



LISA STRINGFELLOW

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

Hi Lisa! *A Comb of Wishes* is a wonderfully human story set against the backdrop of a fictional Caribbean island where fantastical things are possible. What inspired Kela's story and the island of St. Rita? Kela lives in St. Rita, which is an island in the Caribbean that is inspired by Barbados, where my father was born. I wanted the story to be rooted in the sounds, sights, smells, and tastes of the islands. Kela lives in a loving community that has its own history and traditions. When I began writing *A Comb of Wishes*, I had never read a middle grade novel set in the Caribbean or that had a West Indian protagonist. I wanted to give readers a glimpse of that and also affirm the richness of Caribbean heritage.

Kela's story is also rooted in my experience as a teacher. I wanted a story that dealt with emotions and the reality of loss that some children face. Grief is a process we all experience, including children. I felt it was important to show a character dealing with these natural feelings of loss while also showing a loving community supporting her.

We loved following Kela and Ophidia throughout this book! Ophidia in particular has a very unique voice. Can you tell us a bit about why you chose that style for her chapters? Ophidia's character came to me before Kela's did and it was always very clear in my head. She is over 300 years old and her voice is lyrical and filled with the experience of her age. Ophidia has connections to the folklore of mermaids, but her character is also inextricably tied to the Black experience in the Caribbean. Mami Wata is a West African water spirit and often is depicted as holding a snake, and Ophidia moves and behaves in a very snake-like way. She's embittered by betrayals that she's experienced from humans and that history comes through in her passages.

I amplify the folktale quality of her chapters with the storytelling frame, "Crick, Crack." This way of opening a story is traditional in many Caribbean countries and has roots in West Africa. It connects the storyteller with the audience and by using it in Ophidia's chapters, it's a slight reminder to the reader that they are participating in a story too!

Kela loves collecting sea glass for her jewelry making. Is there anything that you love to collect? When I was a child, I used to have a collection of coins and bills from around the world. My father drove trucks for Coca-Cola