

In a racially polarized classroom in 1970 Alabama, Lu's talent for running track makes her a new best friend—and tests her mettle as she navigates the school's social cliques.

MY YEAR IN THE MIDDLE

Lila Quintero Weaver

Miss Garrett's classroom is like every other at our school. White kids sit on one side and black kids on the other. I'm one of the few middle-rowers who split the difference.

Sixth-grader Lu Olivera just wants to keep her head down and get along with everyone in her class. Trouble is, Lu's old friends have been changing lately—acting boy crazy and making snide remarks about Lu's newfound talent for running track. Lu's secret hope for a new friend is fellow runner Belinda Gresham, but in 1970 Red Grove, Alabama, blacks and whites don't mix. As segregationist ex-governor George Wallace ramps up his campaign against the current governor, Albert Brewer, growing tensions in the state—and in the classroom—mean that Lu can't stay neutral about the racial divide at school. Will she find the gumption to stand up for what's right and to choose friends who do the same?

LILA QUINTERO WEAVER was born in Argentina but grew up in Alabama, where she still lives with her husband. She is the author-illustrator of *Darkroom*, a graphic memoir. *My Year in the Middle* is her first book for young readers.



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A NOTE FROM AUTHOR LILA QUINTERO WEAVER



Photo by Paul Weaver

Although Red Grove, Alabama, is imaginary and so are the characters who populate it, certain people in this story existed in real life.

George Wallace served his first term as governor of Alabama from 1963 to 1967. He was known for his strong segregationist policies, in particular his attempts to block black students and white students from attending school together. Wallace's wife was governor after him, with Albert Brewer serving as her lieutenant governor. When she died in office, Brewer took over as governor of Alabama.

In 1970, Albert Brewer and George Wallace went head-to-head in the primary election for their party's nomination. Wallace ran a particularly nasty campaign, relying on racist rhetoric and personal attacks to defeat Brewer. To accurately convey the cultural milieu of this election, I dug through old newspaper articles and consulted the work of historians. My research helped me craft a fictional political rally that stayed true to the tone and message of stump speeches Wallace delivered during this campaign.

Madeline Manning may have served as Lu's imaginary running coach, but she was also a true American sports hero. She won many national titles and competed in three Olympic Games, including the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, where she won a gold medal in the woman's eight-hundred-meter race.

The Vietnam War was in full swing during Lu's childhood, and like Marina, many college students objected to the U.S. involvement in the conflict. There were numerous anti-war protests, including one that resulted in the tragic shooting of student protesters at Kent State University in Ohio.

Researching historical details is an important part of an author's job, and luckily for me, I love history. But some aspects of this story didn't require much research. I lived them.

I remember televisions with antennae and telephones with rotary dials.

Just as Lu did, I spent time flipping through magazines for young girls, which, like the fictional *Groovy Gal*, overwhelmingly featured white models.

Pop radio filled the background of my youth, and I can still hum along with many of the hits from those years. The song titles and recording artists mentioned in this story—including Van Morrison, James Brown, and Sly and the Family Stone—are real.

Finally, like Lu, I immigrated from Argentina at a young age and grew up in a small town in central Alabama that closely resembles Red Grove. I vividly recall the academic year of 1969–1970 as the moment when public schools in my district desegregated. These recollections remain sharp in my mind and informed Lu's story, both in the events portrayed and in the emotions the characters experience.

#YEARINTHEMIDDLE



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