

Title: *African Town*
Author: Irene Latham, Charles Waters
Genre: Young Adult, Historical Fiction, Poetry

Reviewer Name and Grade: Caroline Q., 9th Grade

Date Reviewed: December 31st, 2023

The story begins in 1859, and tells of the last American slave ship, the *Clotilda*, its inhabitants, and their new lives in America through poetic prose. The horrors and brutality of the *Clotilda* and slavery, the exhilaration of freedom, and the perseverance to build a new life (as well as a new town) is portrayed by the alternating accounts of Abilè, Gumpa, Kêhounco, Kossola, and Kupollee.

These five main characters, all snatched from their homeland of Africa, set upon a slave ship, and forced to work for their captors, form a bond so strong they cannot imagine life without each other. Level headed Abilè, natural leader Gumpa, fierce Kêhounco, hopeful Kossola, and quiet Kupollee first meet on the cramped belowdecks of the *Clotilda*, and form friendships, and eventually romances, that will give them the strength to survive slavery. After being freed from slavery by the Civil War, these five try to save up enough money to go back to Africa. However, even after years of working and saving, the addition of new family members and children, living costs, and low wages mean they still don't have enough. Longing for their home in Africa, but lacking the funds to go back, they instead purchase land and start their own town. This journey is not without many trials and tribulations, but it results in a place rich with African culture and community. This is African Town.

We also read accounts by the former slave owners, Timothy Meaher, who had devised the plan to sneak one last batch of slaves into America, and William Foster, who carried the plan out, with the *Clotilda* under his command. They are full of hate and perceived superiority to people like Abilè, Gumpa, Kêhounco, Kossola, and Kupollee. While these five, and many others, suffered years of injustice with few reparations, there is still a sense of justice and marking of a new era by the end of the book. This feeling is created by the juxtaposition of Meaher and Foster, weak, old, and dying, clinging on to bringing slaves to America on the *Clotilda* as one of their greatest accomplishments, while the former slaves, now free, have created a flourishing community and legacy for African descendants.

Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (for nonfiction) keep you interested?

Yes, the plot kept me interested. The plot had enough twists and turns to keep me engaged, without cramming too many events or side stories into the storyline to the point where it got overwhelming or convoluted. An example of this was the use of a delicate hand when including the side story of Timothy Meaher's son. The very occasional entries by his son in the book were very effective in showing what Meaher was like at home, yet at the same time refrained from becoming too detailed or frequent, which would confuse me as to what direction the plot was trying to go in.

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?

The pace of the book was great. For most of the book, the authors maintain a steady pace that allows them to be detailed when describing events without boring readers. Another thing the authors do in this book that I really appreciated was the usage of pace as a major literary technique. They made me feel what the characters felt by slowing down or speeding up the pace. The sections or chapters describing the days on the *Clotilda* almost matched the length of the chapters describing life in African Town. This made me feel the way the characters did, whether it be how the unbearable experience on ship seemed to stretch on forever, or how their life of freedom seemed to pass so quickly, watching their children grow up and have families of their own.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

This book contains little to no explicit language or topics in it, making it a great choice for younger and older grades alike looking for a thought provoking book on slavery, and how it affected African Americans. That being said, there is some violence portrayed in the book, and the topic of slavery is one that requires maturity to read and think about.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would naturally recommend this book to anybody interested in history or human nature because of this book's premise. I would also recommend this book to anybody who enjoys an unconventional way of storytelling, as the prose in this book is poetic, and the story is told through many, many alternating short entries by different characters, as opposed to the more traditional chapter by chapter format told through the voice of one character.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

One interesting thing about this book is that its introduction is written by Jocelyn M. Davis, a descendant of *Clotilda* survivors. One thing about the writing style that I think worth noting is the entries by African characters are written with an accent, so to speak, the authors spelling the words "the" and "they" as "de" and "dey".

4 stars: I enjoyed this book and found it worthwhile reading.

I really enjoyed the book *African Town*. The plot, characters, and storytelling came together to form an enjoyable and eye-opening reading experience. What ultimately took this book's rating down from five stars to four stars for me was the use of poetry or poetic prose as the vessel of the story. I am an enjoyer of poetry, and there were some places in this book where it was very well done. However, many entries don't feel like poems, just regular writing in an unconventional format. Poems don't have to rhyme, but they always have a flow. Many entries lacked that flow and even at times felt awkward, disjointed, or forced. But in the grand scheme of this book and its many positive attributes, this complaint is a small one that didn't hugely affect my reading experience.

