



Crossing Racial Boundaries



Portland native Renée Watson grapples with issues of race and class in her new novel, 'This Side of Home.'

Author weaves Portland gentrification into new novel

BY LEIDA SNOW
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A Portland and New York-based author says issues of race and class drive the story in her young adult novel "This Side of Home." (Bloombury)

"I wanted to turn a mirror on it," said Renée Watson, during a recent interview about her new book, the story about twin African-American high schoolers whose close relationship is tested by the gentrification in their Portland neighborhood.

Pointing out all the missing black faces from TV's "Portlandia," she laughed: "That's not the Portland I know."

Watson says she's experienced the things she writes about, and that her story, while not autobiographical, is written "from a real place." Focusing on twins in the book was a way to tell two sides of the story, she said.

Watson got her start as an author at The New School in New York. As she was learning about writing for children, her classmate turned out to be a Random House editor who encouraged and mentored her. Her work at the nonprofit organi-

zation, Dream Yard, that brings artists into the public schools, has enabled her to divide her time between New York and home.

Watson is 36 and single, the youngest of five kids, a dynamo who embraces the complexities that the issues she writes about.

The teenagers in her book, for example, experience more people moving into their neighborhood who are different from them and see upscale businesses displacing mom and pop shops.

"There's a way to revitalize a neighborhood without pushing the people out. You have to work with the community," she says. She points out that gentrification is happening in Brooklyn and in Harlem; in fact, it's everywhere.

Watson was in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, facilitating poetry workshops to help youngsters there, and based a picture book, "A Place Where Hurricanes Happen" (Random House) on that experience. The NAACP has honored her with an Image Award nomination in children's literature.

Watson says she's been writing forever: "I wrote a 21 page story in the second grade," she

says. "Marginalized people are often the heroes, and they are overlooked. You have to use your voice to speak up for what's right."

She hopes her novel will start a conversation.

"Arts are a powerful way to help people," she explains. She says educators and parents have a responsibility to choose books like hers that are aimed at young people and directly talk about the N word, discrimination, and black culture and history — all woven expertly into her tale. "You have to be mindful of what you're doing emotionally to the reader," she says.

And asked why white readers, young or older, should read her book, she bristles slightly: "I've been reading about white people all my life," she points out. "Besides, everyone knows loss, everyone faces challenges. I relate to hobbits and witches. People should read across lines."

Watson says that being able to afford her own apartment in Harlem is "living the dream," but that "Portland is home."

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