

# Renée Watson

American writer

**Born:** 1978

**Birthplace:** New Jersey

**Education:** Warner Pacific University (attended); The New School

**Significance:** Renée Watson is a children's and young-adult author who writes about the lived experiences of African American girls and women. Her published titles include *Harlem's Little Blackbird: The Story of Florence Mills* (2012), *This Side of Home* (2015), and *Piecing Me Together* (2017).

## Background

Renée Watson was born in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1978. The youngest of five children, she moved to Portland, Oregon, following her parents' divorce when she was three years old. Growing up with her mother's family of actors and musicians, she was exposed to the arts from a young age.

One of Watson's earliest writing memories was creating a twenty-one-page story at the age of seven. Soon afterward, her mother bought her a journal to help her develop her writing skills. Watson, however, was not only an active writer but also an avid reader with an interest in poetry. As a child and teenager, she devoured the works of Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, and Langston Hughes—whose poems about African American identity mirrored her life and emotions.

Watson attended Jefferson High School, where she was part of the literary and performing arts programs, despite funding cuts that affected arts programs. Encouraged by her teachers, she began to explore how to use the arts to spark conversations about race and class. Following her graduation in 1996, Watson attended Warner Pacific University for two years before participating in a summer intensive writing program at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. Watson, however, returned to Portland to look after her mother, who had been diagnosed with cancer. Taking a break from her studies, she remained in Portland for several years, running an arts and performance nonprofit organization.

Resuming her studies in 2005, Watson moved once again to New York City. There, she attended the New School, earning a BA in creative writing and a certificate in art and drama therapy in 2009.

## Writing Career

In June 2010, Watson began her career as an author with the publication of *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen*, a children's picture book. Illustrated by Shadra Strickland, the story follows four New Orleans friends—Adrienne, Michael, Keesha, and Tommy—as they describe their experience during and after Hurricane Katrina. Written in a free-verse style, *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen* is based on the poetry workshops Watson conducted with young people coping with the aftermath of the storm.

The following month, Watson published the middle-grade novel *What Momma Left Me*. This tale follows the life of Serenity Evans, an African American eighth grader who, alongside her younger brother, goes to live with her grandparents following the tragic death of her mother. Exploring issues of race, gender, and identity, *What Momma Left Me* received favorable reviews and was named a 2010 New Voices Pick by the Association of Booksellers for Children.

Watson published the children's picture book *Harlem's Little Blackbird: The Story of Florence Mills* in 2012. Based on a true story, the book is about Florence Mills, a daughter of former slaves who becomes a successful jazz singer and dancer during the Harlem Renaissance. Illustrated by Christian Robinson, *Harlem's Little Blackbird* was met with critical praise, earning numerous honors, including a 2013 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Image Award nomination for Outstanding Literary Work—Children.

In 2015, Watson published *This Side of Home*, her first young-adult novel. Set in a gentrifying neighborhood of Portland, Oregon, the story follows identical twins, Nikki and Maya Younger, as they prepare to attend a historically black college. *This Side of Home* garnered positive reviews from critics, with many commending Watson's protagonists, with their opposing responses to gentrification, for encouraging conversations about race, diversity, and community.

Watson published the young-adult novel *Piecing Me Together* in 2017. In this novel, the narrator and protagonist is a black teenager named Jade. A junior in a predominantly white school, Jade dreams of finding success outside of her poor neighborhood. A story that challenges stereotypes and prejudices, *Piecing Me Together* was the American Library Association's 2018 Coretta Scott King Book Awards Author Winner. The novel was also named a 2018 Newbery Honor Book, a 2017 New York Public Library Best Teen Book of the Year, and a New York Times Best Seller, among other honors.

Collaborating with fellow author Ilyasah Shabazz, daughter of Malcolm X and Dr. Betty Shabazz, Watson published the middle-grade novel *Betty before X* in 2018. Set in 1940s Detroit, Michigan, the story follows the childhood of Betty Shabazz, who would become a major civil rights leader. A story that explores what it was like to be an African American girl in that time and place, *Betty Before X*, too, was well received.

## Impact

Watson has noted in interviews that while growing up there were not many books with African American protagonists reflecting her reality. Thus, her works aim to represent the experiences of young black women. Featuring girls and women of color in her stories, Watson is an advocate of diversity in children's and young-adult literature—and her works are catalysts for starting conversations on race, gender, and class.

Watson's advocacy of diversity in children's and young-adult literature extends beyond her writing and teaching career. In 2016, she started the I, Too, Arts Collective, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting underrepresented perspectives in the creative arts. That same year, I, Too launched the #LangstonsLegacy Campaign to lease Langston Hughes's Harlem brownstone. As a result of the campaign's success, I, Too, was able to lease the brownstone in October 2016, and plans to provide programming there for emerging writers.

