



*I didn't purposely set out to write history lessons, but I do know that an important event in history is like a stone dropped in a pond. Its ever-widening ripples have the power to stir up nations, communities, and families.*

# Ripples

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I didn't intend to write historical fiction when I first set out to write a book for young readers. My hope was to portray the growing pains of two thirteen-year-old girls over the course of one summer.

Forty years have gone by since my first attempt! *Painting the Rainbow* is still a story about friendship, but it is also about how world events and social trends affect us, not only the ones we are living through but also those that have occurred in the past.

Like most people, I had my own growing pains to draw upon. When I was eleven, my family moved to Brazil. When I returned to the United States two years later, my friends had changed, and so had I. As a writer for young adults and middle-grade readers, I've turned again and again to diaries I kept in the 1960s when I was a

teenager. They are embarrassing to read now with all the exclamation points and boys' names scrawled all over the place, but they offer a wealth of details.

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*Young people hope so much to be special in some way but fear that if they're too special, they won't fit in.*

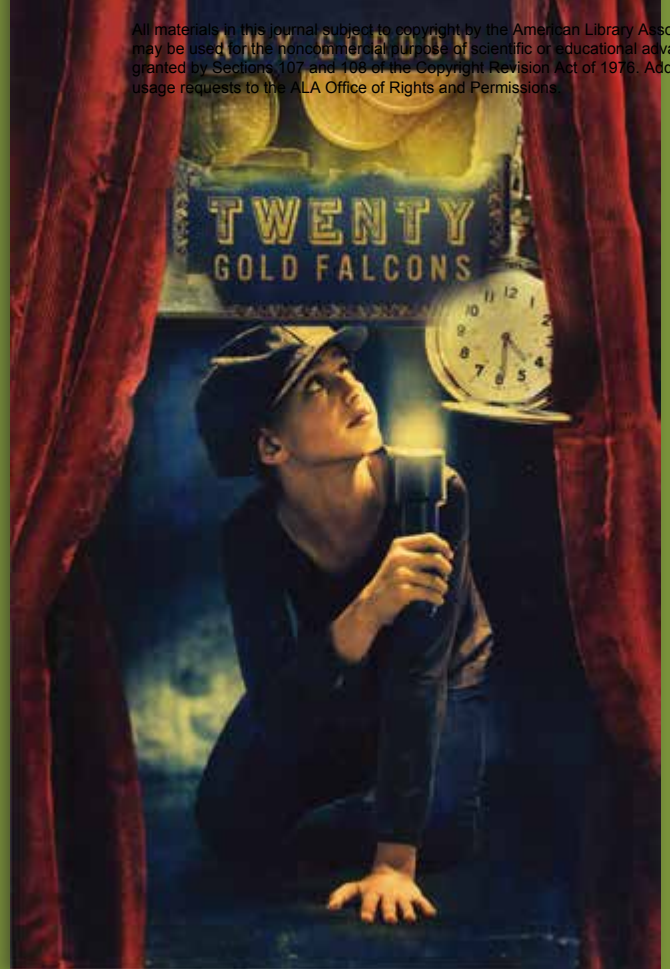
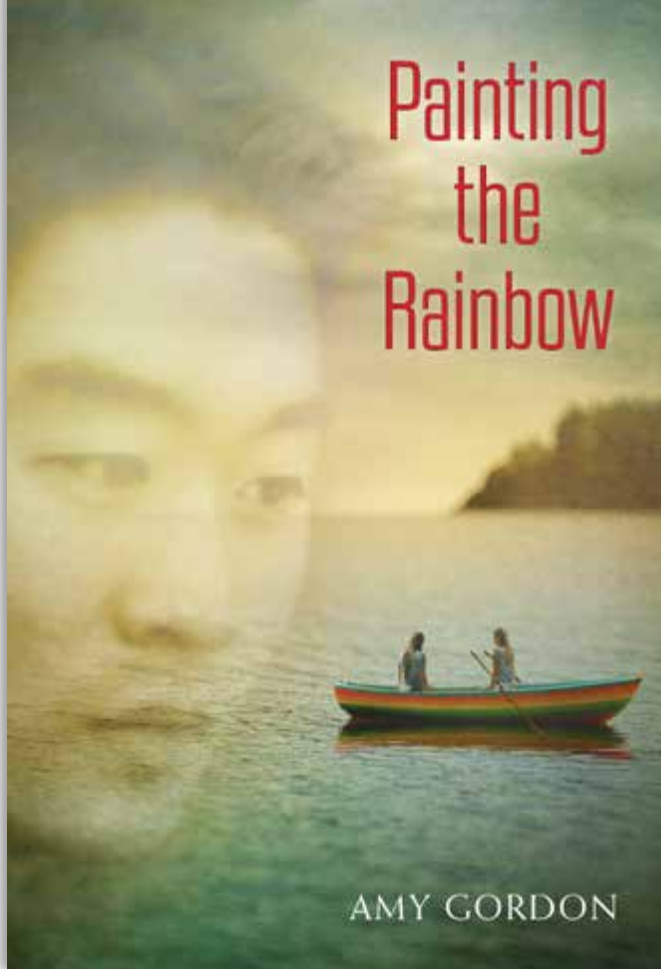
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"I woke up way too early today," I wrote in August 1965. "The workmen came and were banging away at our poor old kitchen. I hate the changes we are making. Mom and Dad don't understand, maybe because they didn't grow up in this house. I guess I'm clinging to how everything was before Brazil, and I still had all my friends here."

