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## Lessons Learned from Authors of Picture Book Biographies of Activists and the Original Biographies They Inspired

Jay Saper

Bank Street College of Education, jsaper@bankstreet.edu

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Lessons Learned from Authors of Picture Book Biographies of Activists  
and the Original Biographies They Inspired

By Jay Saper

Mentor: Sal Vascellaro

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Science in Education  
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## Abstract

This thesis examines the significance of picture book biographies of activists as accessible entry points to teach social movement history and embolden readers to lead courageous lives that confront injustice. The first section is grounded in lessons learned from 19 authors doing outstanding work in the field today: Andrea Davis Pinkney, Carole Boston Weatherford, Cynthia Chin-Lee, David Adler, Debbie Levy, Donna Jo Napoli, Doreen Rappaport, Duncan Tonatiuh, Emily Arnold McCully, Icy Smith, Jabari Asim, Jen Cullerton Johnson, John Hendrix, Kate Schatz, Matt Tavares, Michelle Markel, Richard Michelson, Sarah Warren, and Tanya Lee Stone. I identify and explore ten themes across the interviews I conducted: write from your gut, embrace heartless revision, let go of the superfluous, refuse to condescend, fully live your values, honor the obscure, read unceasingly, tirelessly dedicate yourself to the craft, recognize history as alive, and endure. In the second section I put these lessons into practice, concluding with original biographies of Emma Goldman and Rachel Corrie.

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# Preface

## On Books, Bombs, and the Color Orange

TSA ordered me to  
Take off my shoes  
Remove my belt from the loops around my jeans  
Step into the x-ray and  
Raise my hands in the air

When I passed through  
The screen did not display any broken bones  
It only revealed how broken we allow ourselves to be  
By fear

As my bag came up the belt  
My pants still sagged  
I could not reclaim my possessions  
Until they went through an additional screening for explosives

The TSA agent  
Looked at my whiteness  
And read that I had no knowledge of how to  
Blow anything up

So with the patience of  
A Lansing TSA agent  
With no other passengers in line  
He held my hand  
Walked me step by step  
Through how I could turn my books into bombs

Both are made out of organic material  
Both show up orange when screened on the conveyor belt  
All I have to do is take a thin sheet of explosive  
And place it as a page in my books

It was hard not to think the whole process was absurd  
But then I realized those machines were onto something  
There is a reason why books are conflated with explosives  
A reason why regimes desperate to suppress the people  
Burn libraries with the zeal that they seize armories

Books contain the possibility to inspire us to yearn for something more  
They are ever dangerous to those in power doing wrong

I want to write dangerous books  
Comprised of thin sheets with the explosive  
Stories of brave people who pursued justice

— Jay Saper

# Introduction



My brother Adam nestled up over the heat register on the kitchen floor, rested his back on the freezer door, and read. He read and read and read. When Adam went to the East Lansing Public Library, everyone greeted him by name. The librarian was eager to discuss what he was in the middle of and full of recommendations for what he might love next.

One day, Adam became this librarian to me. We walked up the stairs into the lobby, hooked a left past new arrivals, and continued straight to the children's room. There, Adam walked me to the western wall. "These are biographies," he said. "You can learn about people who did cool things." I looked through the shelves in wonder. I proudly checked out a stack of biographies on my very own library card, the one with my name on the back, scratched out backward S and all.

Through picture book biographies, history became alive to me. History was no longer events that inevitably unfolded. People mattered. People could make a difference. People with courage could confront atrocity. People like Ruby Bridges could determinedly walk through a sea of hate. People like Jesse Owens could infuriate the man who slaughtered millions of my ancestors.

Picture book biographies do more than help us to make sense of the past. The life stories we learn influence the story of the life we lead. In these times we are called upon to be courageous people. I believe picture book biographies can help us move into being braver selves. I believe they can make social movements legible and help to cultivate active participation in them.

In the interest of learning more about the craft of writing picture book biographies, I interviewed authors who I believe based on reading their books are doing outstanding work in the field today. I reached out to 24 authors and 19 graciously responded with an interest in speaking with me about their work: Andrea Davis Pinkney, Carole Boston Weatherford, Cynthia Chin-Lee, David Adler, Debbie Levy, Donna Jo Napoli, Doreen Rappaport, Duncan Tonatiuh, Emily Arnold McCully, Icy Smith, Jabari Asim, Jen Cullerton Johnson, John Hendrix, Kate Schatz, Matt Tavares, Michelle Markel, Richard Michelson, Sarah Warren, and Tanya Lee Stone. What I learned from interviewing these writers forms the heart of the first section of this thesis. There is a list of selected works for elementary children by these authors in Appendix A.

Most interviews took between 20 to 60 minutes and were conducted over the telephone. A couple took place in a café or apartment and some were conducted through email if that is what the author preferred. I had a list of questions I used as a launching point into learning about their approach, though I tried to adapt my questions to the specific works of each author.

While I focused generally on authors of picture book biographies of activists, this is something that I defined rather broadly. Each author grapples with important histories through the use of narrative. Some adopt dimensions of historical fiction and others focus on a particular moment as opposed to a particular life.

I audio recorded the interviews and then transcribed and coded each to help with my analysis. While every author brings their own unique perspective and experiences to their work, I identified ten themes across them: write from your gut, embrace heartless revision, let go of the superfluous, refuse to condescend, fully live your values, honor the

obscure, read unceasingly, tirelessly dedicate yourself to the craft, recognize history as alive, and endure. The full transcripts, from which everything in the first section is quoted, are in Appendix B.

I try to put what I learned from these authors into practice in the second section. Richard Michelson said, “I, personally, am a very political person with strong views on social justice issues, which by necessity come out in my writing, because that is who I am as a person. We can all, only be true to ourselves” (personal communication, February 23, 2017). To be clear about the self I am true to in my own writing, I open the section with a narrative that illustrates an intersection of two important roles in my life, community organizer and early childhood educator. I conclude with original biographies of Emma Goldman and Rachel Corrie.

# 1

## Lessons Learned from Authors of Picture Book Biographies of Activists

## Write From Your Gut

“If you don't write from your gut, you can't write,” Doreen Rappaport said. A writer is always more than a writer and it is important to acknowledge that. Writing from a full self creates more meaningful literature.

Doreen's father changed his Jewish name to go into show business. He arranged Black spirituals and folk songs. The creative community he was a part of, and in which Doreen grew up, was racially diverse. Doreen attended Brandeis, a college created because Jewish students were kept out of most universities through the use of restrictive quotas.

Doreen's experience with antisemitism and proximity to a racially mixed community propelled her into action during the Civil Rights Movement, “It wasn't even a question in the lives of most of my friends not to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement. It was our time!” When the summer of 1964 came around, several of her friends traveled South to join Mississippi Freedom Summer. Doreen had to finish credits to become a teacher, so she stayed back. Inspired by her friends' experience, she went down the following summer to work with Freedom Schools.

Much of what Doreen learned and taught that summer still finds a way into her books. “All I write about is resistance,” she said, whether it be to racial oppression, sexism, or antisemitism. For her, that commitment to writing stories of resistance comes from meeting brave people in the Civil Rights Movement.

When Doreen's editor asked her to write a book on Dr. King, she initially hesitated since there were already so many picture books about him. Yet the editor pushed on and Doreen finally agreed, yet only if she would be able to find a different way

to approach his life than had been done already. Ultimately, she is grateful for the extra push she received. *Martin's Big Words* has become perhaps the most popular book for very young children about Dr. King. Doreen described the book as ending up being the easiest for her to write because she was “in the movement” (personal communication, January 18, 2017). This helped her to convey his spirit in a simple and beautiful way. The words are sparse, in fact not a single one graces the cover, which makes those few that are there all the more powerful.

Duncan Tonatiuh grew up in Mexico and came to the United States as a teenager. The move gave him a new perspective on where he grew up, “I just kind of began to see them in a different light, appreciate them more, things that were around me that I used to not pay much attention to.” As Duncan explored Mexican culture more deeply he “became more aware of Mexico, but also the issues that affected people of Mexican, of Latino origin in the US” (personal communication, January 23, 2017).

While in college, Duncan worked on a project about an undocumented worker who was Mixtec, an indigenous group in Mexico. This project inspired him to learn more about pre-Columbian art. Though Duncan had been exposed to it previously, he now developed an intense passion, and adopted what he was relearning into his own style. So many books that address the legacy of racism in America, especially around the experience of school segregation, have a narrow Black and white focus. Duncan’s *Separate Is Never Equal: Sylvia Mendez and Her Family’s Fight for Desegregation* powerfully pushes through this void. The book retells the case of Sylvia Mendez, the brave child who desegregated California’s schools almost a decade before *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Writing from one's gut can sustain an author's interest in a topic to see a project through. While picture books are often only 32 pages long, writing one well is a difficult and lengthy endeavor. Carole Boston Weatherford grew up with a love for language, nursery rhymes, poems, and the library. Her love for language inspired her to become an author. Because she wants to create beautiful writing, such as a that which moved her as a child, she does thorough research and revises over and over. Carole advised, "You really want to be able to sustain your own interest in the subject matter. You can only do that if you are genuinely interested in a subject" (personal communication, January 16, 2017).

When Michelle Markel decides who she wants to focus on for a biography, "It begins by choosing a subject that I feel passionate about" (personal communication, February 22, 2017). Through writing from her passion for social justice activists, Michelle created *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909*. The book has generated broad renewed interest in Clara Lemlich, as well as the underappreciated role of women and immigrants in the labor movement. Tanya Lee Stone said similarly, "You have to be passionate about what you are writing about, interested in it, immensely interested in it. If you're not, nobody will be interested in your writing. I am always driven by, 'What am I most passionate to be writing about?'" (personal communication, May 26, 2017).

Jen Cullerton Johnson believes that "being a writer is a political act." She remembers her favorite short story writer Tillie Olsen tell her once, "After Hiroshima, there was destruction everywhere. I knew I had to write on the side of light." Jen follows in this tradition. She believes that words are a tool more powerful than weapons in

transforming the world. Jen explained, “I write on the side of light. Light that shines brightness into the shadows” (personal communication, May 22, 2017).

Brimming with passion for a topic helps an author make that topic more exciting for a reader. David Adler put it clearly, “If it is not interesting to you as the author, it won't be interesting to your reader.” David pointed out that an author’s interest influences their approach to writing a particular life, which he feels is beautiful, “You and I could write a biography of the same person. Certain things we both have. Then other things you would have and I wouldn't and vice versa. That is why it is interesting to read biographies because you are reading not only about the person's life, but whoever wrote it” (personal communication, January 16, 2017). Doreen described this as an author embracing their own uniqueness, “You are who you are. We are unique human beings. If you don't use your uniqueness, you are never going to get anywhere” (personal communication, January 18, 2017).



## Embrace Heartless Revision

Debbie Levy reads her work out loud in her office over and over. She keeps on reading and revising, even when her cat looks at her funny for doing so. This, to Debbie, is an essential part of being a writer, “Revision and revision and being heartless with your own work.” She acknowledges that it is difficult to approach one’s own writing without a sense of defensiveness. Writing a draft, setting it aside, and returning to it later helps Debbie see her own writing and where it can improve with greater clarity, “Just give it some time, so you come back to it with fresh eyes” (personal communication, January 20, 2017).

There comes a point when even the most talented writers must open themselves up to additional perspectives on their work. While Andrea Davis Pinkney is an editor by day and esteemed author by morning and night, she still recognizes the particular value of having an editor to help shape up her own work. David Adler has been writing for over four decades and is still very open to editorial comments, “If everything the editor said I were to reject, after a while the relationship would fall apart. Usually what they say makes sense. But as the author I don't see everything. I see it the way I put it down. I have in my head what I think it means but it may not mean that to someone else reading it.” He elaborated on the importance of revision, “No one expects anyone to write a great first draft and nobody cares. They really care about the final draft” (personal communication, January 16, 2017). As Richard Michelson pointed out, it takes significant “self-discipline to revise until a sentence was well-fashioned” (personal communication, February 23, 2017).

Sarah Warren, an early childhood educator, learns a tremendous amount about the importance of revision through all the books she reads to her students. She explained that this helps her to “understand the stakes. There’s nothing worse than trying to share a book that’s too wordy, or preachy, or culturally irrelevant. As you probably already know, kids are amazing critics and they have no problem shutting you down as quickly and loudly as possible.” With their voices in her ear, Sarah takes refining her manuscripts seriously, “I write the most half-baked, preachy, self-righteous stories ever. Then I spend years editing them down and getting over myself” (personal communication, June 15, 2017).

## Let Go of the Superfluous

Michelle Markel explained that when writing a picture book biography, “You’re not writing a report—you’re writing a work of literature” (personal communication, February 22, 2017). This means that the book will not include all the facts of a particular life, yet it will try to capture the spirit by which that person lived. Matt Tavares explained, “Sometimes major milestones are left out, because while they might be a big part of the person’s life story, they might not be a part of this story that I’m telling” (personal communication, June 14, 2017). Richard Michelson acknowledged how difficult this can be, “In every book I write, the inclination is to stuff in all the wonderful information I have discovered, and to prove how much I’ve learned. But for the story to work, most research, by necessity, must be left on the cutting room floor” (personal communication, February 23, 2017).

Andrea Davis Pinkney likens this narrowing to collecting gems of information. She then takes the shiniest ones and figures out a way “to weave them together” (personal communication, March 21, 2017). Tanya Lee Stone tries to hold onto the pieces of a person’s story that hit her most emotionally as she works to capture “the essence of somebody” (personal communication, May 26, 2017). While letting go of interesting information can be hard, Debbie Levy pointed out that, “The stuff that you are not putting in still informs what you are putting in.” She cautioned, “Leave out ornaments that are fun and interesting but that don’t really serve the story” (personal communication, January 20, 2017).

Donna Jo Napoli concurred, “Mostly it’s a mistake to include any information that doesn’t make the plot go forward. So I try to be good and use my research only in

enriching scenes that need to be there anyway or in helping to develop character so that the reader can believe what the character winds up doing” (personal communication, January 16, 2017). Similarly, Carole Boston Weatherford said, “You want there to be a story and you don't want to veer too far afield from that narrative.” Carole likes to use poetry because the economy of language helps her pare down while “packing a more powerful punch in fewer words” (personal communication, January 16, 2017).

