birmingham - Unexpected adventure in Depression-era Gee's Bend

The quilts of Gee's Bend are recognizable worldwide thanks to art exhibits like "Gee's Bend: The Architecture of the Quilt" and "A Survey of Gee's Bend Quilts." But for author Irene Latham, it's the story behind the quilts that makes them so fascinating.

"Gee's Bend has always been populated by survivors," said Latham, a Birmingham resident for the past 25 years. "When I read about the 1932 raid on Gee's Bend and subsequent Red Cross rescue, I could see both the heartache and strength in the colors and textures of the quilts."

Which is why her debut midgrade novel *Leaving Gee's Bend* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, ISBN: 978-0-399-25179-5, January 7, 2010) includes these historic events in the heart-touching tale of ten year old Ludelphia Bennett's quest to save her sick mother.

Every quilt tells a story. Ten-year-old Ludelphia Bennett has only ever known the log cabins, orange dirt, and cotton fields of her small sharecropping community. But when Mama gets deathly ill, Ludelphia does something drastic – she leaves Gee's Bend for the very first time. Mama needs medicine badly, medicine that can only be found in Camden, over forty miles away. It's a dangerous journey, but Ludelphia weathers each challenge in a way that would make Mama proud, including documenting her journey – her story – in a new quilt for Mama as she goes along. In the end, Ludelphia's courageous adventure saves the day for Mama and all of Gee's Bend.

Praised for the simple, emotive quality of her writing, Latham has published over 120 poems in the adult market and is often asked why she now chooses to write for the midgrade audience. It's a personal matter, Latham said.

"I love the innocence of midgrade, how you can still tell a simple story. Mostly I write for little girls just like me -- the quiet ones who are secretly aching for adventure."

Latham lives with her husband and three sons in the Inverness area, where handmade quilts from her husband's family adorn the walls and bed.

Does she do any quilting of her own?

"I can put in a decent stitch, but I can't come close to the talent of my seamstress mother who creates gorgeous gowns out of silk and satin," she said.

A portion of the author's proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to the Gee's Bend Foundation (www.quiltsofgeesbend.com) in support of the community and the continuation of the quilters' artistic efforts. For more information about Irene Latham or her books, please visit www.irenelatham.com. To schedule an interview or photo with Latham, please contact her at 205-981-1935 or irene@irenelatham.com.