

## Q&A With Katherine

### 1) Tell us why you chose to tie St. Valentine to Black History Month.

I started with the idea of Valentine’s Day and kids and parties and then got to thinking about rejection. What kids are rejected? I remember feeling rejected as a child – all kids do to some extent, but what about a child who is visibly different from the majority? How about the child who is part of a persecuted community?

I’ve always been moved by the story of Ruby Bridges, integrating that white elementary school in the midst of the Civil Rights years and praying for her tormentors. Would I have had that kind of courage as a child? I don’t know.

When I began the research on St. Valentine and the early Christian martyrs, I saw the same kind of persecution happening to them that happened to African Americans. The parallels were compelling, even if you focus just on the Civil Rights Movement:

Civil Rights Movement	3 <sup>rd</sup> century Christians
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Whites discouraged from associating with African-Americans</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>People forbidden from associating with Christians</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Nonviolent protest</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Pacifists</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Did not retaliate when violently attacked</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Did not retaliate under torture</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Put in prison</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Put in prison</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Ridiculed and defamed</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Ridiculed and defamed</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Black children labeled as inferior</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Christians labeled as inferior</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Civil rights workers viewed as subversive</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Early Christians viewed as subversive</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Sang in prison</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Witnessed to jailers</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Murdered for their belief in equality</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Murdered for their belief in Jesus</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Followed teachings of Jesus</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Followed teachings of Jesus</li></ul>

### 2) How have you woven a Biblical message into this story?

It would have been pretty hard *not* to have a Biblical message here. The power behind the Civil Rights Movement was the black church: it was the rallying place, the place of solace, a place of corporate outrage. In cases such as the 16<sup>th</sup> St. Baptist bombing, it was also a target of persecution.

But what motivated ordinary women and men *and kids* to change the status quo through nonviolent means, was the Spirit of Christ. The teaching of Jesus sustained them, the Holy Spirit empowered them and the love of the Father gave them an eternal protection. They knew that whatever was done to them, no one could kill their soul.

This is the very thing Marcus has to face in the book. He is being persecuted. He is the recipient of injustice. He has a *right* to be outraged – to fight back and defend himself. What will give him the courage to step beyond himself in this situation?

Ultimately it's his grandmother – not his grandmother, but this story she tells him about St. Valentine – the way she tells it, the way she shows him that it's Jesus who empowers him and Jesus who is the example, and that he's not alone, that Christians through the ages have endured persecution and this is what gave them the strength to do it. Because of that, and because of the example of Marcus's father, who's in jail with Dr. King, Marcus is *enlivened* and inspired to take a very great risk.

### **3) How did your own background influence the writing of this story?**

In third grade I remember a boy named Marcus. He was one of the few African-American children in our class. I don't remember much about Marcus except that I didn't like him. Maybe this was because all boys were "the enemy." I don't remember having hostile feelings towards African-American kids, but I know I wasn't nice to Marcus. When he moved in the middle of the year, I skipped around the playground with my friends, leading the chant, "No mo-ore Mar-cus" to that "Nah, nah-nah, nah nah" tune all kids seem to know. Now I only pray that I did this after he left, so he wasn't there to hear it.

When I sat down to write *The Legend of the Valentine*, the character of Marcus came to me. I decided to set the story in the South in the early sixties. I was pulled by the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement, especially the ordinary children and adults who stood for justice at great personal cost. I read every book in the 323 section of the Woodinville Library and with great fear and trembling, wrote some early drafts. But I found that I was blocking on the story. "You have no right to write this!" my inner critic was screaming at me, "You are a white woman who has lived her entire life in the Pacific Northwest. This is not your story to tell!"

I considered calling my editor and telling her I couldn't do it. That she'd need to find another author. But by now the story had captured me. It wouldn't let me go.

What was necessary was some inner work, some coming to terms with the white privilege I have no control over, but is a part of me even so. I went back to my eight-year-old self and wrote my mixed feelings about Marcus, my prejudices, and the subtle messages I was getting from home. I

wouldn't show that piece of writing to anyone, but facing myself — my child self and my adult self, released me so that I could finish the story. I even included "Kathy" as an extra at the end.

Ultimately it's Marcus's grandmother who empowers him by telling him the story of St. Valentine who was persecuted just as the civil rights workers — like Marcus's dad — were being persecuted. Because of this Marcus is enlivened and inspired to take a great risk.

Marcus, the character, is so real to me. He and his family are only beginning to teach me things I will be learning for the rest of my life. Perhaps this is my story to tell because it is a gift. I offer it to those who have struggled against racism, and those who still feel its sting.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why was Marcus's daddy in jail if "he hadn't done anything bad?" Have you ever been punished unfairly? What did you want to do about it?
2. Marcus says, "There's no wrong color for skin." What does he mean by that? What do you think about it?
3. Travis calls Marcus "Brown Crayon" as a way to make fun of him, yet there is nothing strange or bad about brown crayons. Has anyone ever made fun of you for something that was just silly, like hair color or clothes or the kind of music you liked? Did you start to feel like there was something bad about it just because someone made fun of it? Have YOU ever made fun of someone for something silly? (Be honest ) What made you want to do that? How do you feel about it now?
4. Why do you think Travis is so mean to Marcus? Is Travis a bad person?
5. Why do Jack and Bern go along with Travis? Do you think they would bother Marcus if Travis wasn't around? What do you think would have happened if one of them had said no to Travis about his bullying?
6. Why does Davey wait until the bullies have left the lunchroom before he gives Marcus some napkins to clean up with? What would you do if you were Davey? If you would do something differently, what do you think would happen after you did it?
7. Why does Granny tell Marcus there is "no need to be hating?" Isn't there plenty of reason to be hating when you've been bullied?
8. How does Mama seem to feel about what's been happening to Marcus at school? Why do you think she feels that way?
9. Marcus's daddy is in jail, along with Dr. Martin Luther King, because he believes "everyone should be able to vote." The civil rights workers also believed that nobody should be kept out of a park or swimming pool or restaurant or school because of their race. But many people at that time did not agree. There were even laws that said it was okay to keep people of color out of certain places. The civil rights workers were screamed at, thrown in jail, beaten up and worse for acting on their beliefs. Have you ever been treated badly for what you believe or what your family believes? Have you ever been afraid to stand up for your beliefs because someone may hurt you?
10. Granny tells Marcus about Saint Valentine who also went to jail when he didn't do anything bad. Why was Saint Valentine thrown in jail? Have you ever been treated badly for the religion you follow, or for not following a religion?

11. Many religions have teachings about how we treat one another and Granny shared one with Marcus: “Jesus told us to love our enemies.” This is an important part of Christianity. What are some teachings from other religions that could help us cooperate with and care for one another?
12. What gives Marcus the courage to do what he does for Travis? Would you want to give a gift to an enemy? What do you think would happen if you did? Has someone ever surprised you by being nice when you had been mean to them? How did you feel about it?
13. Why do you think Travis tears Marcus’s valentine? Why does he still say he doesn’t want to be friends?
14. Why do you think Davey said, in front of everybody, that he wanted to be friends? He was already friends with Marcus. How was this any different? Have you ever been afraid to say that you were friends with someone or would like to be? Why? What would happen if you did say it?
15. What do you think happens after the last page of the book?

## **More**

For an excellent documentary on the Civil Rights Movement, I recommend the PBS production [\*\*FREEDOM RIDERS\*\*](#)