

P.S. BE ELEVEN

A Q&A with Rita Williams-Garcia

What inspired you to write *One Crazy Summer* and *P.S. Be Eleven*?

I grew up in the late 1960s and always wanted to share those times with readers, but in a real, humanistic and personal way. I was impressed by the Black Panther Movement as a child and followed its members on the news but also saw them in the community. It occurred to me that not everyone would have a memory of the Panthers within the community, particularly with children. So why not write a child-centric story from the viewpoint of a child with firsthand exposure to the Black Panthers? Midway into writing *One Crazy Summer* I knew I'd write a sequel. I loved the characters and knew the extended family members well. Big Ma was so funny, Pa so relatively young but a man of his times. I just had to follow the family into the presidential race, Vietnam War, and the growing women's liberation movement. The story isn't about those things but about the people who lived through and were affected by those times.

***One Crazy Summer* has received high praise, including a number of prestigious awards. What do you think made this book stand out?**

Even though *One Crazy Summer* peers into untold and tumultuous history and captures an era, it never forgets that it is first and foremost a work of fiction and that the reader matters. It's easy for the child character to get lost in the period that he or she is a witness to; the era always looms large. Here, the era is essential but the characters are the ones who spring up large, funny, complex, and real. They invite the reader to connect real people to those times. I think *One Crazy Summer* does what I hope *P.S. Be Eleven* does—wades deeper into a diversity of attitudes within the black community as seen through one family.

Are any of the characters based on real people? Which character do you identify with most? Who is your favorite?

Yes and no. I use bits of my mother, who painted, to construct Cecile. My mother was a very different person from Cecile but she was larger than life and could be scary. I sympathize with the role of the elder sister through having watched my own big sister, Rosalind, and also through my friends who had responsibilities that I didn't. Even though I am the youngest in my family, I identify with Delphine. I was eleven in 1968. I saw the same things she saw. Vonetta and Fern make me laugh but Delphine is my favorite. She pretends she has it all under control, but boy does she need some help.

What do you love most about writing/being an author? If you could have any other career, what would it be?

I love both imagining and building the story idea into a novel. I'm a daydreamer. That's where my work gets done. I love being excited about the story I'm writing. I have to admit, I love autographing! And if I could choose a different career, I'd be the owner of a tea shop where people get together to knit and quilt. That or a middleweight boxer. No mixed martial arts.

Who were some of your favorite authors growing up?

Growing up I loved Scott O'Dell (*Island of the Blue Dolphins*), Louise Fitzhugh (*Harriet the Spy* and *The Long Secret*), and Reba Paef Mirsky's tales of a Zulu girl (*Thirty-One Brothers and Sisters* and *Nomusa and the New Magic*).

If you could give one piece of advice to aspiring writers, what would it be?

Write for the pure joy and thrill of it each day. Nothing grows writing like writing. And reading!

What do you hope readers will take away from *One Crazy Summer* and *P.S. Be Eleven*?

From *One Crazy Summer*, specifically, I'd like readers to know that there are more sides to history than what we celebrate and remember, and that children are witnesses to and participants in history. From *P.S. Be Eleven*, I'd like readers to think about the disruptive changes in our everyday lives as well as the ever-changing events that shape the nation we live in. It's so easy to forget that women had to fight for equality in our recent lifetime. Delphine today is probably an independent, accomplished woman—I hope! Yet, she doesn't immediately jump on the women's lib bandwagon during the late 60s. We grow into who we are now and that doesn't happen without change. Overall, in both books I hope readers appreciate the real and imperfect family unit and how we interact as siblings, parents, elders, and community members.

Can you give us a sneak peek into what happens next for the Gaither sisters in *P.S. Be Eleven*?

A lot of changes in the Gaither house on Herkimer Street! Pa has an announcement that sends Delphine on a letter-writing quest for answers to her mother. Uncle Darnell comes home from Vietnam a changed man. Delphine struggles to make a good impression on her sixth-grade teacher. Vonetta asserts herself in a new way. The sisters discover The Jackson Five. And Big Ma isn't having any of it. For homework, Google the Jackson Five on Hollywood Palace.