

Author makes connection with Fairview readers

BY CHRIS SILCOX
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Birmingham, Ala., author Irene Latham made a quick connection with the students at Fairview Elementary School when she spent time at the school on Monday, March 22 talking about her first published novel "Leaving Gee's Bend."

Latham took time from a book tour promoting "Leaving Gee's Bend" to speak to Fairview students from each grade-level about being a writer, the importance of reading, and about her first published novel - a mid-grade book geared toward children in the fifth-through-eighth grades.

The fifth-grade students at Fairview had already read "Leaving Gee's Bend", which was released by G.P. Putnam's sons in January, prior to the author's appearance at the school.

Fairview librarian Jenny Painter said having a published author at the school to interact with students is a big deal to the children.

"This is something that we've been looking forward to," said Painter.

Latham said she'll be doing "about 20" appearances on the current book tour and half of those appearances will be at schools. She said the Fairview appearance, in particular, is a special one

because her two nephews attend the school.

Latham's younger sister, Dr. Evelyn Baker, is a pediatrician at Pediatric Consultants North and her two sons are first- and third-graders, respectively, at Fairview.

"She's a published author so this is really special for the students," said Painter. "We feel honored to have her here. We did a reading group with our fifth-graders and they loved her book."

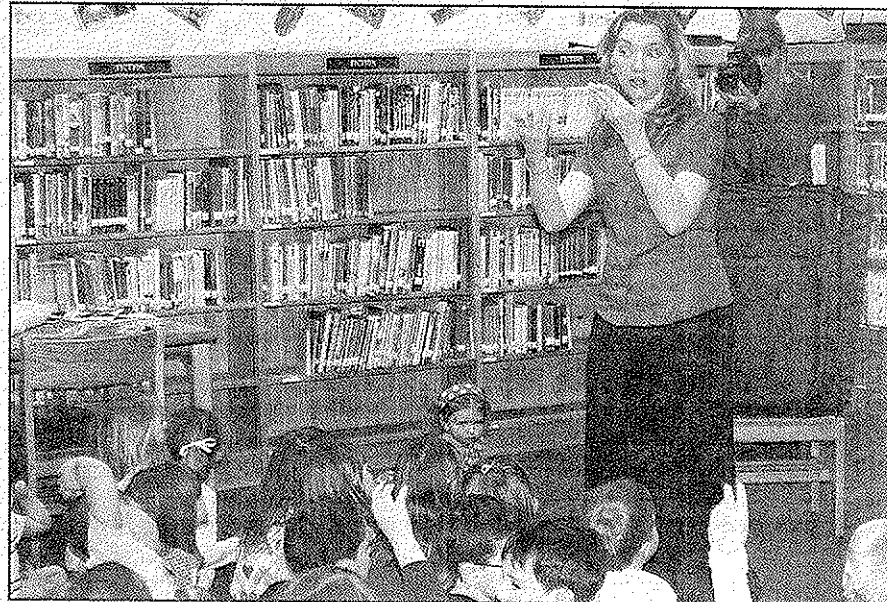
"Leaving Gee's Bend" is described by Latham as a heart-touching tale of unexpected adventure in the vein of such classics as "Sounder", "Little House on the Prairie", and "Stone Fox."

The story of "Leaving Gee's Bend" is about a determined, 10-year-old girl in Depression-era Gee's Bend, Ala., who sets out to save her sick mother and records her adventures in quilt pieces. The story includes the real-life 1932 raid on Gee's Bend and the subsequent Red Cross rescue.

"Leaving Gee's Bend" has received positive feedback from some national book critics, including glowing reviews from Publishers Weekly and First Draft Magazine.

Although the novel is set in the south, it was a trip to a museum in New York City that inspired Latham on a six-year odyssey of writing the story.

"In 2003 my husband and I traveled to New York City and viewed the Quilts of Gee's Bend art exhibit at the Whitney Museum," said Latham. "Although I live only 120 miles from Gee's Bend, it wasn't until then that



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Irene Latham talks about her just-released novel "Leaving Gee's Bend" Monday morning to students at Fairview Elementary School. Latham, a Birmingham, Alabama native, has two nephews attending Fairview.



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Irene Latham uses some props to explain the plot of her novel "Leaving Gee's Bend" to a class of young students at Fairview Elementary School on Monday, March 19. Latham spoke to classes from each grade level about the book.

I became aware of the art and history of Gee's Bend.

"Something happened to me as I walked through those rooms...I was moved by the quilts and the voices of the quilt makers. The more I learned, the more I wanted to know," Latham remarked.

Latham said she gauged her book's effectiveness on her target-readers by asking for feedback from her own sons, ages 10, 13 and 15.

"Because of my boys I think I definitely tried to write something a little more adventurous," Latham commented. "My 10-year-old got so mad at me at the end of each chapter because of the suspense. That was the best compliment."

"Leaving Gee's Bend" struck a chord with Fairview students as well.

"I thought it was very in-

teresting," said 10-year-old Natasha Hughes, a fifth-grader at Fairview. "It was very adventurous. I'd advise anybody to read it."

Fifth-grader Bailey Whited said the book was both adventurous and humorous.

"I thought it was very good," said Whited. "It had some action but it also had a lot of funny parts that I found interesting."

Latham's sister attended Monday's visit to Fairview Elementary.

She said her own children now see their aunt in a whole new light.

"My oldest said 'well, I guess I'm famous now because my aunt wrote a book,'" laughed Dr. Evelyn Baker. "I'm so proud of my sister because this is what

she's talked about doing her whole life. I think she wrote a great family-reading book. Something families can enjoy together."

Latham said seeing her nephews and all of their classmates at Fairview Elementary enjoy "Leaving Gee's Bend" creates a special feeling.

"That really is the best part of the job of being a writer," Latham commented. "Connecting to young readers, feeding off the reaction of young readers, and sharing my passion for writing and telling stories with the kids, that is what it's all about for me."

Latham will be at Carpe Librum Booksellers for a book signing of "Leaving Gee's Bend" at 2 p.m. Saturday, March 27.