## Personal Life

For several years, Watson has worked in public schools and community centers throughout the United States, teaching creative writing and theater. She teaches in the Solstice MFA program at Pine Manor College in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, and resides in New York City.

## Principal Works: Writings

*A Place Where Hurricanes Happen*, 2010

*What Momma Left Me*, 2010

*Harlem's Little Blackbird: The Story of Florence Mills*, 2012

*This Side of Home*, 2015

*Piecing Me Together*, 2017

*Betty before X*, 2018

## Bibliography

"Arts Collective in Langston Hughes' Home Carries On Writer's Legacy." *CBS News*, 12 Apr. 2018, [www.cbsnews.com/news/langston-hughes-home-i-too-arts-collective-renee-watson](http://www.cbsnews.com/news/langston-hughes-home-i-too-arts-collective-renee-watson). Accessed 30 July 2018.

Baker, Jeff. "Jefferson High Alum Renée Watson Finds Literary Success in New York." *The Oregonian*, 16 June 2010,

[www.oregonlive.com/books/index.ssf/2010/06/former\\_portlander\\_renee\\_watson.html](http://www.oregonlive.com/books/index.ssf/2010/06/former_portlander_renee_watson.html). Accessed 30 July 2018.

Schmidt, Samantha. "A Poet's Mission: Buy, and Preserve, Langston Hughes's Harlem Home." *The New York Times*, 15 Sept. 2016, [www.nytimes.com/2016/09/16/nyregion/a-poets-mission-buy-and-preserve-langston-hughess-harlem-home-renee-watson.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/16/nyregion/a-poets-mission-buy-and-preserve-langston-hughess-harlem-home-renee-watson.html). Accessed 30 July 2018.

Watson, Renée. "Interview with Renée Watson." Interview by Jenn Strattman. *Pine Manor College*, [www.pmc.edu/interview-with-renee-watson](http://www.pmc.edu/interview-with-renee-watson). Accessed 30 July 2018.

Watson, Renée. "Renée Watson: Sorting through the Good and Bad." Interview by Jill Ratzan. *BookPage*, 3 Feb. 2015, [www.bookpage.com/interviews/17764-renee-watson](http://www.bookpage.com/interviews/17764-renee-watson). Accessed 30 July 2018.

Watson, Renée. "Teaching Artist Interview with Renée Watson." Interview by Debbie Rice. *Orality*, 19 Nov. 2008, [www.oralty.wordpress.com/2008/11/19/teaching-artist-interview-with-renee-watson](http://www.oralty.wordpress.com/2008/11/19/teaching-artist-interview-with-renee-watson). Accessed 30 July 2018.

Maria del Pilar Guzman



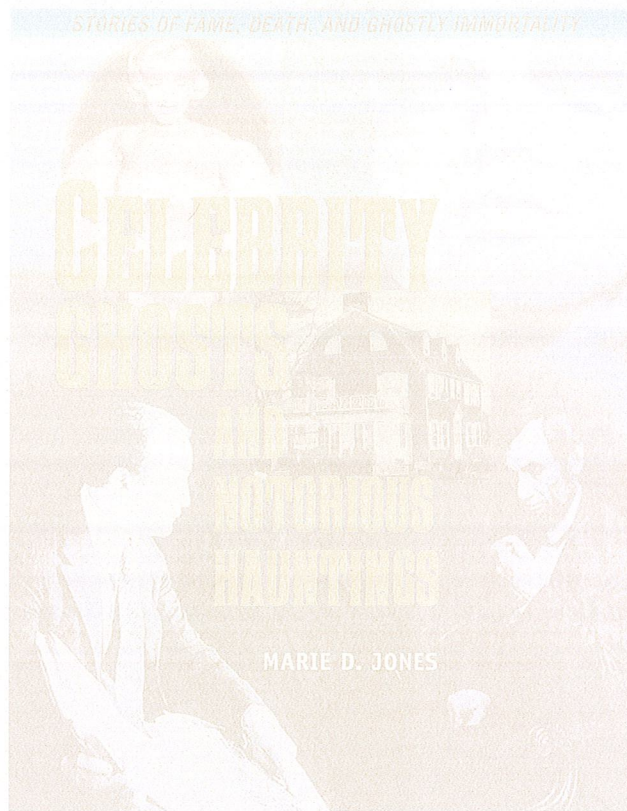
Copyright of Literary Biographies is the property of Great Neck Publishing and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

