



PHOTO BY DAVID FLORES, COURTESY OF RENEE WATSON

Home, past and present

Portland-raised author Renee Watson has new young adult book out about growing up black in the increasingly white neighborhoods of Northeast Portland

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

Author Renée Watson grew up in Portland and lived through the gentrification of her Northeast neighborhood. In 1990, more than 30 percent of Portland's black population lived in North and Northeast Portland.

By the time Watson was a senior at Jefferson High School in 1996, change was moving in, and by 2010, that percentage was halved.

This month Watson released a young adult novel, "This Side of Home," and kicked off the book tour here in her hometown, visiting libraries and schools, including her alma mater, Jefferson High School. This Side of Home deals with the experiences of identical twin sisters growing up in a gentrifying Portland neighborhood, much the experience that Watson herself lived through.

And it couldn't be at a more fitting time. Some of Portland's now blackest neighborhoods — St. Johns, Boise, Eliot and King — are poised on the brink of gentrification, says a study by Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. And with it, these neighborhoods risk pushing people of color out.

Renée Watson saw this happen as a youth, and continues to see it in her new home in New York, where she moved for

college and never left. In her four published works, she has taken on Hurricane Katrina, the Harlem Renaissance and losing a parent — all with strong black girls at the center of the story.

The NAACP Image Award nominee is a writer in residence at public schools and community centers across the country, teaching creative writing and theater. She also writes for Rethinking Schools and the Oregon English Journal on arts and education — everything from science literacy to how to teach kids about police brutality against the black community.

Coming back to Portland recently, she said she "feels so loved" to be back in the place she grew up, sharing her book with the community. She hopes for her next project to be a book of poetry, where she writes about her own experiences as a black girl growing up in Portland.

Sarah Hansell: *Although one of your*

other books is set in Portland, this one really deals with the landscape of the city, and Portland as a city is a huge part of the storyline.

"I didn't know the word gentrification, I had no language for that, but I could see something was changing. On Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, and Killingsworth there used to be a Fred Meyer that is now a police precinct. A Whole Foods opened up on 15th."

Renee Watson:

It's interesting, I actually started writing the story when I was in high school. I didn't know it would become a novel one day, it was just a short story for my English class. I wrote it because my Northeast Portland neighborhood was changing. I didn't know the word gentrification, I had no language for that, but I could see

something was changing. On Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard, and Killingsworth there used to be a Fred Meyer that is now a police precinct. A Whole Foods opened up on 15th.

I started writing about these twin sisters, and the complications of having new white neighbors that are looking to me for friendships and relationships in school. Then I put that story away. That was a long

time ago, and now living in New York, I see the same things happening in Brooklyn and in Harlem.

I just have so many conversations about how gentrification is happening. I've seen gentrification happen right before my eyes in my hometown as well as places that later became home. This is something that is happening across the nation and I think it's important to provide spaces for young people to process how they feel about it. I want teachers to have a resource too in order to have discussions of race and class and all that.

S.H.: *What made you decide to write the story about two sisters?*

R.W.: You know, it's a real practical plot. I made it to show both sides of the argument, both sides of the story, kind of. I don't think things are simple. It's complicated, right? I made it to show someone being for it and someone being wary and against it. So identical twin sisters showed being just like someone and also being very different.

For Maya, the main character, there are expectations that she has for herself and people have for her, based on her neighborhood, the school she goes to and her family's reputation. How do you break way from that, be a part of a group, part of a culture, but also have your own identity? It was just a way for me to play around with that and explore the messy things of identity and loyalty — what it means to be loyal to a community.

S.H.: *North and Northeast Portland neighborhoods that have the highest populations of people of color, including St. Johns, Boise, Eliot and King, are poised for gentrification right now, and already are becoming trendier places for people to live. Do you think there are ways to avoid displacing people of color and poor people from these neighborhoods?*

R.W.: Yeah, absolutely. I think it has to happen on many levels. People who own property and the real estate folks who are coming in and building condos and apartment complexes, I would hope would be mindful of who's already there and who can afford these places. And there are a lot of families in Northeast Portland, and I'm noticing that a lot of the new things that are built are for single people, so just the way that the city is deciding what is built in North and Northeast Portland show what they care about. How do we create things that are conducive for families?

In the book there's a scene where Maya realizes that people are just trying to make a living and people are just trying to live in a nice area, so she takes the first step to go to one of the businesses and say, "Hey, we're a high school in your neighborhood, is there any way we can partner with you?" So I think there are ways that businesses can help with local schools and community organizations and make decisions that make sense for the neighborhood.

S.H.: *As an educator who uses creative writing to help youth cope with trauma, what are ways that we can teach youth about tragedies like the ones in Ferguson and Staten Island?*

See WATSON, page 5