While Jabari Asim writes for a range of audiences, when writing for children he is especially “concerned with exhausting their attention and wearing out my welcome.” This encourages Jabari to focus on an episode “that tells us significant things about the subject’s character.” In *Fifty Cents and a Dream* he concentrates on Booker T. Washington’s “heroic efforts to get an education” (personal communication, June 15, 2017). Jabari does not recount every major incident in the life of John Lewis in *Preaching to the Chickens*. Instead, Jabari chooses to focus on John Lewis growing up on the farm, delivering sermons to the chickens, almost as a rehearsal for his many brave words and deeds to come. It is imperative for writers of picture book biographies to sharpen their focus. Doing so is not to disregard important moments in a subject’s life, but rather to tell a story so well that the reader will remain engaged and feel moved to learn more.

## Refuse to Condescend

Authors take their words seriously and they take children seriously too. Doreen Rappaport articulated that “the art of doing the picture book biography is to simplify and not dumb down” (personal communication, January 18, 2017). Andrea Davis Pinkney explained, “I think that children are smart people. They know things. If they don't know it intellectually, they know it emotionally and spiritually. I think that we should not underestimate what they are able to understand.” Andrea grew up around a dining room table where she heard stories about, “Marching with King, sit-ins, compassionate social action. When you hear that from the time you are a young child, it stays with you.”

Recognizing how important honest stories were to her as a child, Andrea does not shy away from topics or sugarcoat them. For her, it is not a matter of if a story is appropriate for children, but rather how that story will be told. Taking children seriously also means that Andrea gives special attention to the portrayal of her subjects' childhoods in her books. Andrea is intrigued by the question, “What are the things that happen to us as a child that allow us to bring gifts into this world?” (personal communication, March 21, 2017).

While adults often have anxieties about approaching difficult or controversial topics with young children, these issues often fascinate children, a fact the wise author recognizes. Kate Schatz echoed Andrea's sentiment, “Kids are really, really smart. They are often smarter than we give them credit for. They can handle topics and ideas and concepts that we might think are too advanced or too complicated or too scary or too dark.” Kate thinks that writers should not be afraid to write about injustice. She pointed out, “Kids have a really incredibly strong sense of justice, right and wrong. They are

pretty obsessed with it. They are obsessed with good guys and bad guys and what is fair and what is not fair” (personal communication, May 21, 2017).

Emily Arnold McCully thinks it is a shame to perpetuate harmful myths, “People should know. Kids should know for sure... That was one of the things about history that most attracted me too was that it was full of contradictions and full of challenges to what we were being told” (personal communication, March 21, 2017). Her book about Oney Judge, a child that George Washington enslaved, provides a more complicated narrative for children than the conventional lauding Washington receives.

John Hendrix wrote and illustrated *John Brown: His Fight for Freedom*, a book for upper elementary students released on the 150th anniversary of Brown’s courageous raid on Harper’s Ferry. The book explores themes of violence and values, which Hendrix has noticed children have a particular interest in. He loves to help children think about, “When is a time when you would no longer protest verbally, but you would actually act?” At school visits, he regularly explores these deep philosophical questions with children around, “What do values really mean?” (personal communication, February 10, 2017).

Part of valuing children also means that subjects should not be portrayed as perfect people with whom children cannot identify. Each of us has our struggles, even those who lead remarkable lives. Michelle Markel explained, “Children need stories about people who have overcome formidable obstacles to fight for what they believe in. Real people—not fictional characters with magic powers. Stories of real life heroes show that perseverance, and belief in oneself, make anything possible. That’s a tremendous gift to a young person” (personal communication, February 22, 2017).

After going through a difficult separation, Cynthia Chin-Lee was drawn to writing about how women do not get the respect they deserve in society and how they push through to lead amazing lives. She wrote *Amelia to Zora: Twenty-Six Women Who Changed the World*, which briefly chronicles each life in two paragraphs. While some of her subjects have full picture book biographies dedicated to them, most do not. Cynthia's book is very much a precursor to Kate's *Rad American Women A-Z*. Cynthia was careful not to glorify the achievements of her subjects, "For those of us who are struggling in any way, to understand how they had to overcome their hurdles I think is important... We need to get hope from those who came before us and those who struggled before us" (personal communication, January 22, 2017).

## Fully Live Your Values

Icy Smith grew up under extreme poverty in Hong Kong. The injustices that she witnessed motivated her to write about issues of human rights. After doing historical research for a community project, Icy found a “passion to write history, especially untold stories. Writing gives me a sense of empowerment.” This commitment led Icy to write *Mei Ling in China City*, which addresses the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II for an upper elementary audience. In addition to writing, Icy started a publishing house to bring more books into the world that she believes in. East West Discovery Press “is one of the very few independent Asian American publishing companies in the US, specializing in multicultural and bilingual books” (personal communication, March 11, 2017).

Andrea Davis Pinkney has helped to start an imprint dedicated to publishing books specifically about and by African Americans. Like Icy, her values manifest themselves in more than just her writing, “The working as an editor, helping authors say what they need to say, my interest as an author, the kind of books that I write and create, the kind of research that I do, the books I have worked on with my husband, the advocacy in the industry, the hiring of more diverse talent, both authors and editors, they all are interconnected. My hope is that when you step back and look at them, it will make this beautiful tapestry or mosaic of diversity in the larger sense as it relates to content and what is being delivered to young readers” (personal communication, March 21, 2017).

Richard Michelson grew up in a Jewish neighborhood that transitioned into becoming an African American neighborhood. While at the time children did not always play across these lines, in his book *Across the Alley*, a fictionalized account of his own



childhood, the children do. It begins with a white Jewish child and his Black neighbor secretly teaching each other baseball and violin at night and eventually doing so out in the open with the support of both of their families. Young children revere the talents of their peers and can identify with the children who want to play across boundaries. While Richard admits he was not so brave as the children in the book when he was younger, writing the book sparked an interest in learning more about those who “were willing to let their friendship cross racial lines, even when condemned by their peers.” He learned more about the lives and friendship of Reverend Martin Luther King and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Richard’s book about the two, *As Good As Anybody*, looks at the early life of Dr. King in the Jim Crow South and Heschel in Nazi Germany. It leads to the connection of their stories in marching together from Selma to Montgomery. Weaving the tales of two brave people’s lives enabled Richard to convey his deep belief that, “While each individual can make a difference, change more often comes when we reach out and work with each other toward a common goal” (personal communication, February 23, 2017).

Jen Cullerton Johnson teaches young people who are incarcerated in Chicago. While she wrote *Seeds of Change* about Wangari Maathai, she also lives Wangari’s message about the power of plants. With the incarcerated youth she works with, Jen created Karma Garden, which has transformed a sterile environment to a living and nourishing one. While there are now several picture books about Wangari, *Seeds of Change* is notably the only one that talks “about how and why she was imprisoned” (personal communication, May 22, 2017). This was an important fact to Jen to include and she is grateful that her publisher allowed her to keep it in.

As an early childhood educator, Sarah Warren started writing books for her own students to fill a void of biographies that reflected her families' identities and experiences. She explained, "I think about self-image a lot when I teach and when I write. I think about how stories can help us find our purpose. I started writing biographies to show my students how to be change makers." When Sarah first read her book *Dolores Huerta: A Hero to Migrant Workers* to her students, a child smiled and raised her hand to share, "Dolores looks like my mom." Sarah described that moment as one of the greatest in her life and "why I'm still hard at work researching and writing about the lives of exceptional women" (personal communication, June 15, 2017).

Not only do authors bring values to their work, ultimately they create literature that provokes readers to reflect upon their own values as well. John Hendrix described it as "part of the artist's job to make stuff that makes us question our choices and our histories" (personal communication, February 10, 2017). Icy said, "It is our responsibility to prepare young people to take up global issues and become advocates for positive change" (personal communication, March 11, 2017).

## Honor the Obscure

One of the true gifts of being a writer is the opportunity to write into history those stories that have been too often neglected. Carole Boston Weatherford confessed, “I don't always know the people I am writing about are slipping into obscurity, but often they are...These are people whose names were household words when I was growing up, but that I'm finding not everybody's heard of nowadays.”

When Carole wrote *Voice of Freedom* about Fannie Lou Hamer, she did not expect upper elementary students to know about her subject, although she expected that adults would. Carole became shocked when she realized that even rooms full of librarians and English teachers at conferences had no idea who Fannie Lou Hamer was. This helped Carole recognize that, “I am not only giving these people back to kids, the subjects of my biographies, but I am also sometimes educating the adults... My biographies, in particular, sometimes do double duty, when I don't even realize that they are going to do that” (personal communication, January 16, 2017).

While Carole discovered that Fannie Lou Hamer was a little known subject after her book came into the world, Doreen Rappaport learned this at an earlier stage in the process. When Doreen started working eight years ago with Candlewick Press, the same publisher that released *Voice of Freedom* two years ago, she tried desperately to sell them a biography of Fannie Lou Hamer. The proposal was rejected because they had no idea at the time who Fannie Lou Hamer was. Doreen is very proud of what she described as a “gorgeous” book that Carole created and is glad that times changed and Candlewick became open to the important subject.

Tanya Lee Stone is committed to “filling in some of the many missing gaps in our histories.” She credits the relationships with editors she has built and her track record of sales and critical reviews as enabling her to write about subjects who are often overlooked. Earlier on in her career, Tanya faced more questioning. When she first pitched a book on Elizabeth Blackwell, she received pushback, “Why do Elizabeth Blackwell? Nobody knows who she is.” To that, Tanya responded, “Well, because nobody knows who she is, that's why we should do Elizabeth Blackwell” (personal communication, May 26, 2017). *Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors? The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell* is partially the result of Tanya's persistence.

Icy Smith deliberately writes to “fill in the void of books on diversity” through focusing on “little-known and untold stories” (personal communication, March 11, 2017). Icy's next project is on Vietnamese refugees. She has already addressed difficult topics such as the Cambodian Genocide in *Half Spoon of Rice*. Duncan Tonatiuh urged writers to consider subjects beyond the “large heroes” and instead focus on the people we “forget to talk about,” those who “also made important contributions” (personal communication, January 23, 2017).

When writers choose this route, they often confront a tension between working with a subject that is not considered well known enough to have a book published about them and working to bring a work about that person into the world so that they can become more well known and appreciated for the life they lived. While this is difficult to navigate, Doreen believes it is worthwhile. She advised, “Don't be afraid to tackle a subject you think is really important” (personal communication, January 18, 2017).

## Read Unceasingly

There is no writer outside of a reader. This is not simply to suggest that writers are dependent upon readers, it is to say that writers themselves must be readers. Debbie Levy emphasized, “Reading is really at the top of the list of my suggestions.” She explained further, “It is certainly always helpful to read people who you think are doing it in an outstanding way” (personal communication, January 20, 2017).

Duncan Tonatiuh, who fondly recalls checking books out of his elementary school library, has always loved reading. He continues to be an avid reader and has learned to “read like an author” (personal communication, January 23, 2017). As Duncan reads, he is picking up on new tools and techniques to improve his own work. Michelle Markel similarly suggested, “Study how your favorite authors convey emotion and weave imagery into the narration” (personal communication, February 22, 2017).

Tanya Lee Stone stated clearly just how dedicated a writer must be to reading, “If somebody is going to write in any genre they need to read 100 books in that genre” (personal communication, May 26, 2017). While writers learn from the best writing, they also learn from writing that falls short. Jabari Asim explained, “One thing I’ve always been very conscious of when reading a less-than-successful book is noting the point when I lost interest in the narrative, when my mind wandered and I began to think about things far beyond the story.” Jabari tries to apply what he learns from these shortcomings to sharpen his own work, “I’m very concerned with attracting and keeping the readers’ attention throughout the book. When revising, I try to identify the places where the narrative flags. Then I do my best to inject momentum into them” (personal communication, June 15, 2017).

## Tirelessly Dedicate Yourself to the Craft

The pursuit of writing for children must be approached seriously. Writing is a skilled craft and it takes enormous dedication to learn how to do it well. There are no magic shortcuts. Even the award winning authors I spoke with do not wake up and write perfect sentences. They wake up and write. Then they rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and their work slowly improves.

Waiting for inspiration or longing for perfection are the most guaranteed paths to never writing at all. Andrea Davis Pinkney wakes up at four every morning to write. Even on weekends and holidays, she still writes. In fact, to Andrea, “a real writer” must write every day. She explained, “I am making it my business to get those words on paper. Are they always publishable words? No. Are they always spelled properly? No. Are they any great prose or verse narratives? Sometimes. But I am engaged in the active pursuit of the craft of writing” (personal communication, March 21, 2017).

David Adler urged, “Just write the first draft, don't be so concerned. Read it over and keep trying to find ways to improve it” (personal communication, January 16, 2017). Donna Jo Napoli suggested, “I think that letting that first draft have momentum gives the whole book energy. It's much easier to impose structure on something that already has heart and soul than to add heart and soul to something that already has structure.” She added further, “Never tell yourself that you have to be ‘good’ at writing to do it. Just write, and you will get better. I promise” (personal communication, January 16, 2017). As Richard Michelson put it, “The only advice I have for aspiring writers is to stop reading this interview and go to your desk—I mean NOW—and start writing. Don't wait for inspiration. There is no magic formula. Put your butt in the chair and start typing until

you have something you can revise. Are you still here?" (personal communication, February 23, 2017).

## Recognize History As Alive

“It's a new world but it's not,” Andrea Davis Pinkney said (personal communication, March 21, 2017). The best writers of history are those who recognize that it is alive in shaping the present. Approaching historical subjects with this understanding enables writers to carry with them an enthusiasm that makes people from the past terribly important to children of today. Telling history through the biography format can make it especially accessible and engaging. David Adler explained, “If you just learn the history without the people, it becomes both boring and really irrelevant. But by learning history through the lives of people who lived it, who made history, it is much more interesting” (personal communication, January 16, 2017).

Matt Tavares was inspired to try his hand at writing nonfiction after illustrating *Lady Liberty* by Doreen Rappaport. This led to him writing biographies about baseball figures. As a child, Matt loved to read anything that was about baseball. He learned from that experience the power of harnessing sports to engage certain readers. While a reader might be drawn to *Henry Aaron's Dream* because of baseball, they will learn about the Civil Rights Movement along the way. In this sense, Matt believes “biographies bring history to life” (personal communication, June 14, 2017).