# Piecing Me Together discussion questions

1. This book revolves around dichotomies: mentor/mentee, rich/poor, black/white. How do these dichotomies serve the story? What other dichotomies/sources of tension do you see in the story?
2. Jade lives in two worlds—that of her neighborhood, and that of her school. How does she navigate these different worlds? Why and how are they different from each other? What other characters in fiction have we encountered (even here in the Book Club!) that straddle two different worlds?
3. What was important about the setting of this story? Could it have taken place anywhere, or not?
4. Identity is a major theme in this book. How does Watson give us a glimpse of Jade's struggles? What pieces of her identity is she trying to puzzle out?
5. Throughout the book, Jade struggles with the assumptions others make about her. What do well-meaning adults assumed about Jade's life? Why do they do so?
6. Watson has said, "I think young people want to talk about race, class, and social issues, but so many times they learn from adults that those conversations are taboo or too uncomfortable to have." What scenes, ideas, or quotes in this book could be especially good discussion-starters?
7. Renée Watson has said that the inspiration for this book was her female friendships—the meaningful and the complicated. What do you see as the most important relationships in this book? How are they meaningful, and how are they complicated?

8. What did you think about Jade as a narrator? Did she strike you as likable? Relatable?  
Trustworthy as a narrator?
9. Which character did you relate to the most? What made them relatable for you?

# Engaging References!



Scroll Down To Continue

## Interview: Renée Watson on YA Novel “Piecing Me Together”

by [Shelley Diaz](#)

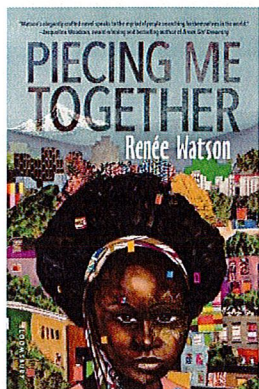
Feb 07, 2017 | Filed in [Events & PD](#)

The acclaimed author [Renée Watson's \*Piecing Me Together\*](#) (Bloomsbury; Feb. 14, 2017) explores the strong relationships among Black women, poverty and privilege, and the power of art. *SLJ* chats with Watson about her stirring YA novel. **What inspired you to write Jade's story?** I was inspired by all of the friendships I've had with women. From being a daughter, a friend, a mentee, a mentor, a teacher—I've had such meaningful and complicated relationships. I drew from several of these relationships to write *Piecing Me Together*. I was also deeply moved by the 2014 NAACP report "[Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity](#)." The report explored the barriers African American girls face. One major barrier was the pervasiveness of stereotypes that adversely impact the educational experiences of African American girls. The report confirmed with statistics and personal stories what I already felt in my own schooling experiences and what I witnessed as a mentor. It was validating to have facts back up what my heart knew. I wanted to bring those experiences to the page. **So much about the novel is about dichotomies and how the protagonist navigates the two worlds in which she participates: her neighborhood and her school, giving and receiving, mentor and mentee, black and white. Why do you think these were themes that needed to be explored in *Piecing Me Together*?** These themes rose to the surface after many drafts of writing. I didn't necessarily set out to write about all of those dichotomies but as they emerged, I didn't want to shy away from them. I think young people want to talk about race, class, and social issues, but so many times they learn from adults that those conversations are taboo or too uncomfortable to have. By exploring these themes in *Piecing Me Together*, I hope readers





and teachers find a space where they can talk about these issues in a constructive, meaningful way. **My favorite scenes were when Jade interacted with the people she loved: Maxine helping Jade with her hair; Jade's mom teaching Maxine how to cook; Jade planning the open mic event with her friends. How and why did you decide to make these relationships the center of this novel?** I really wanted to write a book that explored how we, as women, heal one another, how we challenge one another. I have three sisters and so many strong, brilliant women as friends who have been anchors for me. I wanted Jade to have an abundance of love, especially since the counselor at her school sees Jade as someone who is lacking, who is in need. Jade doesn't have a lot of money, but she has a wealth of family and friends, talent, and ambition. This is where she finds her strength. It was also important for me to write about girl characters who are not catty or bratty or whose main goal is not to get a guy. I wanted to focus on friendship and give space in the story for the women to be their own heroes, to feel content and confident without the approval of male characters. **Readers learn about York, a slave who traveled with Lewis, Clark, and Sacagawea on their historical voyage. What kind of research did you do to include these historical figures within the narrative? Why were they so important to Jade's story?** I grew up in Portland, OR, and like Jade, I saw markers throughout Oregon that acknowledged Lewis and Clark's journey. York and Sacagawea are not on these markers, and they are rarely talked about as being a part of the voyage. I personally had real questions about that, and given Jade's desire to travel and her curiosity about how race and class impact who gets what, I thought she'd be intrigued by York's story, and the more I researched, the more it became a mirror of Jade's experience—receiving opportunities that come at a great cost, feeling invisible, having freedom but still feeling powerless. I did quite a bit of research at Oregon Historical