As a teacher of middle-school kids, I also have had ample opportunity to witness the moment in a friendship when one or both kids realize they are no longer the same. The aftermath brings mourning, jealousy, and resentment. It seems as if the twin tasks of growing up—becoming self-aware and aware of others—are at odds with each other. Young people hope so much to be special in some way but fear that if they're too special, they won't fit in.

But why did I choose to set *Painting the Rainbow* in the 1960s?

It was a time I knew well, of course, but I also wanted to show how the 1960s made a perfect backdrop for a story about upheavals in relationships. During those years the United States seemed to be going through its own adolescence. The civil rights movement and the Vietnam War pushed society, tested families, challenged institutions.



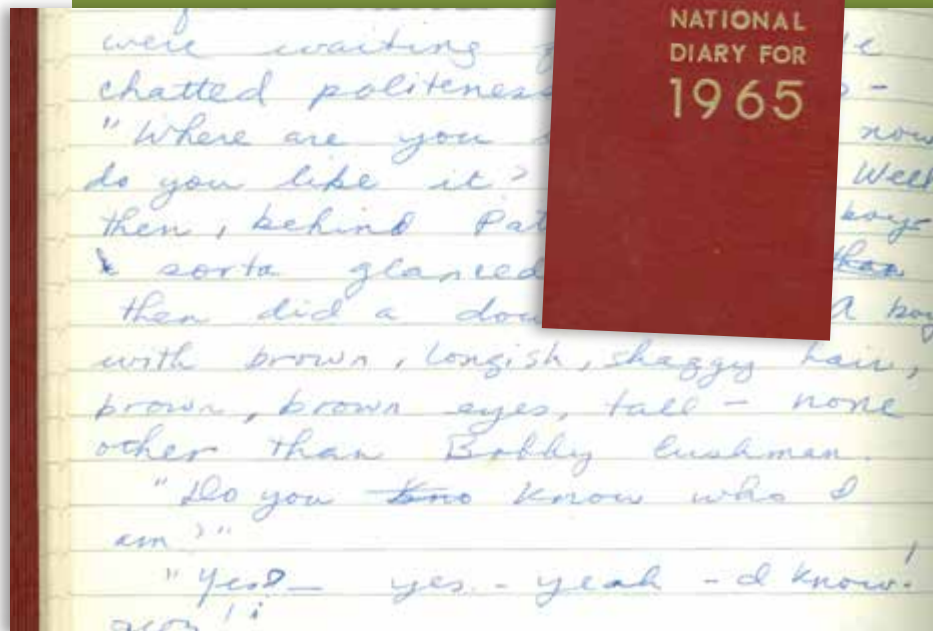
Cover images of Amy Gordon's *Painting the Rainbow* and *Twenty Gold Falcons*.