While there is immense potential in the biography form, it also has its limits. Kate Schatz cautioned that heroic narratives are problematic in that they simplistically draw upon one figure to be representative of a whole period. Kate is committed to counteracting this limited perspective in her work by “connecting the person to larger cultural and political moments, I try to point out other people they were connected with and in community with” (personal communication, May 21, 2017). Jen Cullerton Johnson



explained that while biography is often regarded as the life of one person, “To me biography is about all the connections that person has that have helped her on her way. We are connected” (personal communication, May 22, 2017). In addition to highlighting connections, Kate focuses on a diverse range of subjects in *Rad American Women A-Z* and *Rad Women Worldwide*. These efforts help Kate to reflect a more honest portrait of history that can serve as a counter narrative to what so many children learn in school.

Icy Smith believes, “Learning to connect events from the past to present can equip young people to carefully consider the moral and ethical choices they face in their own lives.” Before she began writing picture books, Icy wrote *The Lonely Queue*, which reflects on how “Chinese Americans were made scapegoats for perceived economic problems.” She believes that it contains in it a deeper lesson that continues to play out today, “In times of war or economic downturn, certain groups of Americans—because of their ancestry—have been adversely affected” (personal communication, March 11, 2017).

Emily Arnold McCully explained that her love for history does not simply stem from an interest in the foreign, but also the familiar. She is interested in exploring “what's the same, or corresponds to what we are experiencing” (personal communication, March 21, 2017). Andrea pointed out, “History is especially in this moment, it's repeating itself” (personal communication, March 21, 2017). Instead of constantly getting lost in the present moment, history can offer a sense of grounding. Kate explained that what we often recognize as an “isolated moment” can better be understood as a part of “larger cycles” (personal communication, May 21, 2017). We can learn from those brave stories of the past about how we can be brave in the present.

## Endure

Doreen Rappaport confessed, “We do want to hear how brilliant we are” (personal communication, January 18, 2017). Often editors are not there with such high praise. It is difficult to tell a story well and difficult further getting a publisher to recognize you have done so. Writers only live to see their work out in the world when they endure through it all. It takes most writers years before they sell their first manuscript. Even those authors I spoke with who were fortunate to sell their first manuscript with ease, found it took several additional years before they sold another.

Duncan Tonatiuh was thrilled when he published his first picture book *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin*. The book is comprised of letters between two cousins residing in Mexico and the United States. After its release and success, Duncan “assumed whatever I write it is going to turn into a book... I wrote several more things and they got turned down” (personal communication, January 23, 2017). Yet, Duncan persisted. He took on several odd jobs, continued to do his creative work, and since putting out *Separate Is Never Equal*, he has been able to dedicate himself fulltime to writing and illustrating. Doreen said that writers do get discouraged, though it is critical to “Find the way you want to tell the story and just struggle and last it through when it's not going well” (personal communication, January 18, 2017).

# 2

Original Work Inspired by the Lessons Learned

## When the Kindergarten Teacher Gets Arrested

My co-teacher turned two lights off, signaling the children to say goodbye to their grownups and make their way over to the rug for morning meeting. As soon as the group finished singing a round of the morning song, a child raised her hand high into the air. “Where is Jay?” she asked.

My co-teacher could have said I was in a meeting or at the doctor. She could have whisked the question away and refocused the group on going over the day's schedule. Instead, she chose to tell the Kindergarteners the truth. “Jay is in court,” she said. “Does anybody know what court is?”

“Oh yeah,” shared an eager student. “I know about court. Lightning McQueen had to go to court for speeding!”

“Exactly, sometimes people go to court because they were speeding.”

There was no time for a hand to be raised before multiple mouths blurted out, “Well, why is Jay in court?”

“He was at a protest,” my co-teacher began to explain.

The principal was also there for meeting that morning to help my co-teacher explain my absence to the students should they ask. “Jay was at a protest at a police precinct with a group of people who were fair skinned like him,” she said. “They were there to say that people with darker skin should be treated fairly.”

The children looked on intently as the principal flipped over the morning message to a blank sheet and uncapped a marker. She drew several stick figures and pointed to the one with long hair, “This is Jay with his group of friends at the police precinct.” Next to the figures she drew a picket sign, “Be fair to people of all skin colors.”

Next the principal drew a picture of the police. “The police tell Jay to leave. Jay and his group believe they have a right to voice their opinions, so they say, ‘No.’ The police tell Jay he will be arrested. Then they take him to jail.”

“What?” the children gasped in disbelief.

“But he doesn't look like somebody who would go to jail,” a child pondered aloud.

“Hmm. I wonder what you mean. Why don't you take this paper and draw what Jay looks like and what somebody who you think would go to jail looks like,” the principal offered.

The child jumped at the opportunity. Processing through pictures helped her develop the language to explain her thought further. “This is Jay,” she said. “He is angry. The other person is sad.”

“Did he get to eat food?” other children wanted to know. “Were their bars in the jail? Was he safe? What about his parents?” The questions were endless.

The principal assured them, “Yes, Jay is safe. When he came out of jail he promised to go back to court with a lawyer to talk to the judge at another time. Jay came in to set up the classroom at school. He came here each morning to teach all of you. Today is the day he promised to go talk to the judge, so he is in court now.”

“As soon as Jay is done, he will be back at school,” my co-teacher said. “You can ask him all of your questions when he returns this afternoon.”

“I want to ask Jay why he is a bad person.”

“I understand why you might think Jay is a bad person,” the principal said. “Sometimes people are arrested when they do bad things. Jay was standing up for

something he believes in. He did not steal anything or hurt anyone. Jay thought he had a right to protest and the police did not think he had that right.”

“It’s like a misunderstanding,” one child said.

“Alright,” my co-teacher transitioned. “Thank you all for being so attentive this morning during meeting. Something we have no misunderstanding about is that you have a right to play. Let’s line up so we can head up to the roof for recess.”

While the Kindergarteners went outside to move their bodies, I sat inside the courtroom on a cold wooden bench waiting for my case number to be called. My co-teacher texted to ask how it was going. For a couple hours I had no updates for her. Finally, I was called up to the stand with those who were also arrested as part of the direct action.

We held hands together as we stood before the defendant's table. The judge ordered a day of community service, picking up trash from the streets bright and early Saturday morning. I put my papers in my folder and gave my friends a hug. They headed out to get Vietnamese food for lunch and I rushed off to school.

Along the way I received another text, which was also echoed on a post-it note left at the front desk, “Do not go to the Kindergarten room. Find the principal first.”

When I got to her office, I saw the storyboard, which broke down the protest into images and language that a group of children who are five and six can understand. Now the principal was sharply focused behind her computer drafting a letter to our families.

We finished reviewing the letter just as the Kindergarteners picked up their siesta mats. When we entered the classroom, the children swarmed me with hugs. We then sat in a circle on the rug. I briefly recapped the storyboard then opened it up to questions.

The students were happy to hear that I was able to eat an orange in jail and call my brother who let my parents know that I was safe. They were eager for confirmation that there were metal bars in the jail. They wanted to know if I felt mad when I was there. I told them that although I could not see my friends, we sang together, which made us all feel better.

While I was separate from my students the morning I had to go to court, my co-teacher and principal's honesty with the Kindergarteners was our song. When we lie to children we foster people who become disengaged when they become disillusioned. When we instead choose to be honest with children about unfairness in this world, we can also be honest about the ways in which people are bravely taking action to make the world a better place. Children can latch on to hope and the power of action.

There were several families who enthusiastically supported this position. Some shared of attending Black Lives Matter demonstrations and telling their children about the experience, teaching them a chant our two. Other parents recounted how years ago the school had taken children to visit a coal mine and talk to the miners. The family conveyed that meaningfully tackling issues of social justice with young children was a critical part of our roots and an important reason for why they proudly sent their children to our school today.

There were also families who expressed concerns. Some questioned why we would talk about such an issue with Kindergarteners. Some worried what it would mean for their child to know that one of their role models has gone to jail.

Like the statements of support, the expressions of concern also came from a deep place of families loving their children and wanting what is best for them. We felt a need

to hear and acknowledge concerns, clarify questions, and share why we still believed it was important to be honest with the children.

The conversation about me going to jail is not unrelated to the rest of our pursuits in the classroom. It is just one piece of an ongoing commitment to a social justice curriculum. When we read about Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, their acts of civil disobedience do not elicit concern from families, but praise.

While children are often regarded as the imaginative ones, we grownups are also capable of making up stories. When we fail to be as direct with children about present injustices as we are about past wrongs, we feed a dangerous myth to them and ourselves. One of the chief responsibilities of educators is to not let children discard the past as forever ago, but rather support them in recognizing how the past is forever enmeshed in the present.

The guard became frustrated when we first began singing in jail. “Quiet down,” she insisted. “Quiet down.” We only sang louder.

As we kept singing, the guard came to recognize our song as more than background noise that made it difficult for her to phone in her lunch order. The song had a purpose. The song had a rhythm. The song was alive.

The guard stood up, clapped to the beat, sang in tune, and danced down the aisle between the cells.

Kindergarteners too can join in on the song, grasp the complex rhythms some insist must go over their heads.



The same child who initially wanted to ask why I was a bad person, had a different question for me the following morning. “But why did you do it even if you knew you would go to jail?”

“Why do you think?” I asked.

“You didn’t care if you had to go to jail. You wanted to stand up for people with darker skin colors.”

## She Defied Them: Emma Goldman's Quest for Freedom

Father said Emma couldn't go to the ball.

"I will defy him," she told Helena.

The night came and Emma lay in bed, waiting for her parents to fall asleep. Then, she crept out of her covers and shook her sister awake.

"We can be back before Father wakes up," she whispered.

They dressed in silence and tiptoed out the door.

"I will dance!" she declared.

Emma's heart raced and her skin sweat. She twirled around the ballroom. She felt free.

But in the morning Emma had to go back home. And at home she never felt free. Because at home there was Father.

Truth be told, Father never wanted Emma. All along he wished for a boy. And he sure let that be known.

"You are my disgrace!" Father shouted. He reached out towards Emma's head and crushed her round comb into little pieces. "You will always be so!" He swung at his daughter and shoved her about.

Helena grabbed Emma and raced up to her room. She held her sister close to her heart, as they cried together.

Without a comb, Emma's hair was unruly. Her spirit was unruly too.

Emma planned to escape. Not just for the night, but for good.

Emma and Helena sailed away from St. Petersburg. With little money, they were forced to the bottom of the boat where they were crowded like cattle.

Waves beat the walls, rocking the ship back and forth, turning their stomachs up and down.

As the boat approached the harbor, everyone rushed to the deck. Emma left her sorrows down in steerage as she raced up to see Lady Liberty.

Her torch of freedom welcomed them. At last, Emma would be free.

Emma landed a job stitching coats near the river. The factory had more room, more light, and less smell than where she sewed gloves and corsets back in Russia. But it wasn't all better.

Emma worked tirelessly from sunrise past sundown for only ten quarters a week. She couldn't even go to the bathroom without asking.

Tanya's body made a thud as she fell onto the floor. The thud could barely be heard over the hum of the busy machines.

Emma noticed Tanya curled up on the ground and cried out for help. One by one feet stepped off their treadles and the needles came to a halt.

"Back to your machines!" the boss howled. "What do you mean stopping work now?"

"She has fainted," Emma said as she took an orange from her lunch and squeezed the juice into Tanya's mouth.

"Do you want to be fired? Get back at once!"

Emma picked up Tanya and walked right out of the shop.

When she first saw Lady Liberty, Emma believed she had arrived to the land of the free and home of the brave. Yet now she had her doubts.

What had she escaped after all? What would it mean to truly be free?

Emma was the first one in the lecture hall for a talk about workers protesting in Chicago. Soon the room filled, packed from top to bottom, with police lining the walls.

As Johanna took the stage, Emma felt the audience disappear. Her eyes lit up as she heard how the workers went on strike. How they walked right off their jobs and wouldn't come back until they were promised shorter work days.

Emma's tired bones understood full well why the workers fought for rest. Their bravery gave her hope.

But as she listened on, Emma's face washed over with horror. Johanna said the police took out their clubs and swung at those on strike, breaking their bones into pieces.

The workers gathered at Haymarket Square to speak out against the beatings. Soon more trouble would come their way.

Johanna noticed Emma's face during the talk and approached her afterwards. As the rest of the room filed out, Emma sat frozen in fright.

"I have a feeling that you will make their cause your own," Johanna said.

Emma rushed home to tell Helena about the speech.

A new world opened to Emma. She followed the case of Chicago workers in the newspapers. She devoured books written by those who inspired them.

Emma met the great writers, thinkers, and organizers of the movement for the freedom the workers prized. She hung out at Sach's cafe and Schwab's saloon, debating long into the night.

"Something new and wonderful had been born in my soul," she thought. "A great ideal, a burning faith."

Soon Emma became a speaker herself, inspiring people just as she had been inspired by Johanna. Wherever there was a wrong, Emma was there to urge the people to make it right.

“I could sway people with words! Strange and magic words that welled up from within me.”

Knowing what to say was never a problem for Emma. The problem was figuring out how to say it when so many tried to silence her. But just like when Father told her no, Emma never gave in. She defied them.

At Union Square, Emma wasn't allowed on the speaking platform. Her friends hoisted her up to speak from a truck parked in the street instead.

The outraged driver hitched his horse to the truck and drove off. Emma kept on speaking. The mesmerized crowd followed her for blocks.

In Providence, Emma set down a box in the square and stepped on top to speak. Police rushed towards her.

“Stop your jabbering!” an officer said, trying to catch his breath. “Stop it this minute or I'll pull you off the box!”

Emma kept on speaking.

“Didn't I tell you to stop?” the disgruntled officer continued.

“I thought it is your duty to maintain the law, not to break it,” she said. “Don't you know the law in this State gives me the right of free speech?”

The audience roared. But the police didn't laugh. They grabbed Emma and threw her into the wagon.

In Chicago, police cut Emma off before she even started to speak. The newspapers were outraged. They said the police proved her point. There really was no right to free speech for Emma.

While the police tried to silence her, they ended up helping her to reach new audiences far and wide. By the time Emma made it to her next lecture in Milwaukee, eager crowds packed the halls so full they had to turn people away at the doors.

The largest war the world had ever seen broke out. The president ordered all the men to join the military.

On registration day, Emma held a massive meeting to question why people should be forced to fight. Police on horses surrounded her. The sea of the crowd stretched on for blocks outside the hall.

