

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Heartfelt middle grade novel navigates loss and healing via a compassionate, blossoming friendship

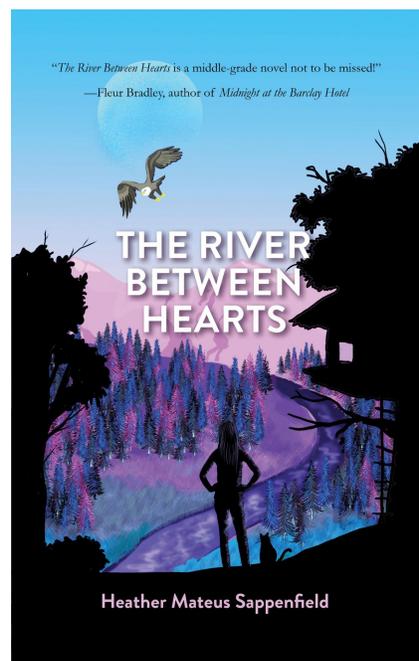
Prize-winning writer tackles important issues with realism and grace

Vail, CO – What does it take to recover after tragedy? What does it mean to be a friend? A chance encounter between two lives in upheaval leads to a touching story of friendship and healing in Heather Mateus Sappenfield’s “The River Between Hearts” (Fitzroy Books/Regal House, February 1, 2022).

On an ordinary Monday, Rill Kruse left for third grade with a dad, but when she came home, he’d been stolen. By a river. One year and thirteen days later—on the first morning of summer vacation—Rill still insists he’s on his way back home.

When Rill’s cat, Clifford, leads her to the family tree fort on the mountainside, she discovers a stowaway, Perla, who appears to be on the run. As Rill considers the events that led Perla to this moment, she embarks on an adventure that tests her understanding of the world and forms a friendship that defies boundaries. The lessons Rill learns nudge her—and all those she loves—toward healing.

Following in the footsteps of literary icons such as Kate DiCamillo with a spirited main character, a memorable adventure, and a heartfelt exploration of contemporary issues, “The River Between Hearts” is a middle grade novel bound to connect with readers of all ages.





“The River Between Hearts”

Heather Mateus Sappenfield | February 1, 2022 | Fitzroy Books | Middle Grade Fiction
Paperback | ISBN: 9781646032068 | Price: \$16.95



HEATHER MATEUS SAPPENFIELD loves adventures, especially in the Rocky Mountain landscape that’s been her lifelong home. As part of women’s teams, she’s won 24-hour mountain bike races and road bicycling’s Race Across America—San Diego, California to Atlantic City, New Jersey. She’s also competed in the Mountain Bike World Championships; ski instructed for Vail Resorts, and loves backcountry ski touring. Her toughest adventures, though, arise in the writing of stories. She is the author of two contemporary YA novels, “The View from Who I Was” and “Life at the Speed of Us,” a Colorado Book Awards Finalist. Her story collection, “Lyrics for Rock Stars,” released as winner of the V Press LC Compilation Book Prize, was nominated for the MPIBA’s Reading the West Awards, was a silver medalist for the IBPA’s Ben Franklin Awards, and was featured on Colorado Public Radio. Her most recent book, “The River Between Hearts,” runner-up for the Kraken Prize, is a middle grade novel about friendship and healing.

Follow Heather Mateus Sappenfield on social media:

Facebook: @heathermateussappenfield | Twitter: @alpineheather

Instagram: @heathermateussappenfield

In an interview, Heather Mateus Sappenfield can discuss:

- Her inspiration for this story, and what compassion means to her
- How middle grade books can connect with children and adults alike
- How and why she balances heavy topics with a lighthearted and naive perspective
- What she hopes readers will take away from this story
- What’s next for her on her author journey



Praise for “The River Between Hearts”

“A shimmering, breathtaking read! A spirited heroine with a voice that leaps off the page, a scenic setting I want to spend time in, vivid characters, adventure, swift page-turning chapters, and heart—this book positively sparkles with emotion. Fans of Kate DiCamillo will be delighted by the wonderful tale that Heather Mateus Sappenfield has crafted!”