"I stayed up all night reading *Black Like Me* by John Howard Griffin," I wrote in my diary in June 1965. "It's about this guy who changed his skin color so he looked like a Negro, and then he went to Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. It's so awful how people are treated, and I can't get it out of my head."

I was also trying to make sense of the bitter arguments that were erupting all around me. I also wrote in 1965, "This Vietnam business—I think all wars must be hopeless. But if I disagree with the idea of war, does that mean I'm not loyal to my country?"

I wanted to bring the climate of the times into the story, but I was also driven to add one more layer to the book. When I was growing up my elders sometimes made hateful remarks about the Japanese. At the time I didn't understand why they would say such things. My need to understand this prejudice actually helped me create the plot of my novel.

Images of Amy Gordon's diary.



In *Painting the Rainbow* the older generation refuses to talk about an uncle who died during World War II. This family secret causes problems for the younger generation, but, for a long time, I myself, the author, didn't exactly know what had happened to him. Solving the mystery brought me to some unexpected places. Most rewardingly, I came across the true story of a young Japanese man who was attending a college in the United States when Pearl Harbor was bombed. I went to the archives of the college to read the diary he'd kept during that time and learned what his feelings were as he was caught up in this traumatic

event. His life inspired my fictional character Kiyoshi, who is the trigger for the family drama that unfolds in the course of the novel.

It has been a long journey since I first set out to write my book. From the very beginning I had my two girl characters: Holly, who is a bit of a showoff and is boy-crazy, and Ivy, who is shy and musically gifted. But initially, Holly was the sole narrator of the story. Over time it seemed important to make Ivy equally sympathetic. She was so quiet, though, I didn't know how to make her character shine through. The solution seems so obvious now: I gave her a diary, and she gained

a voice. Another diary! And the more I included historical events in the story, the more grounded and real my characters became. The tale also became more textured and interesting as I allowed differing points of view to emerge.

In the end, *Painting the Rainbow* became just that—a book about respecting different points of view, a book made possible by the characters' learning to understand their own family histories within the broader context of world history.

As I said, I didn't purposely set out to write history lessons, but I do know that an important event in history is like a stone dropped in a pond. Its ever-widening ripples have the power to stir up nations, communities, and families. These ripples can even travel through time, down through many generations. But just as powerfully, individuals can stand in a pond and drop stones, too. I hope that the greater our understanding of the past, the more effectively we can serve the present and, therefore, the future—all those kids who haven't been born yet—by sending out ripples that help rather than harm.

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**Amy Gordon** was born in Boston, Massachusetts, spent several years growing up in France and in London, England, and moved back to New England when she turned six. After graduating with a BA in language arts and literature from Bard College, Amy found a career in teaching and taught drama to sixth- through ninth-grade students for almost thirty years. She now runs writing workshops and an after-school drama program. Her books are favorites of young readers and have been named to numerous child-voted state-award master lists, including those in Georgia, Missouri, Kansas, and Texas. Her most recent novels for middle-graders are *Painting the Rainbow* (Holiday House 2014), *The Shadow Collector's Apprentice* (Holiday House 2012), and *Twenty Gold Falcons* (Holiday House 2010). She lives in Gill, Massachusetts. For more about this author, visit her website at [www.amyagordon.com](http://www.amyagordon.com). For educators guides for Amy's books, visit [www.holidayhouse.com](http://www.holidayhouse.com).

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