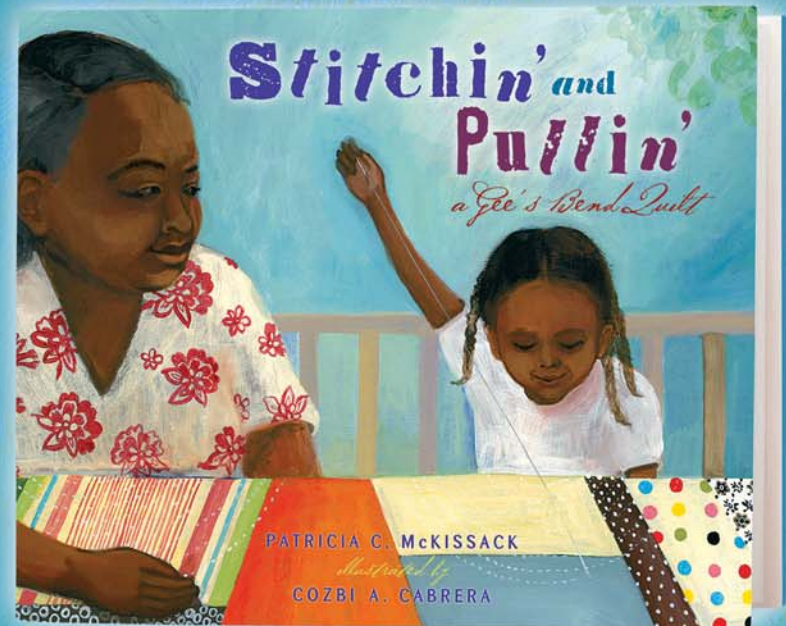


# Stitchin' and Pullin'

## *A Look Behind the Seams*

Look inside for an in-depth interview  
with author PATRICIA C. McKISSACK  
on the making of this fascinating book  
and her research tips for kids!



Grades 1–5 • Random House HC: 978-0-375-83163-8 • GLB: 978-0-375-93163-5

### About the Book

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER, grandmother and granddaughter, aunt and niece, friend and friend. For a hundred years, generations of women from Gee's Bend have quilted together, sharing stories, trading recipes, singing hymns—all the while stitchin' and pullin' thread through cloth. Every day Baby Girl listens, watches, and waits, until she's called to sit at the quilting frame. Piece by piece, she puzzles her quilt together—telling not just her story, but the story of her family, the story of Gee's Bend, and the story of her ancestors' struggle for freedom.



# A Behind the Seams Conversation with Author

## WHAT RESEARCH TIPS CAN YOU SUGGEST FOR YOUNG READERS/RESEARCHERS?

### Familiarize yourself with your topic

I usually begin my research by reading what others have written about the topic. For *STITCHIN' AND PULLIN'*, I read about quilts and quilting in general so I understood the process. I also used *THE QUILTS OF GEE'S BEND* from Tinwood Books as a major source. In it are the biographies of the quilt makers and a collection of the work each woman had produced. There was also a film about the women in which they discussed their work and their community.

### Connect with your subject

I try, when possible, to talk to people who know the subject I am writing about. Or I'll read an autobiography to help me understand from a personal point of view. For *STITCHIN' AND PULLIN'*, I went to the Corcoran Gallery

of Art in Washington, D.C., to see the Gee's Bend quilt display, and I was at the Memphis Museum to actually meet the women and view their quilts hanging on display. I watched other people respond to them—and that gave me a whole other perspective.

### Primary sources are key

Primary sources are always best. Whenever possible, I try to go to the place I'm writing about or meet the person or the people involved in the story that I'm trying to tell. I went to Gee's Bend to meet with the women who quilted the marvelous pieces that now hang in museums all over the country. I saw the quilts on their beds. I even slept under one. And the feel of that you can't experience by reading about it!

I could have written a good book about the quilters without visiting Gee's Bend, but I never would have found the layers of textures, patterns, and emotions that add depth to the story. Facts keep a book honest. Details give it heart. I'd like to think my books have both.

The quilts were beautiful to look at and to study, but there's nothing like touching them and seeing the stitches that some "nut-brown hand" had stitched.

