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Contact: Irene Latham
205-981-1935
Irene@irenelatham.com

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Alabama Author Goes Behind Zoo Gates for New Book

Birmingham – Stint as Teen Volunteer at Birmingham Zoo Inspires Second Novel

Inspiration is sometimes found in the most unexpected places – like one’s own backyard. That’s what it’s been like for award-winning Alabama poet and novelist Irene Latham, not once but twice: first in 2010 with her debut historical novel *Leaving Gee’s Bend* (Putnam/Penguin, ISBN: 978-0-399-25179-5), which evolved out of her fascination with the quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend in Wilcox County, Alabama; and now with her latest novel *Don’t Feed the Boy* (Roaring Brook/Macmillan, 978-1-59643-755-5, Oct. 16, 2012).

“I signed up for the teen volunteer program because I wanted to be a zoo veterinarian,” said Latham, a Birmingham resident since 1984. “I loved learning about exotic animal, but all it took was witnessing one surgery to make me realize that perhaps I’d better just write about the animals instead.”

Which is exactly what she did. *Don’t Feed the Boy* is about a boy who lives at fictional Meadowbrook Zoo, which is named for the North Shelby County neighborhood and modeled after Birmingham Zoo. The book includes all sorts of animal facts and behind-the-scenes adventures drawn from Latham’s training and other research.

It’s hard to be human when you live at the zoo. Now that he’s eleven, Whit feels trapped by the rules and routine of zoo life. With so many exotic animals, it’s easy to get overlooked. But when Whit notices a mysterious girl who visits every day to draw the birds, suddenly the zoo becomes much more interesting. Who is the Bird Girl? And why does she come by herself to the zoo? Together the two kids take risks in order to determine where it is they each belong. But when Stella asks Whit for an important and potentially dangerous favor, Whit discovers how complicated friendship—and freedom-- can be.

Praised for her authentic and memorable stories, Latham has also published two award-winning volumes of poetry and is highly regarded as a speaker for school, library and other groups. She is often asked how she finds time to write the next book in the midst of all that travel. It’s easy, and it isn’t, Latham said.

“The best part of being a writer is connecting with readers. I can’t tell you how much interacting with students and teachers means to me. It’s one of the best, most unexpected joys of my life. It’s one way to practice what I preach, which is ‘live a life worth writing about.’ Yet I do have to be careful not to over-commit myself. I still have children at home, and I need the writing time to nourish my creative soul.”

Latham lives with her husband and three sons in north Shelby County. She is a frequent visitor to Birmingham Zoo, and has a children’s book of poems also on an animal theme scheduled for release in 2014. It’s easy to pick a favorite animal, Latham said. “Without question, humans are my favorite species. The best part about going to the zoo is sharing that experience with loved ones.”

Two book launch events are scheduled to celebrate the release of *Don’t Feed the Boy*:
Sunday, Oct. 14, 2-4 pm Birmingham Zoo: admission required; feed giraffes for free!
Sunday, Oct. 21, 2-4 pm North Shelby Library, 5521 Cahaba Valley Road: free!

For more information about Irene Latham or her books, please visit www.irenelatham.com, and follow her on Twitter @irene_latham.