Reviewer's Name and Grade: Nitya M., 9th Grade

Date Reviewed: March 12, 2024

The book *African Town* by Irene Latham and Charles Waters is a young adult and historical fiction book about the true story of the last known enslaved Africans that were brought to America. The narration starts in 1860, when laws of importation of slaves had been made illegal in the United States for a quite a while. We meet the slaves on the ship who are captivated, the ship is named "The Clotilda". The captives have been stolen from their homes in Nigeria and Benin. Their journeys across the "Middle Passage" in the Atlantic Ocean is a treacherous one. The story also features the men who have enslaved these men and illegally brought them through this journey. These men have also financed this illegal operation. The story then develops further, and we now see the men have reached Mobile, Alabama. The enslaved men and the ship have been hidden in swampy areas to avoid detection of this illegal operation. After avoiding detection, the enslaved men are divided and sold throughout many plantations in the south. The story then shows the disparity of the men clinging to their culture showing the harsh realities of slave workers. The story then is carried through the eyes of many characters in the story, including the ship, the people that kidnapped the slaves, the slave owners, and the slaves themselves. These

many perspectives show us a unique way of storytelling and understanding the situations that occurred. In the story we see a perspective of the enslaved men's escape attempts, the resilience of the captivated men, and the enslaved men who so desperately want to be free. The narration of the story is continuing through the Civil War, which is a massive turning point for the enslaved men. With the resilience of Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation speech, the slaves are now free. The newly freed men and women now reunite and establish a new settlement they call "African Town". With this the freed people can now build a life of their choice and life based on their traditions and hopes. *African Town* is a delightful story about the fight for freedom and how freedom is not always a given. It highlights the fight and spirit of the enslaved people.

Did the plot keep me interested?

The plot was very interesting as it showed the perspective of something you can't really see until it has been shown.

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just, right?

The pace of the book was just right as it shows all the details you wouldn't want to miss condensed into a masterpiece of a book.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

I think this book is appropriate for grade levels 8 and above because it uses some language, and themes can be a little harsh and not suitable for a younger audience.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in U.S history or interested in the U.S in the 1800s and the movement rights for the slaves. It can also be interesting for learning a bit about the Civil War.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

The Book is great to reading because of its action packed and interesting story.

Rating: I will rate this book 5 stars because as someone who doesn't love to learn much this book is amazing and kept me interested throughout. The book shares great messages and has a very nice ending to it.

Reviewer Name and Grade: Shrey G., Grade 9

Date Reviewed: 03/15/2024

African Town by Irene Latham and Charles Waters dives deep into a powerful, true story. It centers around the *Clotilda*, the last known ship to bring enslaved people to America in 1860, defying the outlawed transatlantic slave trade.

The story unfolds through the eyes of 14 unique voices. We meet Oluale, a young West African prince, who recounts his capture and the brutal journey across the Atlantic, known as the Middle Passage. Through his perspective, we witness the remarkable strength and perseverance of the captives. Despite unimaginable hardship, they find solace in shared stories, songs, and clinging to their cultural roots. The narrative also explores the motives of Timothy Meaher, the cunning businessman who financed *Clotilda*. Driven by a desire for cheap labor, Meaher faces the challenge of hiding the ship's arrival and integrating the captives into a society still dependent on slavery. His motivations are complex, a mix of greed and fear of economic losses without slave labor.

Following their arrival, the survivors establish a settlement north of Mobile, Alabama, which they name African Town. The book chronicles their struggles to build a new life, marked by both hope and the constant threat of

discovery and re-enslavement. We see their determination to establish a community based on their African traditions. Their resilience shines through as they build homes, schools, and churches. Characters like Charlie, a resourceful young woman, emerge as leaders within African Town. Using her knowledge of the land, Charlie helps the community find food and essential resources. Her story highlights the ingenuity and self-reliance required for survival.

