

Can I Touch Your Hair? Poems of Race, Mistakes, and Friendship

Irene Latham & Charles Waters, illus. Sean Qualls & Selina Alko

Carolrhoda Books, 2018

Reviews

- [Publishers Weekly](#) (Nov. 13, 2017): “Two classmates—serving as stand-ins for poets Latham and Waters—reluctantly pair up on a poetry-writing project and reflect on their identities, relationships, and the role race plays in their lives, in more than 30 candid, thought-provoking poems. [...] The children’s passions and preoccupations are revealed in poems that explore topics in parallel—new shoes, dinnertime, parental punishments, and police violence, among them—and the racial divisions of the children’s churches, communities, and school become clear, too. [...] Qualls and Alko (*Why Am I Me?*) play into the moody, reflective atmosphere in mixed-media collages whose teardrop/budding leaf motif underscores the way that conversation can lead to growth. The poems delicately demonstrate the complexity of identity and the power of communication to build friendships.” (Starred review).
- [Kirkus](#) (Sept. 26, 2017): “A fresh approach to exploring interracial communication. [...] A brave and touching portrayal worthy of sharing in classrooms across America.” (Starred review).
- The Bulletin for the Center for Children’s Books (Apr. 18, 2018): “...an unusually candid book for pre-YA kids about race and difference, allowing for the possibility of the mistakes (the word is right in the subtitle) but also a hopeful outcome as Irene and Charles find enrichment in their friendship. Though there’s a touch of historical flavor at times (the authors base the poems on their 1980s childhoods), the underlying issues remain relevant in contemporary classrooms and playgrounds. [...] Kids will appreciate recognition of their challenges and the value of surmounting them, and in skilled hands this could prompt some useful curricular responses.” (Not archived online, retrieved from [Lerner Books](#)).
- [The Horn Book](#) (Jan. 25, 2018): “This clever book of poetry is about finding an unlikely friend. [...] This volume would make an excellent read-aloud or a launch pad for collaborative classroom writing.”
- Booklist (Oct. 17, 2017): “Young readers searching for means to have difficult, emotional, and engaged discussions about race will find an enlightening resource in Irene and Charles’ explorations.” (Not archived online, retrieved from [Lerner Books](#)).

Awards

- [NCTE Charlotte Huck Award Honor Book](#), 2019

Lists

- Kirkus Reviews Best Middle Grade, 2018 (Not archived online, retrieved from [CBC](#)).

- [ALA Notable Children's Books](#), 2019

Response to Challenges

- Author Charles Waters, in response to a reviewer's objection to referencing the n-word in a book for children: "I don't know how to have a conversation about the race in our country without talking about the N-word. [...] Ultimately, I don't know if there's a right and wrong answer but I do know it would be unfortunate not to have a talk about it, especially between parents and their children. To have not written the poem 'The N-Bomb' in *Can I Touch Your Hair?* would have been the equivalent of erasing my existence as a person of color in this world." ([Lerner](#))
- Author Irene Latham, in the same interview: "I've made the mistake of withholding information from my own children in an effort to protect them—and I've regretted it. Whether you talk with a child about something difficult—or not—you're taking a leap. Your decision will have consequences. As a mother, a poet, and a citizen in the twenty-first century, I feel like it is more important than ever to be open with our kids, even when it's uncomfortable or frightening. Ignoring hate, not talking about racism, doesn't make it go away; it only allows it to fester and grow. The key to eliminating systemic racism is to bring it into the light so we can all see what we're dealing with and how to change our attitudes and behavior. [...] I'm proud to have been part of creating a book that's a safe place to talk about hard topics." ([Lerner](#))
- Editor Carol Hinz, referencing discussing the poem with her (white) seven-year-old son: "At some point, I knew he was going to encounter the word, whether in music, in a movie, or spoken by a peer. Did I want that to be his first exposure to it? Or did I want his first exposure to be in the safety of our home where we could talk about what the word is and why it is never okay? While not every kid is exposed to a given word at the same age, it's often not something we as parents can control. And I feel grateful to have books such as this one that allow children, parents, and educators to address race and racism in a manner that fosters conversation and empathy." ([Lerner](#))

References

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