



1. Why did you choose to write a work of historical fiction?

When I was in high school, I loved reading historical fiction because it opened up a doorway to the past, and I could learn about events from long ago through the eyes of the characters who explained the historical information and made the history come alive. It also made me want to learn more about that time period, so the fiction led me to the facts.

2. What prompted you to write COPPER SUN?

I went to Ghana several years ago and was overwhelmed by the beauty of the land and people, as well as the history of the place that hovered just out of reach. When I visited the slave castles, where thousands of Africans were housed like cattle before being shipped as cargo and sold as slaves, I felt their spirits crying out to me. When I crawled on my hands and knees through the "door of no return," which led from the darkness of the prison to the incomprehensible vastness of a beach, I knew I had to tell the story of just one of those who had passed that way.

3. In COPPER SUN, you address the complex social issue of slavery. Why is this an appropriate topic to be handled through fiction?

In order to bring immediacy to the subject, I chose a character who undergoes the humiliations of slavery and who survives to pass on her history to the next generation. I think it's really important to remember the past and never forget those who came before us. It is our job to tell their stories.

4. What kind of research did you do for this book?

The story of Amari is fictional, of course, but is based on the horrible reality of the slave trade. I have spent almost ten years doing research on this novel and editing it for accuracy of fact as well as sincerity of spirit. I read dozens of books, listened to transcripts of slave narratives, spent years on the internet, and talked to friends in Ghana who made sure I was telling the story correctly. On my website I have provided a resource page where dozens of websites and books are listed that can give you more information.

5. Why did you include a character that was an indentured servant?

Most young readers probably know quite a bit about slavery, but not much about the process of indentured servitude. An indentured servant worked for a specified period of time, after which freedom could be purchased. It was a good way for a hard worker to find a place in the new world. Europeans and even some Native Americans were indentured at first. Many Africans who were first brought to this country in the 1600's were originally brought in as indentured servants. It soon became easier to enslave them, however, and their rights of indenture were lost. An indentured girl like Polly had a good chance of assimilating into the society at some point, although as a runaway, she would have been severely punished.

6. Amari's character in COPPER SUN is an important figure for young readers to examine as she is a survivor in spite of horrendous difficulties. What do you think readers can learn from Amari's life?

Amari doesn't start out strong. She is terrified, grief-stricken, and doesn't understand the language of her captors. She has no idea how strong she is until she manages to endure and survive. Others who befriend her and help her are vital to her success. She shows us that being a winner is a journey, a process, not something that comes wrapped in a package.

7. What racial, cultural, and social statements do you make through the friendship of Amari and Polly?

Even though the two girls initially mistrusted and disliked each other, they show that a friendship is something that grows and develops through shared triumphs and difficulties. The two girls grow into their friendship gradually, which is more realistic than making them instantly like each other. I think they show that race, and culture have very little to do with the human spirit and that which makes us cling to each other as friends.

8. What is the significance of Tidbit's character in COPPER SUN?

A little boy and a dog make for a delightful combination of characters, a guarantee of adventure, and the possibility of tragedy in a world in which the next day is not promised. Tidbit had humor, pathos, and fear. He represents all those children who were born into slavery and had no opportunity to dream of a better life.

9. The themes in your novels are often heavy; why do you concentrate on these issues?

I try to deal with topics that are both meaningful and significant. I also hope that by reading my stories, young people can perhaps apply some of the messages to their own lives. Slavery is a topic that should not be ignored, but discussed and remembered. The generation that does not remember the evils of the past may be forced to repeat them. Knowledge is power and truth is all we have to keep us free.

10. What would you like your young readers to get out of reading COPPER SUN?

I want them to say, "Wow! That was great! I never knew all those details about slavery. I want to know more!" I want them to embrace this novel and pass it along to their friends and their parents and teachers. I want them to remember all those who died as well as those who survived.

11. Describe your writing process in general.

Writing for me is a very fluid process--I sit down and wait for the words to come. They usually do—in buckets and waves. It's amazing. I look upon it as a blessing because the words come so easily. I try to make strong characters that change and develop and learn from their mistakes. I think the layering comes in the story development. The plot is born from the idea, then is crafted by the characters and how they respond to what happens to them. I get up early in the morning and write all day—maybe ten or twelve hours a day. It is truly an act of immersion. It's a thrilling, exciting process.

12. Describe your writing process for COPPER SUN.

For this one, I had to move in and live in world--really become a part of the lives of the characters so they seem like real people to me. African was my home. Then a slave ship. Then South Carolina, and finally Fort Mose. I became engrossed in the lives of Teenie and Clay and Tidbit. I think that "being there" is essential for making the story ring true and honest and real.

13. How did you discover the information about Fort Mose?

When I was researching a place for the girls to escape to, I came across an obscure reference to a place that existed in Florida for a very short time. Fort Mose, a little-known, but very important part of the history of slavery in this country offered freedom and a chance to live one's dreams if only it could be reached. A museum and several artifacts from Fort Mose can be found near St. Augustine, Florida. More information is available on the resource page of my website.

14. If you were asked to coalesce COPPER SUN into one sentence, what might that be?

This novel speaks for the untold multitudes of my ancestors who needed a voice. I speak for them. Amari carries their spirit. She carries mine as well.