Soldiers unscrewed light bulbs from their fixtures and threw them at the vase on stage holding red carnations. Water spilled. Petals fell to the floor.

The crowd grew agitated. Emma stood up.

“Your presence here and the presence of the multitude outside shouting their approval of every word they can catch, are convincing proof that you do not believe in violence.”

She urged the crowd not to be provoked. She praised them for showing that people with a dedicated belief in freedom can be more powerful than police with weapons and soldiers with rage.

Emma suggested a song to lift their spirits as they exited the hall. She went home carrying her head high.

Police came bursting into her office, “Emma Goldman, you’re under arrest!”

Behind bars, Emma refused to be broken. Her friends outside wrote letters and sent her gifts. So many gifts she had plenty to share.

Emma found a broomstick used to sweep the floors and affixed to it to a bag. She cast the broom between the bars and fished it over to the other women.

They reached in for a sandwich or piece of fruit, then grabbed the broomstick themselves to pass along treats from cell to cell.

Police broke up her protests. Judges sent her to jail. Yet, still she defied them.

Sickened that Emma wouldn't stop, the government finally ordered her out of the country for good.

"That is the end, Emma Goldman, isn't it?" a reporter asked.

"It may only be the beginning," she answered.

Emma watched Lady Liberty fade in the distance.

A broken comb couldn't contain Emma's unruly hair. A broken government couldn't contain her unruly spirit by sailing her across the sea.

Like waves of the mighty ocean, Emma's cries for freedom continue to beat back, inspiring new struggles for justice on these shores.

## More About Emma Goldman

From the moment she was born on June 27, 1869, people tried to crush Emma Goldman's longing for freedom. Father abused her because she was a girl. The Russian tsar attacked her family because they were Jewish.

Emma traveled to America in 1885 hoping to find freedom. She settled in Rochester, New York, where she worked in a sweatshop. Attending a lecture by Johanna Greie, Emma learned about the Haymarket Affair. Eight anarchists who supported striking workers and opposed police brutality were wrongfully arrested. Four were hanged.

Outraged, Emma took up their cause as her own. She moved to New York City in 1889 to immerse herself in the anarchist movement. She met newspaper editors and passionate organizers, most of whom were immigrants like herself who spoke Yiddish and German.

Before long, Emma became a prominent speaker. She traveled the country encouraging workers to strike. She inspired everyday people to make changes themselves, as opposed to waiting for elected politicians to do so.

Police with clubs in hand repeatedly denied Emma's right to free speech. While they hoped to silence her, their harsh treatment led others to take notice.

When Emma told the unemployed in Union Square that it was wrong for them to go hungry in a city of mansions, a judge sentenced her to a year behind bars. Emma was forced to sew in the prison shop and work as a nurse.



While the thirteenth amendment, which was ratified in 1865, outlawed slavery as it had been known to that point, it allowed forced labor to persist, and still does to this day, as punishment for a crime.

Drawn to the power of the written word, Emma began publishing *Mother Earth* in 1906. She used the magazine to share about the causes she believed in and lectured about.

In 1908, Emma spoke out against the violence of the military. A soldier in the audience, William Buwalda, was deeply moved. He went up to shake her hand and was sentenced to Alcatraz prison for doing so. “The government lost a soldier,” Emma remarked. “But the cause of liberty gained a man.”

Emma worked as a nurse among immigrants living in poverty. She noticed families often had less food than mouths to feed. Emma spoke out against poverty and also spoke up for the rights of families to choose if and when they wanted to have children. This led to another arrest in 1916.

As the United States prepared to enter World War I in 1917, the government instituted a draft, requiring people to register for the military. New laws made it a crime to criticize the war. Emma thought both were wrong and spoke out. The post office refused to mail *Mother Earth* to subscribers and police arrested Emma.

On June 27, 1919, Emma celebrated her 50th birthday behind bars. “What more fitting place for the rebel to celebrate such an occasion?” she reflected. On December 21 of that year, Emma was deported to Russia.

While Emma was inspired by the everyday people who had overthrown the tsar, she became frustrated with the new leaders there. Emma left Russia for Europe, where she spoke out against the rising wave of fascism.

Though Emma returned briefly to the United States in 1934 for a 90 day speaking tour, she was never allowed back to live in the country. She died in Toronto in 1940. Emma's body was brought to Chicago, where she was buried next to the Haymarket martyrs who inspired her passionate life dedicated to justice.

## Timeline

**June 27, 1869 Emma born** to Taube Bienowitch and Abraham Goldman in Kovno, Lithuania, part of the Russian Empire. The family moves to Papilè shortly thereafter.

**1876 Emma moves to Königsberg** to attend school. Teachers are generally abusive to Emma, except for the German teacher who introduces her to opera and literature.

**1881 Emma moves to St. Petersburg.**

**December 29, 1885 Emma immigrates to United States** with sister Helena and settles in Rochester, New York, with sister Lena. Begins to work at a sweatshop.

**May 4, 1886 Haymarket Affair** in Chicago leads to wrongful arrests of eight anarchists who protest police beatings and killings of strikers demanding eight hour workday. Emma follows the trial in the newspaper and attends Johanna Greie's lecture about the injustice.

**November 11, 1887 Haymarket Execution.** Four defendants hanged. One commits suicide.

**1889 Emma moves to New York City** to learn from anarchist writers and organizers.

**1892 Homestead Steel Strike** in Pennsylvania. Mine owner Andrew Carnegie hands control to Henry Clay Frick to break the union. Frick hires Pinkerton agents and kills nine strikers. In response to the massacre, Alexander 'Sasha' Berkman attempts to assassinate Frick. Emma publicly defends Sasha.

**August 31, 1893 Emma arrested for speech to unemployed** in Union Square.

Sentenced on October 16 to a year in prison at Blackwell's Island, today known as Roosevelt Island. Released on August 17, 1894.

**June 6, 1893 Haymarket Pardon** of surviving defendants by Illinois governor acknowledges their wrongful conviction.

**September 10, 1897 Lattimer Massacre** near Hazleton, Pennsylvania. Sheriff kills 19 striking coal miners.

**September 6, 1901 President McKinley assassinated** by Leon Czolgosz at Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. Emma arrested in Chicago. Later released for lack of evidence connecting her to the plot.

**March 3, 1903 Anarchist Exclusion Act** fulfills President Theodore Roosevelt's wishes to prohibit anarchists from immigrating to the United States. Allows deportation of noncitizen anarchists who have been in the country for three years.

**1903 Emma founds Free Speech League** in defense of John Turner. Supreme Court upholds constitutionality of Anarchist Exclusion Act and John Turner becomes the first deported under the legislation.

**1906 Emma founds *Mother Earth*** to share her ideas beyond her lectures. Continues publication of magazine until shutdown under Espionage Act in 1917.

**April 20, 1914 Ludlow Massacre** in Colorado. National Guard opens fire on striking workers from John Rockefeller's mining companies and kills at least 19.

**February 11, 1916 Emma arrested advocating for birth control.** Sentenced on May 20 to 15 days at Queens County Penitentiary for violation of 1873 Comstock law.

**April 6, 1917 United States enters World War I.**

**May 9, 1917 Emma founds No-Conscription League** to oppose war and impending draft.

**May 18, 1917 Selective Service Act** requires men to register for the military.

**June 15, 1917 Espionage Act** outlaws interfering with military recruitment and the war effort.

**June 15, 1917 Emma arrested** for protesting the war. Sentenced on July 9 to two years in prison in Jefferson City, Missouri.

**May 16, 1918 Sedition Act** expands Espionage Act to prohibit criticism of the government during the war.

**October 16, 1918 Immigration Act** expands reach of Anarchist Exclusion Act.

**November 1919 Palmer Raids** begin to suppress unionization efforts during rise in unemployment after the war. Hundreds rounded up and prepared for deportation.

**December 21, 1919 Emma deported** to the Soviet Union on the *Buford*, along with 248 others targeted for their political beliefs.

**May 14, 1940 Emma dies** from a stroke in Toronto, Canada. Buried at Waldheim Cemetery in Chicago next to the Haymarket martyrs.

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## Quotations

- “I will defy him”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume One*, p. 18.
- “We can be back before Father wakes up...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume One*, p. 19.
- “You are my disgrace...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume One*, p. 60.
- “Back to your machines...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume One*, p. 16.
- “I have a feeling that you...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume One*, p. 9.
- “Something new and wonderful...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume One*, p. 10.
- “I could sway people...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume One*, p. 51.
- “Stop your jabbering...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume One*, p. 191.
- “Your presence here...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume Two*, p. 72.
- “Emma Goldman, you’re under arrest!”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume Two*, p. 75.
- “That is the end, Emma Goldman...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume Two*, p. 145.
- “The government lost a soldier...”: Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*, p. 28.
- “What more fitting place...”: Goldman, *Living My Life, Volume Two*, p. 127.

## The Short and Courageous Life of Rachel Corrie

Most people would probably put on a shoe before stepping through a thorny blackberry bush. Not Rachel. She never was most people. That child braved sharp thorns with bare feet.

And thorns. Thorns weren't the only thing didn't bother Rachel. She planted her scratched up feet in the ground, when others got scared and wanted to scurry.

"Let's say all our food sunk in the boat and we have to eat what we can find," Rachel called out to her friend Brigid.

They reached their hands into the cool water of the creek. Tugged at the slithering seaweed. Stretched the meal out over a rock to dry in the summer sun.

Rachel caught a fish the size of her thumbnail and said, "We have to eat what we can find."

"You're not going to eat that," Brigid insisted.

"Yes I am," said Rachel. She dropped the fish into the back of her throat. Swallowed in a single gulp.

"Gross!" Brigid shouted.

What made Rachel do what her friends would never dare?

According to her, it all goes back to that fire.

No sirens clamored. No fire engines swooped to the scene.

But on April 10, 1979, Rachel was born with a fire crackling inside her belly.

As Rachel walked through her hometown of Olympia, Washington, she could see the mountains in the distance. Before her, she noticed people lying down. Their mattress the hard concrete of the sidewalk.



She saw signs painted on cardboard asking for a bite to eat. This wasn't the pretend hunger of shipwrecked princesses with Brigid down by the stream.

Sadness stoked Rachel's fire. Sadness at what she saw. Sadness at what most people passing by refused to see.

She took out her pen and wrote, "They are us. And we could as easily be them."

In second grade, a sign of rules hung down from the ceiling of Rachel's classroom. One said, "Everyone must feel safe."

"That's the best rule I can think of," Rachel wrote in her journal.

But what about the people sleeping on the street?

What about those sitting with cardboard signs?

Shouldn't they be part of everyone? Shouldn't they feel safe too?

Rachel wanted everyone to mean everyone.

In fifth grade, Rachel learned about children the whole world over who went to bed hungry. Children who died from disease because they didn't have enough to eat.

Flames of outrage bellowed. Rachel had to let it out. She went right to the capitol to give those lawmakers who let it all happen a piece of her mind.

Wearing her blue sweater with snowflakes and evergreens stitched in white, Rachel approached the microphone.

Inside her fire must have been trembling. Outside she stood confident and still.

Her eyes looked forward. Her mouth started to move. Her heart started to speak.

"I'm here for other children. I'm here because I care. I'm here because children everywhere are suffering. We have got to understand that the poor are all around us and we are ignoring them. We have got to understand that they are us. We are them."

In college, Rachel learned about the past. About people who refused to ignore wrongs. People who wanted to build a better world. Even if it meant putting themselves in danger.

“We’ve certainly waded in the same water and wandered on the same beaches as very brave people,” Rachel thought. “It makes bravery seem more possible.”

Rachel heard a voice on the radio say that towers across the continent fell. She heard her government leaders rise with calls for war.

Rachel thought about those brave people before her, unafraid to take unpopular stances.

She stitched feather into fabric. Crafted a hat with a beak. Gathered a group of young and old and danced down the streets as doves beckoning for peace.

But the bombs of war still dropped. And sunk Rachel’s heart. Her fire yearned to do something more.

Across the globe, bulldozers demolished homes in Palestine. Brave people tried to use their bodies as shields to protect the homes.

Rachel’s friend asked her to help.

“I need to go,” she thought.

As a child, Rachel loved playing in the water. Here the children couldn’t even swim in the sea their people had known for centuries.

When they wanted to travel to a job, attend a school, or visit a doctor, they were stopped, searched, questioned.

“I’m sort of embarrassed about how long it takes me to realize in my gut that people live like this,” she thought.

Bulldozers came to demolish homes where families lived and children played.

Rachel and her friends ran out into the path between the bulldozers and the homes and refused to budge.

With banners and megaphones and determination, they stood strong. Flesh more solid than steel. The bulldozers backed down.

Rachel wrote to her parents about what she saw. She told them about the generous families she stayed with.

About how the families wanted her to let Americans know she had lived with Muslims. That they were good people, quiet people, who wanted peace.

While Rachel felt loved by Palestinians, she felt the world did not love them. Did not care that explosives shattered the windows of the family's house she was in. Did not care that this happened while she was playing with two babies and being served tea.

Rachel's parents were afraid. They wanted her to return home.

Her fire wouldn't let her budge. "I think it is a good idea for us all to drop everything and devote our lives to making this stop."

Bulldozers and a tank got ready to demolish more homes. Rachel and her friends moved in to announce their unarmed presence. They put their bodies in front of the mighty machines like they had done several times before.

A bulldozer moved towards a friend's house. Rachel, wearing a fluorescent orange jacket, knelt before its blade. The operator continued forward, piling up a mound of earth.

Rachel stepped on top of the mound, planting the hardened soles of her feet in defiance.

Friends screamed as the bulldozer refused to stop. And ended Rachel's life.

From the time she was a young child, Rachel wanted more than to watch the world through a window. She wanted to taste the wetness of the grass. Answer the melodies of the birds. Play with her toy boat in the pond beneath the cottonwood tree.

When Rachel was a toddler, she stepped down from a wooden climber and walked toward Capitol Lake. With her arms wide open and her grandma at her side, Rachel announced, "This is the wide world and I'm coming to it."

Come to this wide world Rachel did.

A bulldozer might be able to take a life, but a bulldozer can never extinguish a fire.

Through each brave act that we do, Rachel's fire burns on.

## More About Rachel Corrie

Cindy and Craig Corrie welcomed their third child Rachel into the world on April 10, 1979. As she grew up in Olympia, Washington, Rachel fell in love with playing in nature and the power of words. She cherished nursery rhymes and lullabies and piling into bed with her siblings Chris and Sarah to listen to a story.

