

## Stitching Together a Story

*Leaving Gee's Bend* is a tale of family, culture and determination. **By Susan Swagler**

Here's how passionate and determined local poet and novelist Irene Latham can be when it comes to sharing words with the world at large: She can get a chef, a city council member, some lawyers, a doctor, a really smart kid, a teacher, other writers and a homebuilder on the same stage at the same time to read poetry to people.

This enthusiasm and love of the written word is evident throughout her debut novel, *Leaving Gee's Bend*. (The book is written for young-adult readers, but I practically inhaled it one day.)

This supremely satisfying (and, at times, heartbreaking) book is set in 1932 and is inspired by the rich quilting history of Gee's Bend. Latham wrote three other books about Gee's Bend (officially known as Boykin, it's down in Wilcox County) before finding the story she needed to tell all along: that of smart, brave, spirited Ludelphia Bennett.

Latham's interest in Gee's Bend and the town's tradition of quilting took shape when she saw a major exhibit of Gee's Bend quilts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. "Something happened to me as I walked through those rooms," she says. "I was moved by the colors and textures, and by the voices of the quilt makers as they told their stories. For weeks afterward, their words woke me in the mornings and sang me to sleep at night. I wanted to know anything and everything about this place and its people."

First she read. Then she wrote.

And what we have is the story of 10-year-old Ludelphia Bennett who lives in the tiny, close-knit community of Gee's Bend with her father; an older brother; a new baby sister; and her mother, who is dying from pneumonia. Ludelphia decides that the only way to make her mother better is to get the doctor from Camden (40 miles away) to come see about her. So, despite never having been out of Gee's Bend, she leaves one day to bring him back. Ludelphia forgets the eggs she's gathered to pay the doctor, but she takes along her needle, thread and quilt top, which will ultimately tell the story of her journey.

This is important, and it goes right to the heart of the quilting tradition (sustained by African-American women for four generations) in Gee's Bend. The quilters there consider the process of "piecing" the quilt top to be a very personal endeavor, one that reflects a singular artistic vision—telling whatever "story" that quilter wants to tell. Therefore, the top (the side that is face up on a bed) usually is pieced by a quilter working alone. The actual quilting part—sewing together the completed top, the batting (stuffing) and the back—sometimes is

done communally by a small group of women.

From the very beginning, Ludelphia, with her needle and scraps of fabric always close at hand, won my heart. She says, "I mean to tell you, there ain't noplace in the world like Gee's Bend. For one thing, you can't hardly find it. It's like a little island sitting just about in the middle of the state of Alabama. Only instead of ocean water, it's caught up on three sides by a curve in the Alabama River. Ain't noplace in Gee's Bend you can't get to by setting one foot after another into that orange dirt that likes to settle right between your toes. I reckon the hard part is how once you're in Gee's Bend, it ain't all that easy to get out."

Latham's use of the Black Belt vernacular is spot-on. She writes from her heart, so her characters—black and white—sound true.

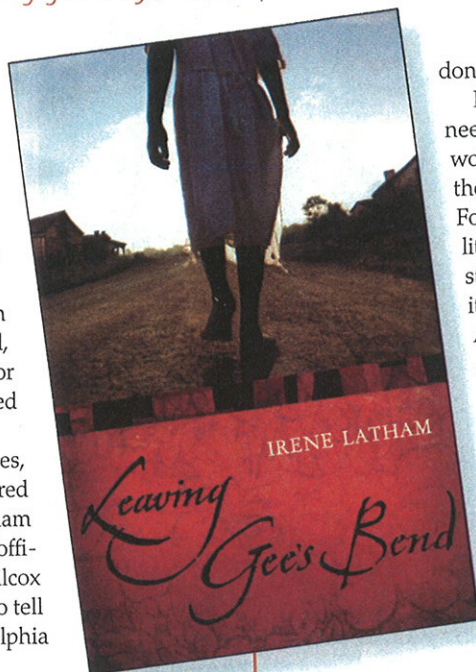
The way she pieced together Ludelphia's story with the real history of Gee's Bend, including a raid on the families there in 1932, and the sheer isolation of the place, is remarkable. The book, which includes characters named after the long-established families in the Gee's Bend community, is now in its second printing.

I understand perfectly how the beautiful Gee's Bend quilts can touch someone so profoundly.

Years ago when we lived in Washington D.C., I, too, attended an exhibit of the quilts stitched by the Bennett and Pettway families. (It might have been the very same one Latham saw in New York; I think it was a traveling exhibition.) I still remember the wave of homesickness that swept over me as I walked through the gallery. I remember that my tears that day came not only from seeing the beautiful works of art in front of me but also from the simple fact that I missed my grandmother. Maybe that's why I enjoyed *Leaving Gee's Bend* so much.

Or maybe it's because this book, like a well made, lovingly made quilt, is stitched together in a way that is interesting and useful and tells a good story, too. It is worth holding.

For more information on this book and Irene Latham (and lots of cool links to quilts and poetry), go to [irenelatham.com](http://irenelatham.com). ●



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