

## Get Your Word On

Richmond author gets high praise from Judy Blume, picked by Book Sense and releases debut young adult novel this month



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Through a vivid narrative voice and an extraordinary cast of characters set in rural Mississippi, "Claiming Georgia Tate" by Richmond author Gigi Amateau tells the unflinching and unforgettable tale of a sensitive twelve-year-old girl caught in the trauma of incestuous abuse at the hands of her deadbeat daddy. "Claiming Georgia Tate" was recently picked by Book Sense as a Summer 2005 Children's Picks which described the debut young adult novel as "a well-told, honest, and poignant story about a likable young girl who endures personal losses and sexual abuse, yet who still believes in joy and the basic goodness of people."

First-time author Gigi Amateau will read at the Fountain Bookstore on Thursday, May 12 and at Barnes & Noble in Midlothian on Sunday, May 22. But first, we called her up at home right here in Richmond to chat about her new novel, Judy Blume and her writing process.

### **James River Writers: How did you get started writing?**

Gigi Amateau: I started writing in school. In grammar school, creative writing is a routine part of class work, right? Kids make up poems and stories all the time. Some time in high school, I started writing for the joy of it then, even later, thought about the possibility of writing as my job. When I turned 30, I figured that if I really wanted to write, I needed to set some goals and make it happen. So, I fired off an essay about driving around Richmond and sent it in to Richmond magazine – basically, to make myself take a risk and get moving. They published it! That was awesome!

### **JRW: Where did you get the idea for your debut novel, "Claiming Georgia Tate?"**

Gigi: This might sound kooky but often my writing begins with a picture or sentence that pops into my head. When I see a picture in my mind that excites, exhilarates, or repulses me, I watch it and then write it down. On vacation one morning, I was swimming freestyle in the ocean at Edisto, South Carolina - just swimming and not worrying about sharks or jelly fish. Usually, when I'm in the ocean, there is a part of me freaking out

about JAWS. On this particular morning, my swim was a liberating, free-of-all-worry sort of swim. A school of dolphins was out there with me. In my mind, I heard a little girl say: "Sometimes, he goes out too deep." I stopped swimming and watched the dolphins while I treaded water. I listened to more of what this girl had to say to me. Then I got out of the water and went to my blanket where I wrote until it started getting on my family's nerves.

**JRW: How long did it take you to write "Claiming Georgia Tate?"**

Gigi: For a decade now people have been asking me, 'Hey, how's your book coming?' In the summer of 1996, I started writing "Georgia Tate." Of course, like so many life projects, I went through cycles of furious work and then letting it rest while I attended to my family and my job. Over the years, I have worked for a number of different bosses and every single one of them has allowed me the flexibility that writing a book sometimes demands. Also, my family and friends are an incredible group of people who believe in building each other up. Nobody ever rolled their eyes or dissed my effort. I think that kind of support helps you get to the finish line, no matter what it is you're attempting.

**JRW: Judy Blume gave you a rave review, declaring, "It's rare and exciting to discover a talented new writer like Gigi Amateau." How do you feel about that?**

Gigi: It blows my mind for Judy Blume to say something like that about my story. Women of my age are first-generation Judy Blume readers. We grew up with this incredible author who believed in us as readers and as young women. All of my girlfriends read and loved "Are You There God It's Me Margaret?" Her work does not talk down to young readers. It honors them.

**JRW: What other types of writing have you done? What type of writing do you enjoy the most?**

Gigi: I've done a ton of grant writing which, when you get it right, is super rewarding because the outcome of that – money, staff, technology – really can make the world a better place, or at least even things up a bit. I've done some freelancing for Family Style and Richmond magazine. Freelancing taught me a lot about working with an editor, writing to an audience, and trying to find good titles and leads (which I suck at, for the most part). We're fortunate, in Richmond because our local publications are quality publications and our local editors, at least the ones I have worked with, push you to turn in your best work in a very positive environment.

My favorite type of writing is more of a phase of writing – it's that breakthrough moment where it all finally makes sense, you see where this thing wants to go and you can't stand to be distracted by anything else. It's like a spell, almost. No matter if I am writing a grant, a difficult memo, an article, or a novel - I love that moment and love even more the writing that flows subsequently. I also enjoy working with editors. Collaborative writing

is a lot of fun for me (seriously).

**JRW: What are your plans for the future? Is there another book on the horizon?**

Gigi: My plans for the future are to keep on doing the same things I am doing today: writing, being there for my daughter after school, enjoying my husband and my family, practicing yoga, and eating good Mexican food, at least once a week. I would love to go to graduate school too, either in library science or writing. The idea of having a structured, supported environment to study and practice writing just feels so yummy to me.

There are two more books on the horizon, at least! Right now, I am finishing up a new young adult novel and a chapter book, both for Candlewick Press.

**JRW: What do you think is the biggest misconception about writers?**

Gigi: Maybe that we understand commas.

**JRW: Any advice for struggling writers out there? Does it get any easier?**

Gigi: Based on where I am in my second novel I would say the act of writing and keeping the work cohesive gets easier because you've been through it before and hopefully have learned a lot about yourself and your habits during the first go-round. That is unlike public speaking, which is always sickening. Some aspects of the business of writing (i.e. talking about it in front of people or reading it out loud) do not get any easier for me. I wear my pink Boston Red Sox cap when I read to real live people. That way, I don't see them.

*James River Writers (JRW) is a nonprofit, Richmond, Virginia-based group of professional writers and friends of literature who have joined to promote the art of writing and the love of books in Central Virginia. Their aim is to encourage readers and aspiring writers, and to spur awareness of contemporary authors and their work. For more information about James River Writers, visit [www.jamesriverwriters.com](http://www.jamesriverwriters.com).*