



An Interview with Author Glenda Armand and Illustrator Steffi Walthall

This author-illustrator team shares their inspiration and collaboration behind the book *Black-Eyed Peas and Hoghead Cheese*. Inspired by the author's own childhood, this story celebrates the soul of soul food and the stories that connect us.

What inspired you to write *Black-Eyed Peas and Hoghead Cheese*?

Glenda Armand: Even though this story is very personal to me, I had no plans to write it. My agent, Karen Grencik, informed me that an editor, Sonali Fry, was looking for someone to write a picture book about soul food. Would I be interested? I did not jump at the chance because I am not a foodie. However, my family is from Louisiana, and I grew up eating delicious Creole cooking. With that experience and with picture books being in my wheelhouse, I thought I would give it a try.

It turned out to be an unexpectedly rewarding experience. I learned many things about the history of African Americans and of my own family. I learned how deep my family's roots are in Louisiana. I gained a deeper understanding of how intricately the story of African Americans is entwined with the history of the United States. I grew to appreciate the extent to which what we eat makes us who we are.

“A solid overview of the history of soul food.”

Kirkus Reviews

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Glenda Armand and Steffi Walthall

Steffi Walthall: The story was absolutely beautiful, and so joyful! I work on a lot of historical nonfiction and even though this book is based around facts during that time period, I had an opportunity to be playful and fun with the character designs and adding a little bit of magic to the pages.

**What was the most difficult part about writing the book?
What part was the easiest?**

Armand: The hardest part of writing the book was deciding what to leave out. There is just so much there! I'd uncover one bit of information and that would lead to another and another. I had to remind myself that this is a picture book, and you only have room for so many words! The most satisfying part was weaving together the different threads of the story, the past and the present, the food and the feelings.

Walthall: I think the most difficult part for me was trying to best represent the vision of the author. Every book is different, and I always want to do justice to the characters and the stories. We had to do some pretty creative thinking on how we would handle the historical scenes for the sake of content and time, but I really love how they came out. The easiest part was adding in the final details and adding character to the house. I referenced things from my grandparents' home like pots and pans and cabinets and I also looked at photos from my family.

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What character or element of the story do you identify with the most and why?

Armand: I am Frances! Except that she has more curiosity about the process of cooking than I had when I was her age. Now I wish I had spent more time in the kitchen as Mom created the meals I grew up eating. Recipes are great, but there's really nothing like learning from the cook herself.

While my four sisters learned at Mom's side, I was somewhere curled up with a book or training our family's dog, Mr. Boy, how to shake hands. I know that my mom would be tickled that, of her five daughters, I am the one who wrote a "cookbook." However, I know that she approves because, even though the wonderful illustrator never met her, Steffi Walthall's depiction of Grandma in *Black-Eyed Peas* looks remarkably like my mother. She is smiling down on us.

Walthall: The familial bonds are what resonated most with me. When I read the manuscript, I was instantly reminded of my grandparents and great aunts and uncles and how we love on each other when we're together. The celebration at the end reminded me of Kwanzaa with my extended family!

What do you want kids to take away from this story?

Armand: I would like young readers to take away from this story the same lessons I learned when writing it. I would ask them to learn from their elders. Take advantage of family get-togethers to "interview" family members. What was their childhood like? What did they dream of?

I often told my students, "Once you learn to read, you read to learn." So read and learn! Learn the history of our country, the good and the bad. Learn about your own ethnic group and the role it played in that history. Knowing these things will give you a sense of belonging, purpose, and pride. And learn how to cook!

Walthall: I hope that the kids who read this story are motivated to look into their personal histories and do research on their family traditions, regardless of background. I also hope readers are encouraged to look into some of the practices talked about in the book as well.



Glenda's Mom, Thelma Armand

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Glenda Armand and Steffi Walthall

What are you currently reading?

Armand: When it comes to books for pleasure, I listen to them. When I read a physical book, it tends to be spiritual in nature, or for research. I like to have actual copies of books that I use for research because, once I've written in the margins, highlighted and decorated them with Post-it notes, I return to them again and again.

As far as books I've recently listened to, usually while gardening, they would be hard to fit into one category. Yesterday, I finished *Benjamin Franklin's Last Bet*, before that, I listened to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, after having spent about a month weeding with *David Copperfield*. Prior to the Dickens classic, I enjoyed an intriguing nonfiction book called *A Short History of the World According to Sheep*. Now I am listening to *Dragons in a Bag*.

As a middle and high school teacher and librarian, I was always on the lookout for books that would hook boys on reading. Even though I'm retired now, I am still on that search, which shows up in my reading choices. When I am choosing just for me, I lean toward biographies and historical fiction.

Walthall: So, a lot of times, because of my schedule, I don't have a chance to "read" as much as listen to audiobooks and podcasts. I just finished listening to *Ghost Summer* by Tananarive Due and I'm adding *Black Girls Must Die Exhausted* by Jayne Allen, *The Good House* by Tananarive Due, and *The Last Final Girl* by Stephen Graham Jones to my rotation!



Black-Eyed Peas and Hoghead Cheese: A Story of Food, Family, and Freedom

Glenda Armand, Illus. Steffi Walthall

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Audience: Lower Elementary

While visiting her grandma in Louisiana, nine-year-old Frances is excited to help prepare the New Year's Day meal. She listens as Grandma tells stories – dating back to the Atlantic slave trade – about the food for their feast. Through these stories, Frances learns not only about the ingredients and the dishes they are making but about her ancestors and their history as well.

“Know what I like most about Grandma’s kitchen? More than jambalaya? More than sweet potato pie? Even more than pralines? Grandma’s stories! Every meal Grandma cooks comes with a story. What will today’s story be?”

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Interview Courtesy of

