

Renée Watson (1978 -)

By Linda Christensen

Renée Watson is a bestselling author, educator, and community activist whose books have sold over one million copies, topping the *New York Times* bestselling list. Her poetry and fiction center the experiences of Black girls and women and explore themes of home, identity, and the intersections of race, class, and gender. Several of her books take place in Portland, Oregon, where she grew up. Her books for children and teens, as well as her fiction and poetry for adults have received several awards and earned international recognition.

Watson was born in Paterson, New Jersey, on July 29, 1978, to Sydney Roy Watson, who grew up in Jamaica, and Carrie Elizabeth Cooke from West Virginia. Watson moved to Portland in 1981 following her parents' divorce, where she lived in the Vernon neighborhood (northeast Portland) with her mother and older siblings. Watson first learned poetry at the nearby Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, where she sang in the choir, acted in plays, and learned to speak and perform in front of an audience. She attended public school in Portland at Vernon Elementary, Binnsmead Middle School, and Jefferson High School, where she graduated in 1996. She wrote for the school newspaper, *The Jeffersonian*, and for the *Rites of Passage* literary magazine. A one-act play she wrote in high school was performed at the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center in Portland.

From 1998 to 2005, Watson mentored students at the I Have a Dream Foundation, Self Enhancement, Inc., and as a Writer in Residence for Literary Arts in Portland. In 2005, after working with young people and observing how arts transformed their lives, she moved to New York City and enrolled in The New School to study creative arts therapy; she graduated with a BA in 2008. Watson worked as a teaching artist and consultant for arts education organizations providing professional development workshops, coaching, and mentorships on the intersection of social justice and art for nonprofits, including Writers in the Schools, the Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, and DreamYard.

In 2010, Watson published the picture book, *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen*, inspired by her work with children in New Orleans coping with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. That same year she published the middle grade novel, *What Momma Left Me*, about a young Black girl who has lost her mother. Since her debut, Watson has published over twenty books for all reading levels, from picture books to adult fiction and nonfiction. Her work has appeared in several anthologies, including *Black Enough* (2019), and her biography of Oprah Winfrey was published for the *She Persisted* book series (2021). Her book of poems, *Black Girl You Are Atlas* (2024), won the Walter Dean Myers Award. *skin & bones*, Watson's debut fiction novel for adults, was named a finalist for the 2024 Westport Prize for Literature, gaining positive buzz as a soulful exploration of sisterhood and what gets passed down generation to generation.

Several of Watson's publications have been recognized for their "outstanding merit." Her picture book, *Harlem's Little Blackbird* (2012), was nominated for an NAACP Image Award. Her middle grade novel, *Betty Before X*, co-written with Ilyasah Shabazz (2018), made the Schomburg Center's Black Liberation Reading List for Kids and was named on the Best Book lists of 2018 by Kirkus Reviews, *The Washington Post*, and New York Public Library. In 2021, Watson and Nikole Hannah-Jones co-authored *The 1619 Project: Born on the Water*, a lyrical picture book in verse chronicles the consequences of slavery and the history of Black resistance in the United States. Her Ryan Hart series, which Watson fashioned after Beverly Cleary's Ramona novels, describes the experiences of a Black girl living in and attending school in Portland. Her young adult novel, *Piecing Me Together* (2017), whose protagonist is a Black high school student attending a predominantly white private school in Portland, won the Newbery Honor, Coretta Scott King Author Award, and the Josette Frank Award. "Every city has a story," Watson said in a 2024 interview about her Portland-based stories. "I wanted the city of Portland to be more than a setting, but a character with a backstory....I grew up with very little knowledge of the history of Black folks in Portland, but I felt the racial tension in the city. I knew there was something different about the parks on my side of town versus the White side of town."

From 2016 to 2019, Watson founded and served as executive director of I, Too, Arts Collective, a nonprofit located in Langston Hughes' former brownstone in Harlem organized to support historically "underrepresented communities in the creative arts." As of 2026, she splits her time between Portland and New York City.

Sources

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