

Gentle Reader,

It gives me no pleasure to disturb you with this story, for who wants to read about slavery? Still, the place, story, and characters compelled me to write *A Sitting in St. James*. That, and the need to know why so abhorrent an institution was, to slaveholding families, a necessity and an entitlement.

Sixteen-year-old Thisbe can't answer my question. She didn't create her enslavement; as a servant, she can only create her survival in her vault of silence and invisibility.

Rosalie, seventeen, can't answer my question. If not for her one-quarter Black blood, she would be allowed to enter her white grandmother's house and take her place as a Guilbert heir.

Lily surely can't answer this question. All she can do is butcher and cook for the people who murdered her son.

Instead, we turn to the beneficiaries of plantation life, starting with eighty-year-old Madame Sylvie Guilbert, keeper of the gold and survivor of two revolutions, who insists on her portrait painting, or "sitting," because it is tradition. Next, we turn to her son, Lucien, fifty-five, who is desperate to keep Le Petite Cottage out of the hands of ever-encroaching creditors. And last, we turn to Lucien's son, Byron, a West Point cadet and engaged heir, who longs for his true love, fellow cadet Robinson Pearce. We could turn to Jane, an abandoned plantation master's daughter, but her concerns are limited to her horse and the size of the portion of meat on her plate.

Slavery is hard to talk about, but *A Sitting in St. James* invites even the most hesitant reader to engage in this intimate familial and at times unflinching story to better witness a brutal period in its benign and overt cruelty, to better understand its legacy of privilege and racism.

At no other time in our nation's history have readers sought out more this examination and conversation. Can the readers find hope in the end? In my care, yes, they can.

Sincerely,

Rita Williams-Garcia