**I saw the quilts on their beds.  
I even slept under one.  
And the feel of that  
you can't experience  
by reading about it!**

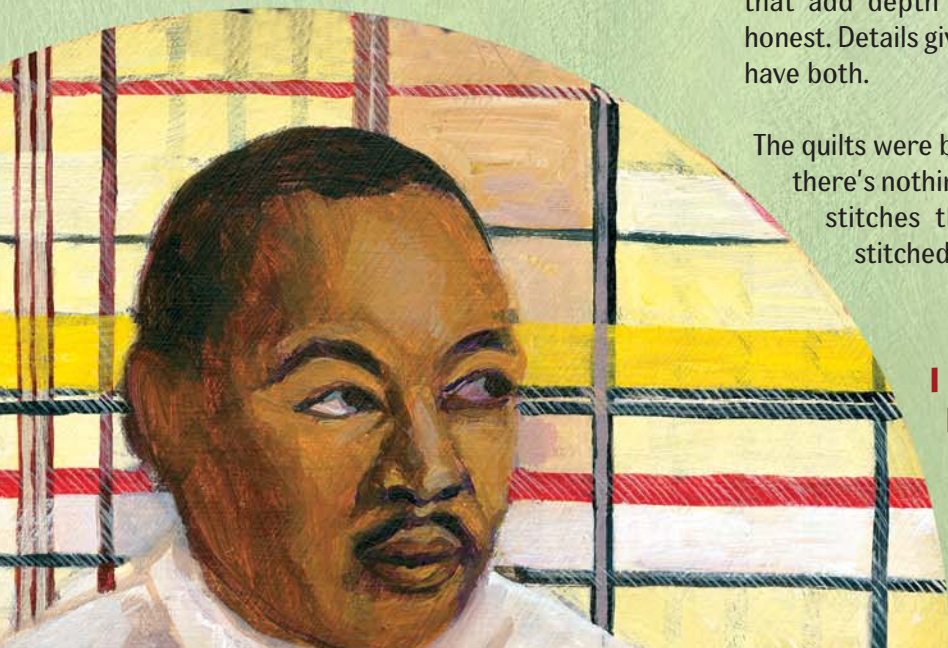
## DESCRIBE YOUR RESEARCH PROCESS FOR *STITCHIN' AND PULLIN'*. WHAT WAS YOUR PLAN FOR THE TRIP TO GEE'S BEND? DID YOU FOLLOW THE PLAN?

First, I sent my editor an overview, a list of things I wanted to include in the book. This list was based on the following questions: Who is the book written for? Why am I writing it? What do I want to say?

After my initial research—seeing the quilts in Washington, D.C., reading *THE QUILTS OF GEE'S BEND*, and researching quilts and quilting in general—I outlined my ideas. You wouldn't begin a trip without a map, so I never start on a writing adventure without a map—an outline of where I'm going and how I intend to get to the end of the story. The *STITCHIN' AND PULLIN'* outline helped me to decide how much I wanted to include, plan the order and sequence, and set the tone of my work.

I followed my outline when I visited Gee's Bend, but I also expanded it to include new and interesting things that I hadn't known until I got there. I realized there was so much more to the Gee's Bend story. With all the new information I learned, I decided to change the whole purpose of the piece. Back at home I incorporated important history into the story . . . the history of a people, a time and a place.

For example, I didn't know that Martin Luther King Jr. had come to Gee's Bend, that the closing of the ferry ended Gee's Bend's connection to the main land, that Gee's Bend was once a plantation, that during the Depression in the 1930s Gee's Bend was the poorest





# Patricia C. McKissack

places in America. I didn't know how much love and family and family connection and concern for others existed in one small place.



Patricia C. McKissack (right) learns to quilt.

## YOU WROTE A GORGEOUS PASSAGE ABOUT COLORS IN THE BOOK. HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE SETTING/COLORS IN GEE'S BEND?

Oh the colors are vibrant! It is said the Impressionist artists gathered in Provence in southern France because of the vibrant colors. I can imagine that if the Impressionist had visited Gee's Bend, they would have chosen it as an artist's haven as well. The sky seems bluer, the foliage seems greener, the Alabama River seems muddier, the sun brighter . . . and the mosquitoes bite harder! It is just a place where everything is alive, including the people—they laugh like no other people, they throw back their heads and sing praise songs. Life has not always been kind to these women, but they are warm and friendly and inclusive. They took me in as family. Because my mother's maiden name was Petway, they told me if we are not related by blood, we are certainly related by plantation—and that just felt so right.

