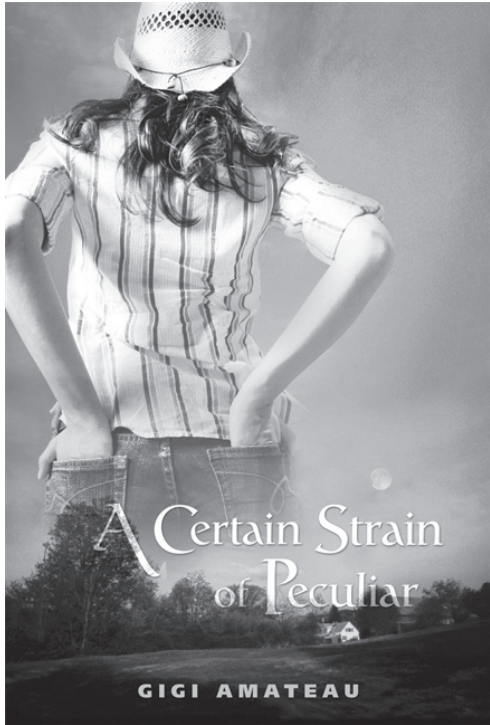


A Certain Strain of Peculiar

by **Gigi Amateau**



ISBN: 978-0-7636-3009-6
Age 12 and up

About the Book

Thirteen-year-old Mary Harold has had enough of panic attacks, trying to stay invisible, and being called “the grossest girl” at school. If her mom won’t move from Virginia back to their family home in Wren, Alabama, she’ll just have to drive the 691 miles there by herself, to where the comfort of Grandma Ayma’s arms, the steady routine of the farmhouse, and the cool shade of the Black Warrior Forest await.

Days of hard work wrangling cattle under the hot sun and the tough yet tender advice of Amya and her farm manager, Bud, guide Mary Harold in discovering the true strength of her own spirit. As she reaches out to befriend Bud’s daughter, Dixie, a troubled girl with a strain of peculiar all her own, she overcomes her self-doubt and learns to listen to her own heart, discovering just how powerful and surprising the bonds of friendship and family can be.

Discussion Questions

1. In *A Certain Strain of Peculiar*, the main character, Mary Harold Woods, strongly identifies with her birthplace, Wren, Alabama, even though she has not grown up there. What do you think it means to have a strong sense of place? Why do you think Mary Harold feels she belongs in Wren? Have you ever visited someplace just once and felt you belonged there? What makes a place special to you—the people, the land, the stories you’ve heard, or how you feel when you’re there?
2. Think about this statement: *Mary Harold and her mother, Bye, act more like friends than mother and daughter.* Do you agree or disagree? Do you think they have a close relationship? How does their relationship change over the course of the story? Besides Bye’s character, find other examples of mothers or mothering in the book. Are all of your examples human? Are they all female?
3. Mary Harold uses her body to help her cope with her strong and changing feelings about the world around and inside of her. For example, she hides in her long, black hair, and she holds her voice silent, in protest and in hopeful prayer. She also works hard to change her appearance. In what ways does Mary Harold use her body to nurture or to hurt others? Think about Mary Harold herself, as well as Dixie, Delta, the herd, and people from school.

4. The phrase “to have itchy feet” means to be restless. Sometimes Mary Harold talks about the mole on her left calf or her long second toe. When she has an itchy calf or itchy toe, how would you describe her state of mind?
5. At the beginning of the story, Mary Harold seems afraid of the Black Warrior Forest, yet drawn to it. Why do you think she is afraid to go deep into the wilderness? What else do you think the Black Warrior Forest might represent?
6. Consider how the land and the forest communicate to the people living on Wren Mountain. Who are the primary caretakers of the Black Warrior Forest in this story? Or is the forest the caretaker? Would you say the forest is an old forest or a relatively new forest?
7. We don’t see anyone go to “church” in this story. Do we see anyone worship? If so, how? Read the beginning of chapter 19 again, where Mary Harold observes, “Ayma says knitting circle might as well be church because two or more are gathered.” What does that mean? Do you agree or disagree with Ayma? What purpose does the knitting circle serve for Mary Harold? For Ayma? For Bye? For Bud? For Delta?
8. Name-calling can be powerful in positive and negative ways. Think about the role of name-calling in *A Certain Strain of Peculiar*. Does the name-calling seem like bullying? Does the name-calling sometimes seem affectionate? Russ and Gil use the word *retarded*. Mary Harold uses the word *nutcase*. Both of these are derogatory words toward people with disabilities. Are they used differently? Is either use acceptable? Now think about how Bud calls people names: *champ* and *tough customer*, for example. Are there positives and negatives to addressing people in this way? What about Ayma calling people *beauty* and *precious*? Give some thought to the ways people are addressed within your groups: family, friends, your favorite athletes and musicians, and religious and civic leaders. Are there names, or labels, that mean something to you only within the context of your groups?
9. Reflect on the role of silence in this story. Which characters use silence as a protest strategy, a coping mechanism, a form of prayer, a way of actively listening, or as a form of shunning? What does silence mean to you? How do you use silence in your life? What is the longest period of time you have ever been silent (not counting sleep)?
10. By the end of the book, who has changed? How has Mary Harold’s family situation changed? Is it an intact, if nontraditional, family? How have other characters’ family dynamics changed?
11. What is the point of the title *A Certain Strain of Peculiar* and who in this book has one?

Activities

1. In the front of the book, right after the title page, you’ll find lots of useful information, such as the book’s author, publisher, date of publication, typeface, and how the Library of Congress summarizes and indexes this story. If you were a librarian, how would you index this book? Pick five subject tags and compare them to the subject tags selected by the Library of Congress. Were your tags the same or different?
2. Make a guide to one of your special places. Go there physically or retreat into a vivid memory. Observe your place as if you were a newcomer. Using whatever medium you have available to you (such as a notebook, Facebook Notes, a phone camera, a digital camera, a blog, paint and canvas, or collage), build a field guide to your place. Your guide can include everything you want to hold and remember about this place, so you can return to it for inspiration and comfort whenever you like.

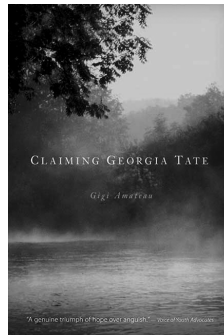
About the Author



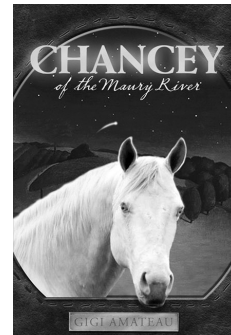
Gigi Amateau was born in Tippah County, Mississippi, and spent her early childhood and summers there with her grandparents. She grew up in Mechanicsville, Virginia, just outside of Richmond, and still lives in Richmond with her husband and daughter. She says, “The time in my life that I felt happiest, and like I most belonged, was as a little girl with my grandparents in Mississippi. Whether I’m writing about girls, horses, or fishing, my characters are all trying to find that place of most belonging.”

A graduate of Virginia Commonwealth University with a degree in urban studies and planning, Gigi Amateau worked for nearly twenty years in Richmond’s non-profit community. Now a full-time writer, she loves reading about John Adams, riding horses in the mountains, gardening with native plants, and chasing birds.

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