

# Can I Touch Your Hair?: Poems of Race, Mistakes, and Friendship

written by Irene Latham and Charles Waters  
and illustrated by Sean Qualls and Selina Alko



## Reading and Activity Guide

### BEFORE READING

- + Ask students to share what they know about poetry. What or whose poems have they read before? Do they have a favorite poem/poet? Explain that sometimes poetry rhymes, but sometimes it doesn't! Poetry is a way to share your inner thoughts and feelings, to play with words, to write in different styles and rhythms!
- + You can share with students that this sweet, honest book was actually written by a white poet named Irene, and a black poet named Charles! While they were not actually friends as children, the stories in their poems really happened to them as kids.
- + Explain that this book of poems also tells a story. Ask them to pay close attention to each poem - *Who is the speaker, Irene or Charles? Where/what time of day is the poem happening? What is each poem talking about, and can you tell how the poet is feeling in each poem?*
- + Invite children to think about a time they were partnered with someone they didn't like, when they felt left out at recess, when someone DID play with them at recess, when someone who hurt their feelings apologized to them. The poems they are about to hear touch on these ideas.

### DURING READING

- + Feel free to pause after one poem or the pair of poems to discuss using the questions listed above or use the second page of supplemental questions for children who are ready and eager to dig deeper into these complex topics.

### AFTER READING

- + *What did Irene and Charles discover by the end of the poem project?*
- + *Did you have a favorite poem? Which one? Why?*

### Springboard Activities:

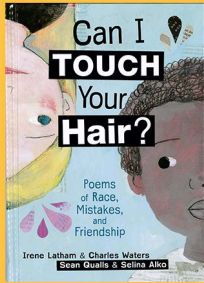
**Activity #1: Different, but the Same!** - Have each child partner up and encourage them to find (at least) one way that they are different from each other...but also some things they have in common - similar hobbies likes/dislikes, siblings, etc. In the classroom, you may partner up students who don't typically play together, or try "Speed Dating" style - give pairs 2 minutes to find commonalities/differences, then rotate partners, so they talk to multiple classmates. (Students may need help/prompts for connecting.) At the end, ask children to share any surprising discoveries. Ask them what they learned/remind them that we are all unique individuals and although we are different, we do have things in common, and friendships come in surprising shapes and forms!

**Activity #2: Poetry Festival-** Using similar topics as Irene and Charles, take time to create your own poems. Think about your experiences. Use all five senses to gather lots of details to really describe your experience well to others! Write down your ideas and try crafting a poem! What title will you give your poem? Will it have any illustrations? **Hint:** *Any writing piece is not ready the first time around. It is called a "rough draft". Writers edit, change, tweak, throw away, and fix their writing many, many times before it is finally ready! Be willing to play around with your ideas and words to create a poem you are satisfied with. Happy writing!*

**Activity #3: Meet the Authors** - [This Q&A](#) with reveals what inspired them and what they hope inspires you.

For children in grades 5-8, check out [this curriculum guide](#) developed for the classroom.





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**Hair/Strands:** How is Charles feeling, and why? Dennis touches his hair without permission, and he hurts Charles' feelings by saying it feels like a sponge. Do you think Dennis was trying to be mean? Why? (Open-ended question.) Either way, his words and actions hurt Charles' feelings, even if Dennis was just curious. What can we learn from their interactions?

**Church/Sunday Service:** Irene notices that the stained-glass Jesus has His arms thrown wide to welcome everyone. What does Irene notice about "everyone" at her church? How can we help people who look/speak/walk differently from us feel welcome at our churches, just like Jesus would? Next, what does Charles observe about Jesus at his church? You may want to follow up with [this short explainer video](#) or share the ideas yourself with your children.

**Playground/Fresh Start:** Why is Irene sad? What does Shonda say when Irene wants to play? In a poem not read, Irene blurts, "Sometimes I just need a break from people"? After being surrounded by many people who are different from you, it's refreshing to be around someone who is just like you. That's how Shonda is feeling at recess. What happens to Irene and Charles after they are excluded by their friends at recess?

**Forgiveness:** What does the white boy apologize for? What makes him realize he needs to apologize? How does the apology make Charles feel? Sometimes, we are curious and ask questions...but those questions can make other people feel hurt, sad, or even mad. What can we do if our words or questions hurt someone else - even if we didn't mean for them to? **Go Deeper:** Have you ever heard the word "stereotype" before? A stereotype is an idea people have about other people, but it doesn't actually fit everybody - it's not always true. For example, some "girl" stereotypes are that you love pink, glitter, and pretty dresses, and you must not like sports, bugs, or getting dirty! Now girls, maybe SOME of those things are true about you, but maybe some are NOT! Some "boy" stereotypes are that you like blue or green, building with blocks, legos, you LOVE getting dirty and playing videogames, and you really don't like reading. Again, maybe some of those things are true about you, but not all! Stereotypes can be painful because they say, "EVERYONE who is a (boy, girl, child, adult, white, black, Hispanic, Native American, Asian, etc.) does this or acts like this or likes this or dislikes this." BUT, God created us all so uniquely, that we all enjoy, like, and dislike a RANGE of things! Stereotypes don't fit everyone. So, it can be painful to hear, "You're a \_\_\_\_, but you don't act like one." We can love and accept people as God created them and embrace the likes and dislikes God instills in us!

**Apology:** Sometimes there are things that have happened that are so heavy and terrible and sad, that we don't quite know what to say. Have you ever noticed that before? Maybe when someone's grandparents died, or when a best friend had to move away. Irene's best friend Shonda reveals that something very tragic and terrible happened in her family's (and in many black families in America) past. You may want to share snippets of what life as a slave was like, appropriate to the age of your children: viewed as property because of your skin color, treated as not human, whipped for not working hard/fast enough. Not allowed to learn how to read/write, being whipped if you could. No paycheck, no freedom. Simple huts with minimal personal belongings. Families were separated, not allowed to marry, have children, stay together as a family unit, were forced to have children so that the slave owner could have more slaves (NOT so they could build a happy family together). These things are so terrible that sometimes simply saying, "I'm so sorry" does not feel adequate. But Irene tries anyway. Did you like her idea? How do you think Shonda will react to Irene's note?