## WHAT MOVED YOU THE MOST ABOUT THE GEE'S BEND COMMUNITY? WHAT SURPRISED YOU THE MOST?

I was moved by their openness and their ability to enjoy everyday things. Visitors might get the impression that Gee's Bend is remote and therefore isolated and lacking in modern conveniences. They have computers, cell phones, Nintendo, bicycles, motorcycles—they have all of that. But yet they have not lost the ability to sit on the front porch and talk. They have not forgotten how to take a stranger in and treat them with kindness. My son, husband, and I all stayed in Mary Lee Bendolph's home and we sincerely appreciated her hospitality. But most of all I will remember her allowing me to quilt with her during my visit; it is a memory I will treasure.

## HOW DID YOU ORGANIZE YOUR FINDINGS? HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT TRANSLATING THE INFORMATION INTO A BOOK?

When I was in Gee's Bend, I met so many people, and I knew it would be difficult to write a book that included all their stories. So, I decided to create a character that represented the reader, a young person, learning a craft and thus earning her place among the community of women. In this way, I could honor all the women, their genius and their craftsmanship.

Each one of the vignettes is like a patch. Cozbi, the illustrator, visually put them together to form a quilt. But first, I laid it out on paper, putting the big red and white gingham in the middle—the heart of the quilt. The patch that represented Martin Luther King Jr.'s

visit there was a black, white, red, and yellow, and brown plaid circle. A pink patch was Pinky the horse who saved so many lives that day on Pettus Bridge in Selma. There are patches for each one of the neighborhoods in Gee's Bend identified by color and shape. And so much more. In the end, I guess what I did was write a quilt.

## COLORS

Grandma says,  
Blue cools.  
Red is loud and hard to control,  
like fire and a gossiping tongue.  
Green oozes.  
Orange laughs.  
Pink smiles.  
Yellow warms.  
Black protects.  
White shifts its shades from  
soft and bright to dingy.  
Purple is quiet.  
Lavender is sweet-smelling like  
a newborn baby.  
Brown is hardworking.

Grandma says,  
"Colors show how you  
feel deep down inside."  
I feel yellow right now with  
a hint of orange.





All illustrations © 2008 by Cozbi A. Cabrera.

## Gee's Bend Through the Years

- ♥ As a cotton plantation, Gee's Bend was far from remarkable—it was practically off the map and the soil was not particularly forgiving. Yet after the Civil War, most of the emancipated slaves elected to stay as sharecroppers.
- ♥ In the 1920s and '30s when the Depression began, this community was hit so hard that federal government, through a number of New Deal programs, came to Gee's Bend to offer assistance. And in turning a temporary spotlight on this community, government officials gave it the dubious distinction of being "the poorest of the poor."
- ♥ Then, in the 1960s, Gee's Bend was literally at the doorstep of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at their church just days before the March to Selma. Many of the quilters were there that night and were forever changed by it. Later that decade, the now-savvy community organizers formed a quilting collective. They started to sell their quilts and used the profits to give back to the community.
- ♥ And in the 1990s, an art historian saw a picture of one of those quilts, took a trip down to Gee's Bend, met a few of the ladies, and introduced their work to some curators he knew. The rest is art history.

## About the Author & Illustrator

**Patricia C. McKissack** is the author of the Caldecott Honor Book *MIRANDY AND BROTHER WIND* and the Newbery Honor Book *THE DARK-THIRTY*. She and her husband, Fred, have written over 100 books about the African American experience. She has also received the Regina Medal for Lifetime Achievement in Children's Books and the Virginia Hamilton Award. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri.

**Cozbi A. Cabrera** is the illustrator of the picture books *BEAUTY, HER BASKET*, and *THANKS A MILLION*. You can visit her Web site at [www.cozbi.com](http://www.cozbi.com). She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

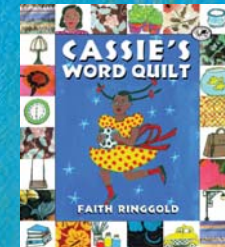
## Internet Resources

The Quilts of Gee's Bend  
[www.quiltsofgeesbend.com](http://www.quiltsofgeesbend.com)

The Art of Quilting  
[www.pbs.org/americquilts](http://www.pbs.org/americquilts)

African American Quilting Traditions  
[xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/quilt/atrad.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~UG97/quilt/atrad.html)

## Related Titles



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