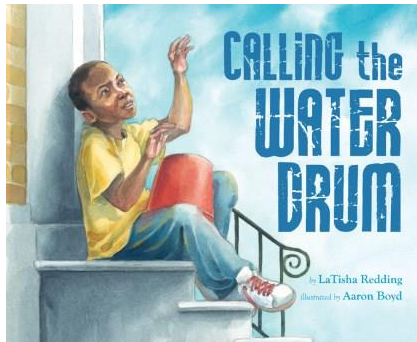


INTERVIEW: AUTHOR LATISHA REDDING ON IMMIGRATION, GRIEF, AND THE HEALING POWER OF ART

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In [*Calling the Water Drum*](#), Henri and his parents leave their homeland, Haiti, after they receive an invitation from an uncle to come to New York City. As they attempt to flee Haiti in a boat, Henri loses his parents out at sea, and after his loss can only communicate with the outside world through playing his drum. In this interview, author **LaTisha Redding** discusses how she tackles heavy themes in children's books and what inspired her to write Henri's story.

CALLING THE WATER DRUM features tough themes such as loss and grief. How were you able to tackle such tough topics in this story?

Loss and grief are part of life even when you're young and children experience these things, just like adults. Certainly a six-year old doesn't have the vocabulary to say, "I'm depressed because this happened to me." So I wanted to know how could this child, Henri, express the trauma that he has experienced. I explored that question with the story.

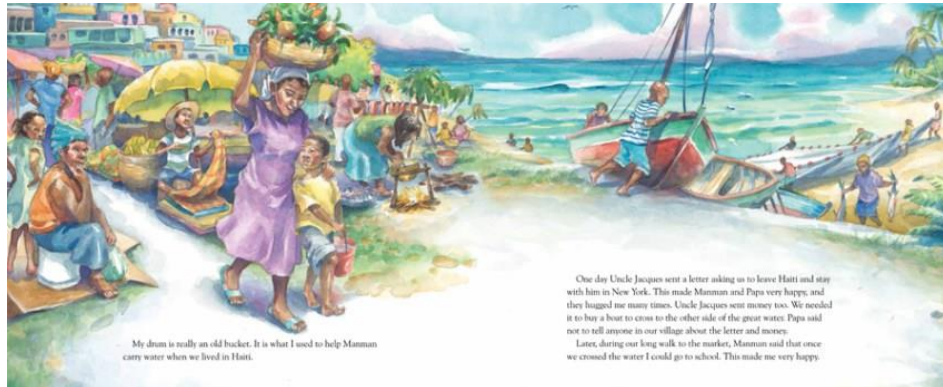
In your author's note, you've noted that the stories from your Haitian friends about their journeys were vastly different from others. What made their experiences so much different from other immigration experiences?

First, I have to say that as a Black American, my observations of the immigration experience are those of an outsider, and I can only speak from that standpoint. When I was younger, I had noticed that for my Haitian friends that chose to talk about their immigration experiences, they didn't discuss it with the joy like my other (immigrant) friends. If anything, when speaking about their experiences, much was left unsaid. Looking back, I'm also aware that for my Haitian friends that didn't discuss it, perhaps it was because the journey was ordinary or happened when they were too young to remember.

What inspired you to write Henri's story?

I had an image of Henri in my head for several months, playing his drums with intensity. I also had a separate idea about a child coping with grief. I thought about the image and

the idea separately for some time. It's only when I asked myself—why is this boy playing the drums so intently? Why was this other child grieving? How could he express his grief? —that I wove the two ideas together. After that, I discovered other parts to the story.



Since drumming became a link to Henri's past and a vessel for his emotions, do you think the creative arts plays an important role in a child's life?

Yes, I do. The creative arts whether painting, music, dance or storytelling are a doorway to children learning about themselves, their world and their place in it. It deepens their imagination and engages them physically. It's not just them sitting and listening to the adult talk; creativity is a hands-on experience. It's molding the clay, mixing paint colors, practicing the scales on a piano or perfecting the posture in dance. Plus children love to discover things and create things. It's play to them and that is what the creative arts are about.

What impact do you think CALLING THE WATER DRUM will have on kids who have never been exposed to the topic of immigration? Also, what do you hope readers will take away from Henri's story? The landscape of the immigration experience, with its different cultures, languages, economic and political histories, is vast and varied. For children who don't know about immigration or understand what it means, CALLING THE WATER DRUM allows them to see one aspect of immigration and to see it from a child's point of view. Stories are powerful. They help shape us, help us cope and maybe accept the incomprehensible. Henri's story is painful, yes, and it's full of hope too. The hope and determination for something better is what I'd like to leave with readers.

Learn more about *Calling the Water Drum* [here](#).

