

Q&A with Author GIGI AMATEAU



Come August, Come Freedom is very different from your previous novels. How did you become interested in the story of Gabriel and decide to cross into the historical fiction genre?

Sometimes I agree that this book is different, but other times I feel like *Come August, Come Freedom* fits well with my previous novels. In all areas of my life, not just writing, I think about questions such as: What does it mean to belong? Why do some people have full access to life while some people's access is blocked? How does being part of a family help us find purpose and remove barriers to that which makes us happiest?

The early Republic has long fascinated me. There is almost nothing I love better than getting lost in the 1800s. Once I decided to write this story, I was really nervous because I'm not a historian, just a layperson who loves history. What motivated me are these facts: Gabriel had a wife, Nan, and she was involved in the plot herself. When Nan appeared, history became a love story, too. Add to that the fact that my favorite place in the world — the James River — played a role in the actual events.

While doing research for Come August, Come Freedom, what information did you come upon that most surprised you?

The actual trial documents related to Gabriel and his men were recorded by the ruling class: white, land-owning men who were highly invested in squashing Gabriel's plan for freedom. Yet even through that filter, you get a sense from the testimony of how deeply the Boys on the Brook believed in the promise of freedom. They understood that the American Revolution was left incomplete, that many people were kept out. Gabriel's freedom fighters used passionate, patriotic language: "Here are our hands! Here are our hearts! We have as much right to fight for our country as any men!"

The historical Gabriel clearly believed that America was his country and Virginia his home. He belonged here; he belonged here as a free man, and he saw how other groups of people were also denied access to freedom. He tried to build a coalition.

What kinds of research did you do to get a better understanding of the blacksmith trade in 1800?

For the blacksmithing in particular, the main primary sources were the blacksmith logs of James Anderson and his son. Anderson was a big-time blacksmith in Williamsburg and also had a shop in Richmond. Also, I visited a historic private home and looked at blacksmith records from their farm during the same period. I watched videos, read old smithing books, and found a book called *Virginia Negro Artisans*, which was awesomely helpful. Most fun of all, I took blacksmithing and metalworking classes. I made two copper bracelets and one sharp pointy thing. And got a few blisters and burns!

Q&A with Author GIGI AMATEAU *continued*

Come August, Come Freedom includes real characters from history as well as fictional characters that you created. Why did you decide to supplement the story with fictional characters?

The short answer is: I'm incapable of writing anything without women and old people.

Here's the longer answer: The primary sources relating to Gabriel's rebellion offer insight into the planning of a military coup. But in these documents you can also glimpse the social and family life of a neighborhood — young, old, male, and female. In my research, I learned that people resisted their enslavement every day with direct and indirect acts of rebellion. Learning about that helped me understand that Gabriel was part of a legacy of insistence and resistance. So I wanted to have some characters surrounding him throughout his life and inspiring him to stay true. In order to write a life for Gabriel, I needed him to have a family, some friends, some folks who loved him and believed in him.

The story of Gabriel's life had a lot of holes in it. How did you fill in the missing pieces?

Well, I made most of his life up by just kind of meditating on everything from my research. That probably sounds goofy, but sometimes just sitting there and holding thoughts of the Haitian revolution in the still of your mind, for example, can be remarkably revelatory!

So, from the beginning I knew two things: Gabriel would fall in love with Nan, and this love would drive everything. He would get to the river in the city very early, and the city would give him his trade and his confidence and his resolve. I'd say that for me, too, the city and the river gave me confidence to write. I remember almost giving up one day. I went for a walk and was thinking, What am I doing? I don't know how to write history. Then I realized that I do know about cities — my city — and rivers — my river. So that was a start. I had these things in common with Gabriel; his place is also my place. And then the story started getting into my skin, into my heart.

When I felt shaky about plot choices, I turned to secondary sources to validate that it could have happened the way I imagined. I also read a lot of books, diaries, journals, advertisements, letters — anything I could find about plantation life during the period and about life in the city.

What do you think Gabriel's story can teach us about the history of the Civil War and the fight to end slavery that may not already be common knowledge?

This story reminds us that the fight to end slavery started long before the Civil War. Gabriel was twenty-four years old in 1800, when he planned to take Governor James Monroe hostage and demand that slavery be abolished in Virginia. I think the historical record shows that he was influenced by the Haitian revolution, by the movement of arms and ammunition during peacetime, and even by the political turmoil during the presidential campaigning of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Q&A with Author GIGI AMATEAU *continued*

What do you hope readers will take away from Come August, Come Freedom? How do you think this story relates to current issues in our society?

I hope readers will feel my sincere love and admiration for Gabriel and Nan, and I hope readers will love them, too. Maybe readers will wonder what other stories are out there that may get overlooked in history books. Also, if somebody reads *Come August, Come Freedom* and decides, "Nah, it didn't happen that way," I hope that reader will write Gabriel's story from their own reflection and meditation.

For myself, Gabriel's life causes me to ask these questions: How will I respond to the global reality of modern-day slavery known as human trafficking? What will I do to support families and children who are being denied access to a decent education and economic opportunities?



GIGI AMATEAU is the author of *A Certain Strain of Peculiar*, *Chancey of the Maury River*, and *Claiming Georgia Tate*. About this book, she says, "I love learning about people who lived during the Early Republic era. Gabriel's story illustrates how one individual's pursuit of life, liberty, and happiness can intersect with a nation's pursuit of a more perfect union. Gabriel went all in for freedom. To me, he is one of America's greatest patriots." Gigi Amateau lives in Bon Air, Virginia.



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