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### **Biography**

**SHORT:** Irene Latham is a poet and novelist who writes heart-touching tales of unexpected adventure. Her debut midgrade historical novel *LEAVING GEE'S BEND* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2010) is set in Alabama during the Great Depression. A resident of Birmingham, Alabama, for the past 25 years, she has published over 120 poems of various books, journals and anthologies, including a full-length collection *WHAT CAME BEFORE*, which was named Alabama State Poetry Society's book of the Year and earned a 2008 Independent Publisher's (IPPY) Award. Irene loves exploring new places and often uses "research" as an excuse to travel. Her favorite characters in books and real life are those who have the courage to go their own way.

**LONG:** Irene Latham is a poet and novelist who writes heart-touching tales of unexpected adventure. She was born in Georgia, the third in a family that would eventually include five children. At one time or another she had lived in various parts of Florida, Louisiana and Tennessee. She also traveled worldwide with her family, including a two and a half year stint in Saudi Arabia before settling in Birmingham, Alabama, where she has lived for the past 25 years.

When Irene was eight years old, she wrote in her Dr. Seuss' *MY BOOK ABOUT ME* that, in addition to mother, veterinarian and farmer, she wanted to be a writer. However, she didn't take a single writing class in college. Instead, she earned degrees in social work from University of Alabama at Birmingham and University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa).

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Irene also participated in the Walt Disney College Program and is the proud recipient of a *Mouster's* Degree.

For many years writing was Irene's secret life, but after the birth of her third son, she decided to pull those poems and stories out of drawers and share them with others. Since then she has published over 150 poems in various books, journals and anthologies, including a full-length collection WHAT CAME BEFORE, which was named Alabama State Poetry Society's *Book of the Year* and earned a 2008 Independent Publisher's (IPPY) Award. Her first historical novel for children, LEAVING GEE'S BEND, was released by G.P. Putnam's Sons in January, 2010. It was inspired by the now-famous Quilts of Gee's Bend and has been called "a beautifully stitched quilt of a novel" by Richard Peck and "authentic and memorable" by Booklist.

Irene especially enjoys sharing her passion for writing with others at school, senior centers, libraries, Girl Scout meetings and writing conferences. She is the co-founder of the Big Table Poets and serves as poetry editor for *Birmingham Arts Journal*.

Irene loves exploring new places and often uses "research" as an excuse to travel. Her favorite characters in books and real life are those who have the courage to go their own way. she is currently hard at work on a new collection of poems inspired by the NPS (National Park Service) Historic Photo Collection, and another midgrade novel DON'T FEED THE BOY, about the son of a zoo director mom and elephant keeper dad who struggles to escape the confines of zoo life.

## **Book Information:**

**LEAVING GEE'S BEND**

**ISBN: 978-0-399-25179-5**

**G.P. Putnam's Sons**

**January 7, 2010**

**Brief Synopsis:** 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.

## **Reviews:**

"Latham brings the girl, the period and the region to life." - [\*Chicago Tribune\*](#)

"Life in 1932 rural Alabama is no picnic for African-American sharecroppers, such as the family of ten-year-old Ludelphia Bennett, who are trying to scrap by on their tiny farm in

Gee's Bend. Ludelphia doesn't seem to mind her meager surroundings as long as she can sew quilts with her mother, but when Mama falls ill with pneumonia, Ludelphia leaves the only place she has ever known to retrieve lifesaving medicine from a town nearly forty miles away, confronting prejudice and superstition along the way. Based on real people and events, the story rings true with its quiet sense of place, and Ludelphia's narration echoes the tradition of storytelling in quilting, a nod to the famous Gee's Bend quilting history. While most of the secondary characters are fairly simple, Ludelphia's voice carries the reader through a treacherous landscape with determined vibrancy, adding a dash of adventure and mischief to an otherwise harrowing tale. The conclusion is at once happy and realistic—the family knows that even with Mama's recovery and supplies from the Red Cross, the winter will still be hard—making this an enjoyable piece of fiction about an undertreated bit of American history." [*The Bulletin for the Center of Children's Books* (BCCB)]

... "She has given the world - and the children of the world who have no idea about this section of our country in more segregated times than now - a glimpse into a sharecropper's life. I get it. The kid's will get it. There's good story telling going on here. I thank Irene Latham for writing this book." [[Muddy Puddle Musings](#)]

"*authentic and memorable*" - Booklist

In Gee's Bend, Alabama in 1932, 10-year-old Ludelphia's mother nearly dies giving birth. Ludelphia takes off downriver to find a doctor in the town of Camden, 40 miles away, and in her first journey away from her tiny village, she encounters white people for the first time. The hardship of African American sharecropper families is always present in this stirring historical debut, and so is the rich sense of community in rough times, although that community does include sometimes malicious local gossip. Inspired by her mama, Ludelphia stitches together a quilt that tells her story, and that intricate process of quilt making sometimes becomes a too-heavy metaphor. Still, Ludelphia's voice is authentic and memorable, and Latham captures the tension of her dangerous journey and the racism she encounters when a white, mentally disturbed landowner's widow takes everything from the sharecroppers as repayment for their debt. In a final note, Latham talks about the history of Gee's Bend and its rich quilting traditions.

— *Hazel Rochman*

["a true heroine... an adventure story... a page-turner"](#) - *Augusta Scattergood, former children's librarian*

Library Media Connection

Ludelphia Bennett is a ten-year-old African American girl growing up in 1932 Gee's Bend, Alabama. In this isolated area the families all work as sharecroppers, living below the poverty level. When her mother is sick with a cough and fever, Ludelphia goes to get the white doctor to help. Ludelphia learns of courage, love, loss, fear, discrimination, hope, and more as she travels through the white section, seeking assistance for her family. Ludelphia is identified as a witch by the very family she thought would help her, and it is the knowledge of white people fearing her that eventually enables Ludelphia to save Gee's Bend. Although similar to other tales set in small towns, this is different in its focus

on a female protagonist and witchcraft. The strong tale of hope and survival will encourage female readers to enjoy other well-known works such as *Bud Not Buddy* (Delacorte Press, 1999) and *Souder* (Harper & Row, 1969). ***Recommended.*** Sara Rofofsky, Electronic Resources/Web Librarian, Queensborough Community College, Bayside New York

[School Library Journal](#)

Grade 4-6-Blind in one eye and shouldering a fair share of work as part of a family of sharecroppers, 10-year-old Ludelphia Bennett is no stranger to hardship or determination. Though her small town of Gee's Bend is geographically isolated by the Alabama River, she sets off on her own to Camden, 40 miles away, to find a doctor for her sick mother. Constant throughout her arduous journey is a stitched-together fabric, and she both physically and mentally chronicles her experiences as she pieces a quilt together. This is the way Ludelphia tells her story, of seeing white people for the first time, of encountering kindness and hate, and it is also the way Latham pays homage to the community spirit that historically fostered a heritage of artisan quilt-makers. While there is a bit of a reliance on coincidence, what shines through is the characterization and sense of place. Rural Alabama of 1932 is brought to life, complete with characters' prejudices and superstitions that are eventually overcome thanks to Ludelphia's indomitable strength. Here is a story that is comforting and warm, just like the quilts that make Gee's Bend famous.

— Joanna K. Fabicon, *Los Angeles Public Library*