When a family friend asked what Rachel wanted to be when she grew up, Rachel declared, “*I am a poet!*” This is who Rachel was. Confident that, even though she was young, she still was capable, she still mattered.

Rachel attended an alternative public elementary school where she learned about important issues in her community and the broader world. Her fifth grade class studied world hunger and organized a press conference at the state capitol, where Rachel delivered a passionate speech.

In middle school, Rachel led a walkout in support of her teachers who wanted smaller class sizes. In high school, Rachel lived for six weeks with a family in Russia. She discovered the humanity of a people the Cold War had made out to be the enemy.

Rachel attended the progressive Evergreen State College. She learned new histories of her community, which unsettled her and further solidified her commitment to social activism.

In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, Rachel became involved with peace groups. She helped to organize a parade of doves down the streets of Olympia.

Rachel learned from an Israeli woman and other local activists about Palestinian homes being demolished and water attacked. In January 2003, she traveled to Israel/Palestine as part of the International Solidarity Movement. Rachel visited her

elementary school before she left to explain her trip to the students and invite them to write letters to Palestinian children.

Rachel arrived to a scene of bulldozers and tanks, border walls and checkpoints, crushed greenhouses and crumbled homes. Yet, she also arrived to a people displaying such immense humanity and love in the face of it all, which she documented in her journals and letters to her family.

The International Solidarity Movement lent bodies as human shields. Rachel and other activists from around the world stood between Palestinian water workers and Israeli sniper towers. They slept at water wells and in Palestinian families' homes under threat of demolition.

On March 16, 2003, Rachel put her body in front of a bulldozer intent on demolishing a home for the last time. Her death was both tragic and unremarkable. Palestinians, who have lost so many friends and family, know full well the extent of the risk that comes along with working for their freedom.

Rachel's family created the Rachel Corrie Foundation to carry on her legacy. A collection of Rachel's writing has been published as a book and adapted into a play that has been performed around the globe. Rachel always believed that words were sacred. It is her sacred words we are left with, and upon which this story is drawn, which continue to inspire action for justice around the world.

## Author's Note

Alice, a fellow activist with the International Solidarity Movement, held her friend Rachel close as she lay dying. Like Alice, I am Jewish. Rachel Corrie understood that morally opposing the Israeli government's treatment of the Palestinian people is not itself an act of antisemitism. Rather, conflating the Israeli government with the Jewish people completely erases the long tradition of which Alice is a part and to which I hope my own work contributes.

My Aunt Jeri grew up in Jackson, Mississippi. As a child, she integrated the public schools. Aunt Jeri grew up in a community that was violently attacked for its commitment to racial justice. White supremacists bombed her rabbi's home because he supported civil rights activists in jail. They bombed her synagogue too. The violence, which left Medgar Evers assassinated in his driveway, did not scare away those with courage.

In 1964, volunteers traveled from across the country to register people to vote as part of Mississippi Freedom Summer. James Chaney, a Black Mississippian, along with Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, white Jews from the North, were murdered when they went to investigate the burning of a church where they had planned to open a Freedom School.

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Mississippi Freedom Summer, I organized Jews for Jackson with my friend, a campaign to collectively move resources to support Black-led organizing in Mississippi. It was an honor to get to travel there that summer to learn from the veterans of the movement and connect with those carrying on the important work. It was inspiring to see how after half a century the veterans remained

committed activists. So many of those who were Jewish were working for justice for Palestinians.

I have traveled to the West Bank and worked for a summer as an art teacher in Nablus with young children growing up in refugee camps. Never have I met such a kind people. The warm heart of the Palestinians is so tragically misrepresented. This misrepresentation enables mistreatment.

My brother Adam and I went to the Islamic Center one day in the town where we grew up to share about our time in Palestine. As we left, the driver of a car passing by rolled down his window and shouted out to us two Jews, "Fuck Islam!" We have too many stories in this world that are told from the perspective of the driver of this car, the driver of the tank, the driver of the bulldozer, the driver of the government. We need more stories of heart, not more stories of hate. This is why I wrote about Rachel Corrie.

At my cousin's wedding last spring, I got to meet childhood friends of my Aunt Jeri. I witnessed the beauty of friendships that have endured through violence that tried to tear them apart. My Aunt Jeri took out a letter she recently wrote to her representatives that she wanted to share with me. In it, she condemned the recent desecration of Jewish cemeteries and the proliferation of bomb threats to Jewish gathering places across the country. She described this present moment of horror to that of her childhood in Mississippi. She demanded serious action be taken to address this wave of antisemitism. I believe we must build bridges and not walls between all those who face injustice. Our struggles for liberation must be intertwined.



## Rachel Corrie's Writing

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## Quotations

All appear in *Let Me Stand Alone*

“We have to eat what we can find...Gross” (p. 136).

“I’m here for other children. I’m here because I care” (p. 8).

“I look at this place now and I just want to do right by it” (p. 203).

“This is the wide world and I’m coming to it” (p. 276).

“I *am* a poet” (p. xx).

## Appendices

## Appendix A

### Selected Works by Authors of Picture Book Biographies

**Andrea Davis Pinkney**

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- Pinkney, A. D., & Pinkney, B. (2010). *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down*. New York, NY: Little, Brown.
- Pinkney, A. D., & Pinkney, B. (2012). *Hand in Hand: Ten Black Men Who Changed America*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

**Carole Boston Weatherford**

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**Cynthia Chin-Lee**

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- Chin-Lee, C., Halsey, M., & Addy, S. (2008). *Akira to Zoltan: Twenty-six Men Who Changed the World*. Watertown, MA: Charlesbridge.
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**David Adler**

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- Adler, D., & Brown, D. (2000). *A Picture Book of George Washington Carver*. New York, NY: Holiday House.
- Adler, D., & Byrd, S. (1992). *A Picture Book of Harriet Tubman*. New York, NY: Holiday House.
- Adler, D., & Casilla, R. (1992). *A Picture Book of Jesse Owens*. New York, NY: Holiday House.
- Adler, D., & Casilla, R. (1997). *A Picture Book of Thurgood Marshall*. New York, NY: Holiday House.
- Adler, D., & Farnsworth, B. (2002). *A Hero and the Holocaust: The Story of Janusz Korczak and His Children*. New York, NY: Holiday House.
- Adler, D., & Ritz, K. (1993). *A Picture Book of Anne Frank*. New York, NY: Holiday House.
- Adler, D., & Widener, T. (2005). *America's Champion Swimmer: Gertrude Ederle*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

**Debbie Levy**

Levy, D., & Baddeley, E. (2016). *I Dissent: Ruth Bader Ginsburg Makes Her Mark*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

**Donna Jo Napoli**

Napoli, D. J., & Nelson, K. (2010). *Mama Miti: Wangari Maathai and the Trees of Kenya*. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

**Doreen Rappaport**

Rappaport, D. (2012). *Beyond Courage: The Untold Story of Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.

Rappaport, D., & Collier, B. (2001). *Martin's Big Words: The Life of Martin Luther King Jr.* New York, NY: Hyperion.

Rappaport, D., & James, C. (2005). *The School is Not White! A True Story of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

Rappaport, D., & Kelley, G. (2009). *Eleanor, Quiet No More: The Life of Eleanor Roosevelt*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

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**Emily Arnold McCully**

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**Icy Smith**

Smith, I., & Nhem, S. (2010). *Half Spoon of Rice: A Survival Story of the Cambodian Genocide*. Manhattan Beach, CA: East West Discovery.

Smith, I., & Roski, G. G. (2008). *Mei Ling in China City*. Manhattan Beach, CA: East West Discovery.

**Jabari Asim**

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Asim, J., & Lewis, E. B. (2016). *Preaching to the Chickens: The Story of Young John Lewis*. New York, NY: Nancy Paulsen.

**Jen Cullerton Johnson**

Johnson, J. C., & Sadler, S. L. (2010). *Seeds of Change: Planting a Path to Peace*. New York, NY: Lee & Low.

**John Hendrix**

Hendrix, J. (2009). *John Brown: His Fight for Freedom*. New York, NY: Abrams.

**Kate Schatz**

Schatz, K., & Stahl, M. K. (2015). *Rad American Women A-Z: Rebels, Trailblazers, and Visionaries Who Shaped Our History and Our Future!* San Francisco, CA: City Lights.

Schatz, K., & Stahl, M. K. (2016). *Rad Women Worldwide: Artists and Athletes, Pirates and Punks, and Other Revolutionaries Who Shaped History*. New York, NY: Ten Speed.

**Matt Tavares**

Tavares, M (2010). *Henry Aaron's Dream*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick.

**Michelle Markel**

Markel, M., & Sweet, M. (2013). *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909*. New York, NY: Balzer and Bray.

**Richard Michelson**

Michelson, R., & Colon, R. (2008). *As Good as Anybody: Martin Luther King, Jr., and Abraham Joshua Heschel's Amazing March Toward Freedom*. New York, NY: Knopf.

Michelson, R., & Lewis, E. B. (2006). *Across the Alley*. New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

**Sarah Warren**

Warren, S., & Casilla, R. (2012). *Dolores Huerta: A Hero to Migrant Workers*. Tarrytown, NY: Marshall Cavendish.

**Tanya Lee Stone**

Stone, T. L., & Brown, K. (2015). *The House That Jane Built: A Story About Jane Addams*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

Stone, T. L., & Gibbon, R. (2008). *Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote*. New York, NY: Henry Holt.

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## Appendix B

### Interview Transcripts

Andrea Davis Pinkney

3/21/17, 22 minutes, telephone

**You have talked about growing up with parents who were so dedicated to the Civil Rights Movement and I am curious how that has shaped your interest in writing about history and what else has drawn you to the power of the people who brought social change to this country?**

It is interesting because of everything that you said, my parents being so involved, I grew up at a dining room table where I was hearing these stories from a very young age. Marching with King, sit-ins, compassionate social action. When you hear that from the time you are a young child, it stays with you. Those stories kind of always resonated with me.

Then of course now as a grownup, I think we are living in such a, it's a new world but it's not. History is especially in this moment, it's repeating itself. And I have always thought that those stories interested me as a child, perhaps they will interest young people today. And that kind of sparked the passion about these topics.

**With that passion there are many ways to tell those stories and you have done so in a variety of ways, I am curious particular what has drawn you to the picture book biography format and what you see as the power in telling a story in that way.**

I find people like to read about other people or know about other people. I think it is part of our humanity, that we are drawn to others. I know for me, biographies that I do, that I write, are always about men and women who have been of great interest to me. Alvin Ailey, Ella Fitzgerald, Duke Ellington, and *Hand in Hand*. What I try to do in each of my biographies is, I start with the influences of what happened to that individual as a child. In the case of Alvin Ailey, every Sunday at the Baptist church watching his mother sing in the gospel choir. And regarding that in his young mind as pageantry, as drama, like going to the theater. With Alvin Ailey bringing it full circle to his signature ballet *Revelations*.

It kind of goes back to the prior questions. The early experiences influence us and things we experience and discover as children, I believe really impact who we are and the gifts that we bring to the world. And that is what each of the individuals did in the biographies that I write about. It's why it interests me. What are the things that happen to us as a child that allow us to bring gifts into this world?

**You seem to really be drawn to stories yourself and feel that other people will also be drawn to them and you feel like you are drawn to stories that are not being told and you helped to create an imprint dedicated to publishing books specifically about and by African Americans. Your life has been so broad and so passionate, which is really amazing. It seems you really live the ideals of the brave people that you write about. I am curious how you see those many pieces of your life as author, as editor,**



**as advocate, all of these, how do you see these intertwined or separate or playing off of each other?**

We all are our own individual tapestries if you will, mosaics, and in my case, you described it. Each of those stones play a role of the bigger picture. I could not do one at the exclusion of the other. They all inform each other. The working as an editor, helping authors say what they need to say, my interest as an author, the kind of books that I write and create, the kind of research that I do, the books I have worked on with my husband, the advocacy in the industry, the hiring of more diverse talent, both authors and editors, they all are interconnected. My hope is that when you step back and look at them, it will make this beautiful tapestry or mosaic of diversity in the larger sense as it relates to content and what is being delivered to young readers.

**All those pieces are so important and I love how they come together for you. You mentioned your husband illustrating many of your books. How is that for you?**

Typically authors and illustrators do not meet each other, they don't go to Starbucks, they don't collaborate, they often have never met. In the case of my recent book, *A Poem for Peter*, which is not illustrated by my husband. Steve Johnson and Lou Fancher, husband and wife team, have never met them, never spoken with them, never conversed with them, they did those illustrations completely exclusive of what I did with the text. That is typical of the process. In my case, I've got a unique situation, I am married to the guy. And we share a house and a tube of toothpaste and a box of cereal, a family, and children, and all of that. The way we do that is it's pretty much the same. Brian has a studio it's outside of our home. I don't go there. I don't ask him how he is doing. I don't look in the window. I don't see the artwork in process, I see it when it's finished. He gets the manuscript not from me but from the editor that is working on it.

We do have a "business meeting" once a week, which is on a Saturday, we go to the same diner every Saturday. We go over sketches and schedules and anything work related during those several hours. And that's the boundary that we have. When that meeting is over, it's done. We don't talk about work other times. What's good about it is I can plan on it, if there is something I want to discuss with Brian about sketches or a direction or a book cover. I just know that I've got that on my list for Saturday at 11.

**You have said that aspiring writers should write and write and read and write every day. And also you talk about how your own voice, the voice that you find for writing each story, almost comes to knock at your door and you meet a friend and you just listen to this character whisper in your ear and you feel like the vehicle for those words. Has that always been the case for you? How did you get to that point? Was it the persistent dedication, the practice, or has that always been your relationship to writing? What encouraging words would you have for folks who are dedicated and want to keep learning more in being able to develop their own unique voice?**

You know it's funny, that's an interesting kind of quote. While I do experience what you are describing, writing is a craft, it's hard work and I work hard at it. As well as the

research for all of my books. That whispering, character whispering in my ear, is one piece of a large process. I write every day. My own personal belief is that's what a real writer does. People say, "Do you write on your birthday?" "Yes." "Do you write on Christmas?" "Yes." "Do you write when you don't feel like writing? Do you write when you don't feel well? Do you write when you feel tired?" "Yes. Yes. Yes."