—Todd Mitchell, author of “The Last Panther,” Colorado Book Award Winner

*“A chance encounter of two lives in upheaval leads to **a beautiful story of friendship**, healing, and a cemented belief that people are not things. Sappenfield does a beautiful job at tackling important issues for middle grade students to grasp!”*

—Sarah Hopkins, Bookseller, Bookworm of Edwards

*“Heather Mateus Sappenfield’s *The River Between Hearts* is a beautiful young MG that **hits all the right notes**: a strong heroine who’s dealing with all the changes of growing up, and has a broken heart that needs mending. This story has lots of heart, a beautiful setting, and a spirited, sweet voice make the words come alive. Perfect for fans of Leslie Connor’s *A Home for Goddesses and Dogs* and Laurel Snyder’s *My Jasper June*. The Colorado setting shines and carries you away. *The River Between Hearts* is a middle-grade novel not to be missed!”*

—Fleur Bradley, MG author of “Midnight at the Barclay Hotel,” NPR Best Book of 2020

*“Rill and Perla may be very different, but the adventure that awaits them this summer will prove the opposite. The two have to repair hearts that do not know about language, social class, or race, yet the friendship that unites them will be stronger. *The River Between Hearts* is **a clear example of what an intercultural friendship means**, and the mental health of a child at 10 years of age, and the healing process that entails them. The river that took what they want the most will be the same one that will unite them in the fight to find the best in each other, in the fight to find themselves.”*

—Rocio Garcia-Roa, Technical Services Specialist, Eagle Valley Library District



*“The River Between Hearts is a beautifully written story about friendship and acceptance. Rill and Perla are heading into summer vacation dealing with their own grief and loss. They learn, ‘The best adventures...true ones...test you and teach you about yourself.’ Heather Mateus Sappenfield does a wonderful job describing the impact of immigration on children in resort communities and **I look forward to sharing this novel with my students.**”*

—Beth Cooney, Lead Literacy Teacher, Edwards Elementary School

*“an outstanding middle grade novel. **Being a teen in a town similar to Rill’s, a lot of topics are easy to connect to**, especially for kids in our community.... this story has so much to offer... The ending does not disappoint and ties the whole story together perfectly.”*

—8th-grade reader, Homestake Peak School



An Interview with Heather Mateus Sappenfield

1. What's the inspiration behind this story?

In the mid-nineties, I taught high school language arts. Students who were new to America would turn up in my classes. Some of them were undocumented, yet I'd become a teacher to help anyone with a desire to learn. These students were a marvel to me because, despite knowing little, if any, English, and despite knowing few of the basics of daily life within the school, they managed to get by. Often admirably. Often while also working one or even two jobs after school.

Some mornings I'd walk through the school's front doors to discover a group of them gathered in the lobby, crying and comforting each other because a family member, or maybe a few, had been rounded up for deportation the day or night before. I tried to imagine how that must feel: being left behind in a foreign country with no documentation and no family. Later, these students would be in my class, trying to concentrate, learn, and continue on. Their courage amazed me. When I started writing novels, I knew this was a story I would someday explore.

2. What does compassion mean to you?

This novel is a map of Rill's journey to understanding compassion—how it feels, how to express it, how giving it to someone else can be a gateway to one's own healing. Her teacher, Mr. Rainey, defines *compassion* as “a feeling of worry or pity for the suffering or misfortune of someone else.” The word *pity*, in its pure form, means sympathetic sorrow for one who is suffering, distressed, or unhappy. It can, however, carry the extra meaning of looking down on the thing you feel sorry for, and part of Rill's journey is growing from seeing Perla as a “thing” to someone who is her equal and, ultimately, her friend. For me, *that's* true compassion. I believe moments when we meet people who differ from us—in nationality, in ethnicity, in spiritual belief, in social strata—define us, and they have the potential to be among the most beautiful experiences available to us as human beings.



3. Who is this story for? Why explore immigration through a middle grade lens, rather than YA or adult?

When I state that this novel is “A read for all ages. A read for our times,” I’m being honest. It’s written through an almost-eleven-year-old’s eyes because Perla’s predicament is happening to kids—here in the Vail Valley, throughout Colorado, across our nation, and around the globe. I hope this novel illustrates the costs of apathy or indifference and, through Rill stumbling along and making mistakes, guides young readers toward compassion.

There’s an interesting dynamic that occurs when someone older reads a middle grade novel. Perhaps because these books are written and marketed for “children,” more mature readers tend to open the first page less guarded, and thus they’re unconsciously more susceptible to its messages. Middle grade novels are rarely simple, though. Young readers have agile minds, hungry to define their world, so these books are filled with depth and theme, irony and wit. Crafted to be easier to decode, there’s less filtering, so all this good stuff travels straight to the heart. I firmly believe every adult should read at least one middle grade book a year. It’s good for the soul.

4. From a craft perspective, how do you approach writing about difficult topics for younger ages?

Crafting middle grade stories is much harder for me than writing adult, or even YA, books. I relish a succulently worded description or turn of phrase, but for kids, I must do this so deftly that it’s seamless, with little or no overt artifice. There’s no nostalgia or looking back; I must be fully with the protagonist, viewing the world in that moment through their eyes. The rule “show don’t tell” is vitally important, especially when writing about difficult topics. So my characters move, via action and thought, toward figuring things out. Making mistakes is important. And they often don’t understand what motivates them, so the reader treks with them toward discovery.

5. What’s next for you on your literary journey?

Answer coming soon...waiting on exciting news!