Society and watched documentaries about York, Lewis, and Clark. **With which character did you identify the most? Which was the most difficult to write?** The character I have the most in common with is Jade. Though this book is not autobiographical, there are many instances where Jade's experience overlaps with my own. I know what it's like for someone to come into my neighborhood with the goal of taking me out of it, to show me that there's more to life than my small world. While those intentions usually came from a good place, they made me feel like my neighborhood wasn't good enough, like I needed to be fixed. I drew on those feelings to write about Jade's disappointment in the mentorship program. I also relate to Jade's skin tone and size, and it was important for me to write a character who is dark-skinned and plus size without the story being solely about that. There's no bullying here because of Jade's weight or low self-esteem because of her looks. She is affirmed by her family and sees herself as beautiful, and that is very much how I grew up. The most challenging character to write was Mrs. Parker. So much of this novel is about intention and impact. Mrs. Parker would consider herself an ally, a

socially conscious person, but even with her care and concern for Jade, she reinforces stereotypes and doesn't truly see Jade without labels, and when it matters most she doesn't stand up for Jade. As a white woman and an important staff member at the school, Mrs. Parker has power, and she doesn't always do a good job of examining her privilege and how her decisions sometimes hurt Jade. I wanted to humanize Mrs. Parker and not make her a villain, but I also wanted to make sure I wasn't excusing her behavior. I had to really work at making her more complicated and nuanced than wrong or right, mean or nice. **The Black Lives Matter movement is alluded to several times in the book, and Jade organizes an event to benefit a woman who was a victim of violence from law enforcement. Why was it important for you to include this element in this novel?** While writing and revising this book, two disturbing videos went viral: a South Carolina school officer slammed a teenage black girl onto the classroom floor, and a Texas officer, who showed up to respond to calls about a fight at a pool party, yanked a 14-year-old girl to the ground, dug his knees in her back, and unholstered his gun. There are too many stories to count of instances where black people are mistreated, abused, or killed by police officers.

Unfortunately, this is a part of our young people's world, and I thought it should be included in the novel because the teens reading the book will have similar situations where one night they go to sleep and the next morning there is news of another name to hashtag. I knew I wanted to include the experience of what it is like to hear these stories in sound bites and have to keep going on about your day as if nothing happened, as if it's normal. In the book, Jade refuses to take this as normal and, more important, she wants to do more than tweet about it. She wants—needs—to take action. **This work has a lovely cover by Bryan Collier, which reflects Jade's talent of creating collage art. Did you have any input on the cover design?** I am

so proud of this cover. I have admired Bryan's work for many, many years. We've been saying for a while now that we should collaborate. The intention was that it would be a picture book, but once I was finished with *Piecing Me Together*, I thought maybe he'd be interested in doing the cover. I wanted the cover to be a collage because of Jade's passion and talent. I also wanted to make sure she had dark skin and natural hair. I trusted him to do right by the story. **How did you come up with the title?** Titles are the hardest part for me—especially for novels. With my picture books, titles come first, but when writing a novel, I wait till the end and think about what the essence of the story is and try to come up with something that speaks to that. There's a scene in the book where Jade is sitting at a gathering for Woman to Woman and she is wondering if a black girl can ever feel whole. She mentions feeling just fine when she is home with her family, but when she goes out into the world, she is sometimes broken into a million pieces. After I wrote that scene, the heart of Jade's story came to me. She is piecing her life together, trying to keep from coming undone. **What are you working on next?** My next book will be out from Farrar in February 2018. It's a middle grade historical fiction novel about the early years of Betty



Shabazz. I am coauthoring the book with Ilyasah Shabazz and am honored to tell the story of Betty's experience growing up in Detroit during the 1940s.

## Engaging References!

[#SLJTeenLive](#)[Black Lives Matter](#)[Bryan Collier](#)[SLJTeen](#)[SLJTeen Live](#)[Summerteen](#)[YAlit](#)

STORIES OF FAME, DEATH, AND GHOSTLY IMMORTALITY

### RELATED →

#### BOOKS & MEDIA

##### Reimagining Our Futures: YA Authors On Feminism, Fairy-Tales, & Fantasy

by [Sayantani DasGupta](#)

#### BACK TO SCHOOL

##### From Classroom To Circulation Desk: Lessons From A Teacher-Turned-Librarian

by [Paige Przybylski](#)

#### BACK TO SCHOOL

##### First Day Ready: For Librarians Starting At A New School, Tips From The Trenches

by [April Witteveen](#)

#### INDUSTRY NEWS

Scroll Down To Continue

##### YALSA's New Director, Inaugural Awards, And More | News Bites

by [SLJ Staff](#)

#### BOOKS

##### SLJ Facebook Live Chats With Authors At Day Of Dialog & Book Expo 2018

by [Shelley Diaz](#)

#### DIVERSE BOOKS OPINION

##### WNDB Walter Grants Return | News Bites

by [SLJ](#)

[More →](#)

## TOP STORIES

#### ED TECH

##### Tech Leaders: Amplifying Reading & Research

[Jennifer Snelling](#)

#### STEM