I am an early riser. I get up at 4. I do that. It's a routine. I do it pretty much every morning, I am writing every morning. I am making it my business to get those words on paper. Are they always publishable words? No. Are they always spelled properly? No. Are they any great prose or verse narratives? Sometimes. But I am engaged in the active pursuit of the craft of writing. It is kind of along the lines of the comment that you made. That is the portal by which those characters can enter because I am open to the process of receiving information that comes into my mind. But I have to be working at writing to get to that point. It doesn't just happen. It's not magic. It doesn't just pop up out of nowhere. It comes because I've made myself available for it.

**I am curious how you have navigated writing about important histories that you have said we cannot sugarcoat for children, even though you are writing for young people, being honest about the complexities and the contradictions in our past and how those continue to shape the present. I am curious how you have continued that commitment and any pushback you have received or things you think folks should keep in mind if they do want to tackle something that an editor might be a little bit too hesitant to take on and doesn't think is appropriate, even though it is important to actually honor the realness of what has happened and the brave courageous people who have confronted those issues.**

I think that children are smart people. They know things. If they don't know it intellectually, they know it emotionally and spiritually. I think that we should not underestimate what they are able to understand. A book is something that, depending on the content and the subject matter, can be shared with a child. I don't shy away from topics and a great example is in the book *A Poem for Peter* there is mention of Hitler and his regime, Ezra Jack Keats' parents fleeing antisemitism, Polish immigrants fleeing, and that book works with first graders. Because hopefully they will have an adult who will contextualize, help them understand, it's also the beauty of an author's note, you can help the grownup find a way in with the child.

I don't sugarcoat. I don't shy away from topics. Another example, my novel *The Red Pencil*, set in Sudan during the height of the war, Darfurian crisis in 2003-2004. There's a sad thing that happened in that book and that was a case where I did have to pause and say, "Okay, how much of this am I going to tell? How am I going to render the tragic without sugarcoating it?" That is where the craft comes in. The dailyness of writing and the listening to myself, "How am I going to tell this story?" I don't shy away from any story.

As a publisher, publishing the book, *A Wreath for Emmett Till* by Marilyn Nelson, about the lynching of Emmett Till. Again that was something that I approached Marilyn about,

knowing that this was a very sensitive topic. I was asking her and myself how is it going to be delivered?

**Thank you for not shying away because those are such needed books. You've mentioned that in addition to the writing every day that you're really dedicated to the research and making sure that what you have presented is historically accurate and really checking all of those facts many times. You generate way more exciting information than can be included into the story. How are you making decisions of what you're going to focus on when you write about somebody's life?**

What am I going to say about whoever? Ezra Jack Keats, Ella Fitzgerald, all those. It starts with a big treasure trove of research and information. And kind of picking out the nuggets, if you will, the gems that are most compelling, knowing in the case of Duke Ellington, knowing that he really didn't want to be a piano player, he wanted to be a baseball player as a kid, okay, setting this beautiful gem over here. Setting it out on my desk, so to speak. And collecting the most, with my analogy, the most shiny, pertinent facts. Then deciding how I want to weave them together. There are times when I think, you know what? This doesn't belong in. I am focusing on the piano, this other piece of it doesn't really have a place in this particular book, and again, maybe that's stuck in an author's note or somewhere else. It is a process of kind of sifting and discovering and that's what fun about the research. I find things out that I didn't know about a person or a situation

**What difference do you hope for your work to make in the world?**

I really hope that young people will discover people, times in history, situations that they may not have known of before and also use that information and sense of discovery, wonder, the gathering of facts, to enlighten others, really, to share what they know about Martin Luther King or Mahalia Jackson or Ezra Jack Keats. Go up to a friend and say, "Hey, did you know that Sojourner Truth had size 12 feet? Did you know she used those feet to stomp out injustice?" What I hope is that people will learn, discover, and share.

Carole Boston Weatherford

1/16/17, 29 minutes, telephone

**I think it is wonderful how you speak of making music with words. You talk about being a child and writing from the very beginning. How do you think that inspiration has continued to live on and energize you as an author?**

I still have the same love of language that I had when I was a little girl: listening to nursery rhymes; reading poems; going to the library; reading *The Snowy Day*. I still have that in me. I still remember hearing Langston Hughes's poetry at school and having to memorize. I still consider Hughes one of my literary mentors. Words never stopped inspiring me. Poetry is my first literary love. I consider myself first and foremost a poet. I

write different genres but they often tend to be hybrids of poetry. I write books for children of all ages.

**While you have been drawn to different genres, you said poetry continues to pull you through. You have talked a lot about the importance of "mining the past for family stories, fading traditions, and forgotten struggles." With that commitment as a writer, how did that bring you to work on biographies in particular?**

People that I write about, first of all, I must admire, or at least be very curious about. I don't want to write about people that I despise or find distasteful. Beyond the fact that individuals spark my curiosity and inspire me, I don't always know the people I am writing about are slipping into obscurity, but often they are. Sometimes I do realize it because there are no other books about them. These are people whose names were household words when I was growing up, but that I'm finding not everybody's heard of nowadays.

When I wrote the Fannie Lou Hamer book, *Voice of Freedom*, I thought that most adults would know who Fannie Lou Hamer was. I did not expect children to know who she was because she died in the '70s. But I was often surprised that adults did not know. I could ask a room full of adults at a conference, it could be an English teacher conference or librarian conference, and they don't know who Fannie Lou Hamer is or at least they didn't before picking up that book. I am not only giving these people back to kids, the subjects of my biographies, but I am also sometimes educating the adults, who are educators themselves. That is really important because if they don't know about these people, they can't tell kids about them. My biographies, in particular, sometimes do double duty, when I don't even realize that they are going to do that. They are such important histories that all of us need to remember.

**We need to be told over and over again and how wonderful your books invite us into exploring pieces of the past that unfortunately aren't always held up. You continue to help have those stories reach so many people. How much of what you are writing is things you have already known and been passionate about and how much are you gathering and doing research? The *Moses* book you did, you and Harriet Tubman lived in the same county, pretty cool to have that affinity, as well as bringing her words and her struggle into contemporary times to help us grapple with the ongoing legacy of slavery and resistance to racism.**

A lot of times my subjects are dead so I can't interview them. I try to access the primary source materials that I can. I often go to photographs first. I want to see what the times looked like, where they hailed from, what that looks like. I want to know what people looked like during this time period, what they wore and their environs. I often go to picture archives. I also use a lot of digital archives at libraries that have primary source materials, like news articles. I also go to museums. Sometimes I even get ideas for books when I am on my travels. Sometimes I might go to a place and get inspired to write about it. Even if I knew about a story, it might strike me in such a way that I think it needs to be interpreted for younger people.

**You talk about interpreting all of those images, news articles, interviews, museum visits, for young people. How do you decide what of that information is going to make it into your story? What does the writing process look like for you?**

Ultimately you want there to be a story and you don't want to veer too far afield from that narrative. That sometimes determines what fits in and what gets omitted in terms of a historical narrative. At the same time, the children's book category has limits in terms of word count. You don't have that many words to work with. You do have to pare down. But even though I have pared down the narrative, the economy of language advances the narrative by packing a more powerful punch in fewer words.

**You talk about those images and then you paint so many images with your words. I know you have been writing your whole life, so obviously you're an extremely skilled writer. How do you choose your words? How do you make your writing engaging to children and really all readers?**

Those decisions depend on the subject and the structure of a piece. If I can come up with the concept and a structure that fits that subject, then sometimes the words will flow. For my book *Before John Was a Jazz Giant*, at first I was trying to make it more biographical, then I realized I really wanted it to be about sounds he heard as a child. I wanted it to riff like jazz, flow like a saxophone. The text is a partial biography, but it is more of a mood piece, a soundscape of his childhood, not what he did in first grade, second grade, tenth grade. But the sounds he heard along the way as he became the person who ultimately graduated from high school in the town where I also happened to live when I wrote the book, go on to become a legend, a jazz legend.

For my book *Racing Against the Odds*, the story of Wendell Scott, it's a Southern story. Once I came up with the Southern colloquial storytelling voice, I was able to choose words. For the Harriet Tubman book, again structure helped with the word choice. Once I decided to structure the biography as a series of conversations between Harriet and God, I had to figure out, what's God's piece? What's Harriet's piece? The characters chose the words for me. Once I am able to arrive at the voice of the narrator, I can choose words that sound like that narrator.

**How wonderful you write in many different voices and allow a book to develop into what you're feeling it should be. What difference do you hope to make with your books when they reach readers?**

At the most basic level, I want them to learn about someone who made a contribution. My books are all about people who have achieved against the odds; faced adversity and racial oppression, yet managed to contribute to society. I want to introduce younger people to individuals like that, especially but not exclusively African American heroes and heroines. I've got a book about photographer Dorothy Lange that just came out. It's almost a companion to my Gordon Parks book, it's from the same publisher. I've got two poetic picture books about Depression-era photographers. Both worked as U.S.

government photographers to document conditions across the country. My books introduce kids to people that I think they should know.

Beyond that I want to of course inspire kids to overcome any obstacles that they might face to achieving their goals or to realizing their own potential. I want my books not only to be a window to the past and a window into inspiring lives, but also to be mirrors for kids, so they can see themselves in the books. I want any child to be able to see themselves in one of my books. At least one. “Oh this person enjoys singing just like I sing.” “This guy, Jesse Owens, he was an athlete just like I am.” “Fannie Lou Hamer loved to read, just like I do.” “Harriet Tubman was scared sometimes, just like I am.”

**It is inspiring to talk to you because you have been one of the most influential writers in the field of writing important histories for children in beautiful and engaging and accessible ways. Through the wisdom you have gained through your years as a writer, what do you have to say to aspiring authors?**

Write what you are interested in particularly if you are writing nonfiction. For one thing, you don't know how long you are going to have to research, so you really want to be interested in it. You also don't know how long it's going to take to sell it and you may have to keep revising it over and over. So, you really want to be able to sustain your own interest in the subject matter. You can only do that if you are genuinely interested in a subject.

The other thing I would say is that some stories are told over and over, but lots of other stories don't get told. There are millions of stories. Write out of African American history. Write out of American history that has yet to be told. Mine the past, as I have done, and mine those stories. Be willing to revise. That is so important. Join a critique group. This is pretty pat stuff. Try to create cinematic themes. Use action verbs. Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly. I tell young writers and adult writers the same thing.

Cynthia Chin-Lee

1/22/17, 37 minutes, telephone

**What inspired you to become a writer, especially for children?**

I have always enjoyed writing, since I was a kid. I grew up in Washington DC and felt like I saw some discrimination and bullying. My parents had seen that too. My parents were both born in the states. When they were growing up, they definitely felt the scorn of some of their peers. Recently my father passed away. He went to American University in Washington DC. He was a college football player. He tried out for a fraternity and they said, “Yeah, you're a member.” But then they had to turn around and rescind that because he wasn't white. Stuff like that would happen.

When I was a young girl, 8, my brother Bruce was 18 and he was saving up for college. He was working at the McDonald's in Bethesda, cooking burgers. But in order to get to his job he borrowed my uncle's car. My uncle's very sporty English MG. And because he was driving my uncle's car to his minimum wage job, he also got a lot of ridicule and faces. One day in the middle of the night, our neighbors call us and say your car is on fire and they called the fire engines and fire station. My uncle's MG was in a blaze. We don't have the proof of how that happened but we have our strong position. I think that I have always grown up with the feeling that while I wanted to see a fully accepting society, it wasn't always that way.

I wanted to write stories of my own heritage and experiences so when I started having kids, 28 years ago, I had read a lot children's books to my daughter Vanessa, who is the oldest, I thought, Gosh, I like to write, but I am going to write stories for her, for myself as well. That's why I started writing children's books. I wanted to write multicultural books.

**Thank you for being open about painful stories from the past and about discrimination your family has faced and how that has shaped you to tell the story of a lot of brave people and brave women who have taken action against injustice. I think the fact that you were on the streets yesterday, and you write about really cool people, many of whom are activists, is all connected. Why particularly the life stories? In *Amelia to Zora* you are telling lots of women's stories just in one book. What drew you to telling all of those stories? How did you choose those people as well?**

That book actually came about, the idea anyway, when I was separated. I was feeling very much women in society don't get respect that they deserve. The struggle they have to go through just to get things that everyone should get: education, equal pay. Feeling very isolated through my separation, I said, "I want to write a book to celebrate women. Hold up these women who have accomplished wonderful things under such difficult circumstances and overcome a lot of obstacles." I knew I wanted it to be pretty diverse, and how women in various fields, including the non-traditional fields like, sports and political action and science, technology, there are women in those areas. The eventual editor for the book wanted a teacher so I have Yoshiko Uchida I also concentrated on women that are either alive or fairly recent, so that was, I thought that would be easier to for my readership. The other reasons why you are selecting when you are an alphabet book writer is because you have to fulfill an X and Z.

**What does your research process look like for uncovering more about the lives of these women?**

I definitely wanted to have information about the women, what they overcame. I think it's great to glorify their achievements, but for those of us who are struggling in any way, to understand how they had to overcome their hurdles I think is important. For most of the women I tried to show something about their youth and something about they had to overcome. I think that's where we get the most inspiration. We need to get hope from

those who came before us and those who struggled before us. So I didn't want to gloss over their lives.

I researched through books and magazines and reference materials. I am lucky I go to Washington DC a lot so I can use the Library of Congress. You can find information on more obscure people.

**You seem to have a desire to really humanize those characters so people can identify with them when they face struggles and not just be intimidated by the accomplishments. The story of how people got there. How do you keep your writing engaging? You talked about the pieces of the lives you wanted to touch upon and once you decide that, what does your writing process look like? How are you telling the stories in a way that is engaging for the reader?**

I don't know. I guess I try to put myself in the mindset of a child. What would be exciting for kids? For me, when I wrote about Amelia Earhart, I thought it was really exciting that as a kid she tried to make her own roller coaster. For Patricia Schroeder, she set up her own little toy store where she would sell her used toys. We're all kids actually, we adjust as we grow up and chase the reality of being adults. That is sort of how I think.