The narrative takes an interesting turn when it explores the impact of the American Civil War on African Town. Initially unaware of the legalities of slavery in the US, the arrival of war raises complex questions about freedom and citizenship for the community. The personified voice of the ship offers a unique perspective, reflecting on the burden of carrying stolen lives across the ocean. The land where African Town is built is also described, portraying its transformation from wilderness to a place of refuge and community.

By the book's conclusion, African Town has become a thriving community, a testament to the unwavering spirit of its residents. However, the fight for justice and recognition continues. Descendants of the Clotilda survivors only recently received an official apology from the Alabama government.

Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (for nonfiction) keep you interested?

Yes, the story is engaging because it uses multiple character perspectives such as Oluale who offers a firsthand account of the horrors of the Middle Passage.

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?

The pace is just right. The book covers a lot of ground, from capture in Africa to establishing a community, but it doesn't feel rushed.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

African Town is appropriate for high school readers (grades 9-12). It deals with mature topics like slavery and violence, but it does so in a way that is respectful and informative.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

This book would be a good choice for readers interested in African American history, the history of slavery in the United States.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

African Town is based on a true story, this is important to the reader because they feel more emotional when reading and that the book is to be taken seriously, not lightly.

I would rate this book 4 stars because African Town tells a unique and important story through its multiple character perspectives. The firsthand accounts of capture, the horrors of the Middle Passage, and the challenges of building a new life in African Town are all powerful and engaging. The addition of the ship's voice adds another layer of depth to the story.

While the historical content is strong, some readers might find the multiple perspectives and the back-and-forth narration styles challenging to follow at times. However, the afterword provides valuable historical context and helps connect the fictionalized story to the real-life events.

Overall, African Town is a compelling read that sheds light on a little-known piece of American history. The focus on the fight for freedom makes it a worthwhile read for mature teens interested in these topics.

Reviewer Name and Grade: Yilin C., 11th Grade

Date Reviewed: 03/16/24

One hundred and ten men, women, and children were captured from Benin and Nigeria and taken to Mobile, Alabama in 1860, years after the importation of slaves was outlawed in the United States. They ride through the dangerous Middle Passage in a ship known as Clotilda. These are the last of the victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. This book, told from fourteen different perspectives, tells the story of these one hundred and ten

captured African Americans as they travel a hazardous journey through the Middle Passage to Alabama to being forced to be enslaved laborers for white men. It is difficult for slaves to keep their culture alive, but they do everything they possibly can. Although they are desperate to keep in touch with their roots, they also recognize that they must still fit into American culture in order to keep themselves safe. The African Americans must desperately fight to keep both their culture and their physical bodies alive. Years later, after the Civil War came to an end, the remaining slaves formed a community of their own, deeming it the African Town. This compelling book, which is based on a true story, showcases a pivotal time in American history and its long lasting effects on society.

Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (for nonfiction) keep you interested?

The plot of this book kept me very interested. Although I am not the biggest fan of history, I thought this historical fiction novel was written in a way to engage all readers, even those who are not too into history. The multiple changes of perspectives is also refreshing. I thought that being able to see something from different perspectives was something that kept me wanting to keep reading this book.

Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?

The pace of this book was just right. Everything was written in enough detail and left nothing for speculation. The author gives historical context, as well as real events from history so no readers are left confused. I was completely drawn into the plot the whole time I was reading.

What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?

This book is appropriate for grades 8 and above. It highlights important parts of U.S. history that readers of this age group will be learning about or have learned about. Coming into this book with some previous knowledge of the Transatlantic Slave Trade may be useful.

What type of reader would you recommend this book to?

I would recommend this book to anyone who likes historical fiction or nonfiction books. Although this book is fictional, it is based on true events. It does contain real historical information, which nonfiction readers may enjoy. Poetry fans may also enjoy this book, as it is told in verses.

What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?

It is important to keep in mind that this book is told through multiple perspectives. Each perspective tells their own story. It focuses more on the emotional aspect of this part of history. This book is also written in a poetic style.

5 Stars. This is one of my favorite books. Although I do not always love historical fiction, this book was an amazing read. It is extremely emotional and heartwarming. Every character is written well with so much personality, as well as having a unique voice; each perspective is different from the next. I found that each character's perspective had a different style of writing, chosen specifically for that character. The writing was careful, specific, and shows so much attention to detail.