**What draws you to the format of the alphabet book to tell the stories? What is the value you see in that and being able to tell many stories, as opposed to perhaps a picture book biography that focuses just on one subject or a particular time period?**

I wrote an alphabet book on Asia. That came about because I saw there were a lot of alphabet books about Africa. That came about when I was flipping through *Publishers Weekly* and it said there is a book called *A is for Africa* and because I am an Asian American and I studied East Asian studies at Harvard, I said, "Well, I think I could write a book about Asia." I guess that is how I got into the alphabet book format. It's a very good format because it fits the traditional picture book, 32 pages. It is perfectly laid out because you always have a few pages of front matter and back matter. Then it gives you a structure and it does give you some actually built in diversity because you have to address a word that starts with A through Z and that does give you some challenge.

**In using 26 letters, 26 stories, it helps intentionally include a diverse range of stories, as well as stories you could sell as part of a bigger project, as opposed to just focusing on that story alone. In talking with some other authors, they have brought up the challenge of really believing in someone's life and then an editor telling them well people don't care about that person or people don't know who that person is. It seems that is the purpose of writers, to say, this life was significant so let's write it, so children are reading it, so people are talking about it. They talked about so much of the power of their books became not only teaching children, but teaching adults about important figures who in popular conscience have not been respected and admired in the ways they deserve. I am curious how you have navigated that challenge.**



Because you get to 26 letters it does give you a chance to do some broader research and really to highlight the people who are less famous and for me it's very intentional that I find people from various communities that have been underrepresented. In *Amelia to Zora*, I wrote about Nawal El Saadawi, the physician and writer. I wanted to find somebody who was from the Arab world, who struggled and fought for women's rights. For writing for children, you do get a little bit, you get edited for some of the more horrifying details of their lives. I couldn't or I didn't or I tried and it got edited down in terms of writing about genital mutilation. I remember when I wrote about Oprah Winfrey, I said explicitly in the write-up that she was sexually abused and that got edited out. There are some things editors feel children books topics that with the younger ages you can't address, but I try to take some chances.

When I wrote *Operation Marriage*, a lot of people would say, "You couldn't have possibly written that for elementary school children." I said, "Oh yeah, I did write it for elementary school children. It is a story for kids." I think kids these days know that there are LGBT people in the world who have feelings and rights and their kids have rights and that was the story that I wanted to tell.

### **Could you talk more about your own path to publication?**

My first book was for adults, it's called, *It's Who You Know*. It's out of print but you could find it at libraries or on Amazon. That was the book I wanted to write because I enjoyed networking with people and I thought it was an undervalued skill. I wrote that book in 1991, before Mark Zuckerberg was born. He made social networking very current for us. Then I had my daughter so I wanted to start writing books for kids because I was reading so many books to her. The first book, *Almond Cookies and Dragon Well Tea*, was written and that's really it.

In order to start to break into children's book writing, which I didn't know a whole lot about, I joined the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. I took a few classes from local children's book authors and then I started writing. *Almond Cookies and Dragon Well Tea* I wrote in response to a contest that was for Little Brown and it was announced in the SCBWI newsletter. I sent it to Little Brown, only to receive a letter that the newsletter printed the wrong information and that contest closed a year ago. But now I had a story I had written in response to the contest, so I said, "Heck, I am going to try to send it out to any editor I can find that says they are interested in multicultural children's literature." So I did send it to an editor that wanted it. He was at Macmillan, Harold Underdown said, "I want you to rewrite it." I rewrote it and then he rejected that.

Then I heard about a small tiny press in Chicago that published books for Asian Americans, so I sent it to them and they published it. They now are now out of business. It was great to have it published and this couple poured some of their savings into promoting the book and we did a West Coast book tour and that got me started. Harold Underdown, who was at Macmillan, who rejected that story, eventually acquired *A is for Asia* for Orchard Books where he subsequently went to. Then he got laid off, went to another editor, and she had to decide whether she would keep it or toss it and she decided

she would keep it. Harold later moved to Charlesbridge and also acquired *Amelia to Zora*. He really encouraged me on that book. But then he left. Charlesbridge. It got handed over to another editor who left and then it got turned to another editor who edited it. It is sort of scary because even if you get something accepted, you have to get it accepted, and then edited, and then actually published. And that takes several years. During that time a lot of stuff could happen. You know, people leave.

**Thank you for sharing that. What difference do you hope to make with your work?**

Gosh, I hope they get people to look at one another and accept one another with love and not to judge people just by their race or their gender or their gender identity. I hope it gets people talking and it gives people hope who may be in the minority or isolated or picked on. With *Operation Marriage*, I sent it to each of my brothers and sisters, my oldest brother, who I guess is the more conservative of us, he called me and said, "I don't like this book and I don't accept that gay people can get married, want to get married." The time it came out of course marriage in California was illegal between gay people. I was really hurt and shocked by him saying this to me over the phone, he was in San Diego. I told him, "Well, Bruce, I beg to differ and I hope you think about it more and reflect. I know that part of your justification for what you think the Bible says, but I really think you should look at the Bible in a different light and understand it is also a work of literature of its own culture and history and period in history." I feel like he has really come around quite a bit. I feel like at least for one person I kind of made a difference. I made him stop and pause and over the years he has changed. That's a very heartwarming feeling. The other part for writing *Operation Marriage*, a lot of people came up and said, "We were so happy to find a book that told our story." I also feel very strongly that women and girls need to have more opportunity and a lot of that comes from my mother's struggle. In her family, she really wasn't encouraged, in some ways she was prohibited from getting an education.

**You have shared about your own journey as a writer. What wisdom that you have gained would you like to pass along to aspiring authors?**

The road to publication is quite hard and you need to persist and you need to think of a way to continue writing if it's only for yourself. The great thing is that you can write a blog and share your writing or your thoughts. I have a blog, most of that is really personal stuff, I think writing is just, it's a great activity for yourself and therapy for me. I feel really blessed that I have an audience beyond just writing in my journal, I can actually share it with people through traditional books and ebooks. I would say, "Do it for yourself first and that if you help others that's extra. If you can get published in a traditional paperback or ebook that is even more broadened." I would say, "Don't write for what you perceive as fame or money, because that comes to the very rare person and writing in itself is just a great activity for your own health: mental health, physical health." I would say, "Yeah, go for it."

## David Adler

1/16/17, 29 minutes, telephone

I really had no plans to be a writer, I was a math teacher. I just got my MBA and a nephew of mine just kept asking questions. All of those questions were bouncing around my head and I wrote a story told completely in dialogue, questions and answers of a young boy to his grandfather as they go on a walk through a big city like Manhattan to a museum like the American Museum of Natural History. It wasn't poetry, but it was poetic. The end of each answer being shared was always the same, it was a little at a time, and that was my first book. I just wrote it, didn't know what to do with it, so I sent it to Random House, they published it. Then I did some math books. Then I came up with Cam Jansen. And then the work expanded into many areas because like all people I have many different interests. That is reflected in the different genres and types of books that I have written.

**You talk about having lots of interests and I would love to hear what in particular draws towards picture book biographies. What is it about the lives of people that you feel is important to tell and especially so for children?**

Well there are two things. First of all, I think you can learn history through the lives of people. History without the people becomes both boring and almost irrelevant. I would call my older level biographies anecdotal because I try to create a picture of the subject using both his or her words and also stories of things that happen that reveal aspects of the subject's personality. In the beginning, when my sons were in elementary school and were asked to write book reports of biographies and I went to the library in children's section there were no nonfiction biographies for third and fourth graders. They were historical fiction because there was a lot made up dialogue.

In my research, I found that one of the very first biographies of Washington was by a minister and he actually thought it was a great opportunity to teach children to tell the truth, so he made up the cherry tree story. Think of the irony of it, "I want to teach you children to tell the truth so I am going to lie to you." To me that was the terrible betrayal of the trust children put in books and the authors who write them. So it really made my picture book biographies series such a success from the beginning. Now there are a lot of people doing it, but at the time there really weren't many young nonfiction biographies.

**So vital to have such deep respect for young readers and to tell the truth. When I was in elementary school in East Lansing, Michigan, I read your picture book biography of Jesse Owens. I was really deeply moved by that book and then also I guess as a Jew I had become so intrigued here was this runner, here was this person, who himself was one person, yet had such great power to challenge all of the horrible vision of Hitler. I think through that story, especially for me, it helped me to see the power that people can have, and as you talk about, that history is so shaped by people and we cannot understand it outside of that context. Your books have impacted me throughout my life. Several other people have been blessed to**

**read your stories as well, whose stories are you drawn to telling? How do you decide whose life, especially for your biography series, you would like to write about?**

Sometimes a combination of who I want to write about and who my editors want to publish. Sometimes it takes some convincing, somebody who I think is very interesting, but the editor may not. I have to want to write it and they also have to want to publish it. It really is a combination of both working together.

Some years ago my editor asked, "Who would you like to write about?" I said, "Lou Gehrig." She said, "I have no interest in baseball." I said, "It won't be a baseball story, it will be a story about a baseball player, but based on his courage."

It is usually with the approach: Why are you telling me about so and so? Well there is something you can learn from his life or her life. For example, Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel. When she was about to swim it, there was a big story in the *London Daily News*, "You won't be able to do it because you are a woman, woman should know they are forever the weaker sex." But she swam it anyway. She not only became the first woman to do it, she beat the men's record by two hours.

**You become captivated by these people and you also have a concern for not misrepresenting them and not writing historical fiction. I would love to hear about what your research process looks like for these books.**

Book to book depending on the subject. Gertrude Ederle was difficult because there weren't any biographies written, full length, before mine. There wasn't all that much information available. I went to old newspapers. I spoke to members of the family. I fit the pieces together. For others, for example, Washington, I got as many books as I could. I tried to get books written close to his life, rather than close to the present time. There are books that were written by people who actually knew him, I thought that was more valid.

I try to gather as many books as I can. Sometimes I have to go beyond the books. I do a lot through newspapers. Often the detail itself might not be important, but it does paint the picture. There is a lot you can learn beyond the life story of the subject and that being usually my goal. It is my goal to find someone I am interested in.

**You have to find a way to beautifully distill that information, leaving a lot of information that might influence what you write, but not everything directly is going to be incorporated. How do you make decisions about what elements you have learned about a person that you think are necessary or would like to try to include in their stories?**

That is the beauty of biography is that you and I could write a biography of the same person. Certain things we both have. Then other things you would have and I wouldn't and vice versa. That is why it is interesting to read biographies because you are reading

not only about the person's life, but whoever wrote it, what he finds interesting or important. It is not about me, but if I write it or you write it, it will be different.

**Could you please describe more of your writing process and how you are able to write in a way that is not dry, but is engaging, not just reciting the facts of the life.**

I generally do not do all of my research first and then do my writing. I research as I write. If I am talking about the birth of someone. I will get all the different sources and see if there is something unique I can find in any one of those sources. I am researching as I am writing. Research, write, research write, research, write. If it's interesting, that is because hopefully what I found to write about the subject is interesting. As a writer I try to make it as well written as I can that is appropriate for the young reader.

**What difference do you hope to make with your work? Why do you bring books into this world? What life would you for them to have?**

My hope with the biographies I write is to be accurate.

**You said there weren't actual biographies when you started that were for children that were actually accounts of what had happened in their lives, but now it seems to be a genre that has more and more books that are being published that are actually researched, not the historical fiction that you described, which seems to be a result of the work that you have done for decades.**

Thirty years ago when you went to the library and looked for a young biography they were fictionalized and now you see less of that. Not only are the picture book biographies younger in general, but most of the biographies that have been published for children are strictly nonfiction. Now there are really a lot of people who are doing it, so I'm doing less of it because the editor says, "You know there is a lot of competition out there that wasn't there before."

**What wisdom have you gained from your writing career that you would like to share with aspiring authors?**

If it is not interesting to you as the author, it won't be interesting to your reader. Write what you find to be interesting. Write it down and then play with it. That is what being a writer is. Writing and then playing with what you have written. Writing is like a lot of other things, it takes practice. Just write the first draft, don't be so concerned. Read it over and keep trying to find ways to improve it. No one expects anyone to write a great first draft and nobody cares. They only care about the final draft.

**In the beginning you shared about the first book you wrote and you just sent it out, I am curious if there is more to that story of your path to publication and the relationships you built with editors over the years since you started to share that your ideas for your books were generated from ideas you had as well as editors who**

**said you should write this book. How did that relationship get formed and what has it looked like or how has it changed over the years?**

I have been writing now for more than 40 years. Over time I have worked with editors and generally had good relationships with them. He or she, usually she, might suggest that I do this book or that book. I am always open to editorial comments. If everything the editor said I were to reject, after a while the relationship would fall apart. Usually what they say makes sense. But as the author I don't see everything. I see it the way I put it down. I have in my head what I think it means but it may not mean that to someone else reading it. When I started, nobody knew who I was, they don't know who I am now, but anyway, they just looked at the manuscript. I just happened to write that first story and the publisher liked it. After six months, it took them that long to get back to me, but then one thing slowly, really slowly, led to the next. I was fortunate.

**I would love to hear what you believe are political responsibilities writers have in these times?**

Everybody has the political responsibility to vote. Beyond that I don't know what special responsibilities authors have. The arrogance for an author to say, "You know my opinion is more valuable than your opinion just because I am an author." That's ridiculous. Which is what actors seem to feel. "Because I can read someone else's script and memorize it, that means you should take my opinions to have greater values than the opinion of whomever else." I think the beauty of our democracy is one person one vote. I don't think I have any particular political responsibility.

Debbie Levy

1/20/17, 56 minutes, telephone

**Thank you for so graciously offering to talk with me today as I really admire the work that you have done and would just like to know more of what has shaped you and what inspires you and what you have learned about the craft of writing important stories of meaningful people for children. I would if you would start with sharing with me what generally inspires you to write.**

There is a broad question. I think for me the thought of writing something that I would want to read.

**You have certainly had a lot of themes in the stories that you tell, you're certainly drawn to telling particular stories. What draws you to a story? What do you hope to tell?**

Well of course it depends on the age that I am writing for, it depends on if I am writing fiction, if I am writing silly poems. One answer is that I appear to have been drawn to stories about being the other or being outside. You might think, "Oh, Ruth Bader

Ginsburg is the ultimate insider. She's a Supreme Court Justice." But her history is not that. Her history was as an other, that is a Jewish person, daughter of an immigrant, a woman trying to make it in a man's profession, and so she was an outsider.

But then also looking at my earlier book, a book very close to my heart is a book about my mother, called *The Year of Goodbyes*. It tells the story of her last year in Germany in 1938 and it goes through the year by going through the entries in her *posiealbum*, which is like an autograph album, which her friends wrote in. There is another story about being an other, an outsider, in Nazi Germany in 1938.

I wrote a picture book about the song "We Shall Overcome," which starts back in days of slavery and then goes through periods after, again we're talking about African Americans being outsiders. So I guess I am kind of drawn to that subject over and over again. There is something that seems to emerge once I am already drawn to the story. So I don't wake up and say, "Okay, let me find a story about an outsider or an other." It is only upon reflection and answering your question. What draws me to a story has more to do with characters, whether real or fictional, and less to do with plot. This is what I am drawn to in my reading as well. Characterization. Of course you have to have the plot, but I am more fascinated by character. And it draws me to nonfiction as well.

**When you decide you do want to learn more about this character, what does your research process look like? I know it's extremely extensive, all the detailed notes you have in *I Dissent*.**

It looks deep and wide. You have to dig down deep. You also have to broaden your scope. I love the research process. I am indebted to my training as a lawyer. Not that you have to be a lawyer to do outstanding research. This is just where I got my sense of keep on, keep on, keep on. I almost conceptualize it as until you close the circle. Research until I bring the circle back around. So I feel anywhere I look around me about this subject or person, what I see, or what I hear, is going to be familiar, because I will already have learned about it. Coming back around to a point where I am not surprised anymore

**As you become intimate in that knowledge, at what point do you decide what shape the book will take?**

Not with the book about Ruth Bader Ginsburg because there I had an editor who wanted a picture book about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, but she wanted a picture book. So that was that. We realized there were no picture books about her, while there are some pretty good middle grade nonfiction books about her. In other cases, sometimes it's an easier decision than others because it feels like a very visual story, where you know that every scene is going to be enhanced by the illustration. Another way of saying that is, the illustrations are going to be as important as the words. It happens that the words come first because I am the writer but I recognize that the illustrations are just important.

**How do you decide what to include? How do you decide what gets pushed to back matter as opposed to becoming central to the story? How are you making those decisions?**

In creating a nonfiction story, it is going to be a story. Sometimes you have to let go of things that are tangential to the story even if they are really, really cool. Even if you want to tell people about them. Tell people about them in school visits. Or on your website or something. Because some things are just really tangential. You are telling a story after all, a true story and it needs to move along and not only does it need to move along, you don't want to confuse the reader with stuff that you can't bear to let go of because it is so interesting. It may be interesting but it's over here to the side. I would say that at the top of list of what determines what you leave out and put in is: Is it in service of the story that you are trying to tell? Of course, I don't want you to get the wrong idea. That is very different from saying you will leave out things that don't support your story. I am not saying you leave out contradictions. I am saying leave out ornaments that are fun and interesting but that don't really serve the story. The stuff that you are not putting in still informs what you are putting in.

**What does your writing process look like? How do you make your writing so engaging? There is history and biography that can bore and history and biography that can excite and connect with children and support them in recognizing the way in which history shapes and informs everything about the present, that people's lives and how they have lived have such great meaning for us.**

I really think every writer just rewrites a ton of times. You write and you rewrite and you rewrite. And you rewrite on the larger structural level, but you also just as importantly rewrite on the granular word by word level. Especially when you are writing picture books because words are precious few so you really want to pay attention to your word choice so they are the right words when you look at them and when you say them out loud. For picture books, especially, I am reading out loud constantly. I am just sitting here in my office reading my words out loud and my cat looks at me like I am crazy. Just revision and revision and being heartless with your own work. Also, reading things that I really admire. I don't think I come close to writing the way that nonfiction writers I admire write. But it is certainly always helpful to read people who you think are doing it in an outstanding way.

**What difference do you hope to make with your work?**

The answer varies with the book. When I write a book like *I Dissent*, here I found a theme, so what I wanted was for young readers to think that it is fine to disagree, it doesn't make you disagreeable. Actually the way change happens is through disagreement. I wanted them to see that, I wanted them to see Ruth Bader Ginsburg disagreeing most vehemently with somebody with someone she was most friends with, the late Justice Scalia. I seem to be going for to imbue in young readers a sense of commonality, something shared with characters both fictional and nonfictional, and to feel maybe inspired, maybe comforted, maybe just recognizing something.



**I know Ruth Bader Ginsburg read your book. How did that all work out?**

It was me writing her a letter, putting it in the mail. The letter that I wrote her requested an interview. They were in session and she said, "Maybe this summer when we are not in session. I have a lot of interview requests, but I would like to comply, and we'll see." It didn't happen. Then I followed up after the summer, after the manuscript was done, but before it went to press so there was plenty of time to make changes. I asked her if she would at least review the manuscript and she didn't hesitate.

**Ourselves and all of our identities shape the stories that we are drawn to and I think it is amazing as a Jewish woman writing about amazing Jewish women as well as the experience of people as an outsider, as well as making change. I got to talk the other evening with Doreen Rappaport, who has written so many wonderful books, a lot of what I heard from her, I have heard in ways from you as well, which is exciting. I so appreciate the approach and concern that both of you have.**

**What was your own path to publication and how has your relationship to editors shifted over the years?**

I was a lawyer and then I worked for a chain of legal newspapers as an editor. I always really liked to write so I did some freelance writings, but journalism kind of writing. I wanted to do more, maybe I could write fiction, which is really hard to do. Then I took a class in children's writing in the DC area from a wonderful children's author and teacher, Mary Quattlebaum. She teaches now at the Vermont College of Fine Arts in their low residency program. I continued with her for two more classes. I just loved it.

First I wrote some short stories and one was published in *Highlights Magazine*, which was very exciting. That was probably my first publication for children. Then through Mary, an editor at a now defunct small publisher, was putting together a series of travel books for kids. *Kidding Around DC*. Mary couldn't do it, so she passed it on to me. Plus, my favorite summer job as a college student was being a tour guide in DC. So it was perfect.

From there I just sent out letters and resumes to editors, to people in the library market, and one day one of them called me up. I chose from a list of subjects that they had open. It was very rigorous. You didn't get a contract until you did a quite rigorous outline. I did those types of books for several years. Really rigorous editing. Really hard.

I kept writing other things. I wanted to write a little bit more freely. I wanted to choose topics of my own. I wanted to try picture books. So I just kept trying stuff and sending it out and getting a gillion rejections. But then, you know, things hit.

**Books are supposed to share about people to an audience who might not yet know them, but sometimes editors might play a role of thinking people do not know who**

**somebody is so they aren't worthy of a story. It is an interesting tension. Have you ever experienced it personally?**

I have. In my case I have tried, and my agent has tried, and we have come so close with a book about a female photographer. She was a path breaker. She was a feminist in her own day. She used technology that is cameras and developing in ways that women didn't. She took photos underground for the first time. She traveled the world. She did all kinds of fabulous things. I have tried so hard to sell that book and she's just not well known enough is the reason that is given. It could also be that I have not found the right way to tell the story yet. Usually something gets rejected because it's not good enough. Not always. Sometimes editors are short-sighted, too focused on commercial considerations. Maybe they are even wrong about commercial considerations. Maybe. But oftentimes, in my case, I'm rejected because it ought to be rejected. So maybe one day I will look at that manuscript again and find a way to make it sing. And then everyone will know about Frances Benjamin Johnston.

**What advice do you have for aspiring authors? What wisdom have you gained that you would like to pass on about your craft?**

It is fun. The best advice is to read a lot. Then when you write, try not to be defensive about your writing. It is hard to look at your own writing objectively. If you write a draft and set it aside and come back to it, just give it some time, so you come back to it with fresh eyes. It's also important to try to be objective about your own work and try to see what is wrong with it. Reading is really at the top of the list of my suggestions. Reading what is being published today is so important. Of course there are wonderful classics and we should read them too. But sometimes beginning writers, what they know about children's books is what they knew when they were children and maybe they are modeling on that and maybe they can, but if they want to appeal to children today, also read the greats of what is being read today. Balance your love for the classics with a thorough familiarity with, and find things that you love, that are being written today.

**What do you feel might be the political responsibilities of writers in these times?**

Do writers have more of an obligation? I am not so sure that I want to arrogate myself an additional responsibility that my equally or smarter neighbor or more social justice activist neighbor or friend might have. That person probably has more to offer in these times than I do, or maybe not, but I am not sure that my being a writer gives me any huge authority. I think a lot of us are thinking about that.

**I am also thinking about the importance of telling people's stories and certain histories that enable people to connect, as you said, across such vast different time periods. People have experienced scary times and people have been brave. So I am curious as a writer, it seems you are interested in telling stories of people who have been brave, who have had tough experiences. To me, it seems those are the books that we so need right now. So that is where my question was coming from.**

It's a good question. But if you wanted to hear me work through it, I would be hemming and hawing for the next hour until I figured out what I actually thought about it.

Donna Jo Napoli

1/16/2017, email correspondence

**What inspired you to become a writer? How does writing for children relate to your academic writing?**

I wasn't inspired to become a writer. Instead, writing for me is like a disease—I do it because I have to, I have no choice about it. I had a personal tragedy when I was 27 and it knocked the air out of me. So I took to writing—as a place of my own, where I could have the illusion of controlling what happened. I find there are a zillion things that disturb me—where by "disturb" I don't mean bad or good—I just mean they ruffle the surface, they make me need to react. And I have learned that writing is my way of reacting.

My writing for children is like my academic writing in that I tend to do an enormous amount of research. I'm not interested in writing only about worlds I live in and experiences I have had. I want to explore through writing. So I write about people who are very different from me as well as ones who are a lot like me. And I write about worlds that are very different from the one I grew up in as well as ones that are a lot like the one I grew up in. But even when I write about a person a lot like myself in a world a lot like the one I grew up in, I will put in there something new to me—some craft or hobby or area of knowledge that is new to me—so that I can learn a lot. I hope by doing that, my reader will also learn a lot. Books opened the world for me—I want my books to help open the world for my readers.

**What drew you to writing a picture book biography? How do you figure out whose stories you would like to tell?**

I'm going to disappoint you, I know. What happened was that I got a phone call from Paula Wiseman, a wonderful editor at Simon & Schuster. She said, "Write a book about Wangari Maathai." I said, "Who?" She said, "Go read about her." So I did. Two weeks later I called up Paula and I told her I was working on it.

I didn't see the book as a biography, though. I picked only one part of Wangari's life—the part about encouraging people to plant trees—and I ran with that. And, again, I'm going to disappoint you on the reason. When I was a child, I had dreadful vision. In fact, it wasn't until 3 years ago that I had surgery on my eyes and I suddenly have a whole different way to approaching the world. Whatever, I used to take a book and climb a tree. I'd sit in a crook and put the book up to my face, and read. For hours. I couldn't play things like ball because the ball always hit me in the face. I couldn't do all sorts of games. But I could read. And trees were my homes. If you do a google aerial view of my home

you'll see that it's one of the densest places in town for trees—and that's in a town that prides itself in trees. I plant trees constantly.

And I loved Wangari because what she urged people to do is something anyone can do. You don't have to be rich or strong or a hero in any way. You can do it easily. And what a difference it makes. That seemed like something children needed to know. It's very easy to feel powerless when you are a child. But Wangari showed us that we aren't powerless.

**What does your research process look like? How do you decide what information to include?**

I usually begin with a character who has a problem. Then I ask how to push that problem. If it's a funny problem, I want to make it hilarious. If it's scary, I want to make it terrifying. And so on. I want to push to the extreme. So I look for a time and place where the particular character and problem will let me do that.

With *Mama Miti*, of course, I had no choice about time and place.

Okay, once time and place are settled, I simply read and read. Libraries are my favorite place. I go online and see if I can find photos and videos of that place and, if possible, of that time. If the time is before photos, then I look at art of that time, hoping that the art will show me ordinary details to enrich what I read—because often what is written is only about the rich people or the famous people, not the ordinary person. I eat food from that time and place (I find recipes and make it myself). I listen to music from that time and place. I go to churches or synagogues or mosques or whatever other places of worship that matter for that time and place. If possible, I visit that place—but I make sure I don't assume the geography today is the same as 2000 years ago, for example, because it often isn't. Rivers, in particular, change a lot. Whatever, I steep myself in that time and place. I revel in it. Then I begin to write, from that knowledge—so I am informed already before I start.

Knowing what information to include and what to leave out is so very hard. Generally, if I got delighted or horrified or astonished at some fact, I'll try to include it—because I want to delight or horrify or astonish my readers. But mostly it's a mistake to include any information that doesn't make the plot go forward. So I try to be good and use my research only in enriching scenes that need to be there anyway or in helping to develop character so that the reader can believe what the character winds up doing.

**What does your writing process look like? How do you keep your writing engaging and accessible?**

I write my first drafts fast (like VERY fast—weeks, not months). I don't worry about being sloppy. I just race to find out where the story is going. Once I have a first draft (and it is an awful first draft, almost always), I then rewrite. And rewrite. And rewrite. I get feedback from my children (if they have the time to give it) and from young people of the age I think my story will be interesting for. Feedback is essential to me. What keeps it

engaging? I really don't know. But I think that letting that first draft have momentum gives the whole book energy. It's much easier to impose structure on something that already has heart and soul (ie, energy) than to add heart and soul to something that already has structure. Or that's what I think. So that's how I do it.

**What difference do you hope to make with your work?**

Do you know, no one has ever asked me that. And I do hope to make a difference. I was a poor kid—with very little experience with the world. Books gave me experience—vicarious experience, to be sure—but enough experience to help me realize that there was a lot more to life than what I saw day by day. Books made me strong. I want to help my reader be strong. I want to give a wide range of experiences to my readers so they can have empathy with others and recognize their own strengths and weaknesses and build on their strengths. I want to write the book that matters the most to some child who is coping with a situation that feels unbearable. I want to be that tattered book that is read over and over because the child needs it. I bet I'm the most ambitious writer ever—because I want my books to be dreadfully important to my readers.

**What advice do you have for aspiring authors?**

Write your ass off. Or if you are putting this interview somewhere where you have to watch the words you use, then write your heart out. Write everything—recipes, instructions, poems, stories, email messages, song lyrics. Just write and write. Be brave and show your writing to others. watch their reactions. Figure out the things you do that get the reactions you want—and write more—write trying to get specific reactions. And write not knowing what reaction you want—just write because it's a joy. And never tell yourself that you have to be "good" at writing to do it. Just write, and you will get better. I promise.

Doreen Rappaport

1/18/17, 63 minutes, diner on Upper West Side

**In a few of your books you talk about your time in Mississippi, in 1965, which is the year after Freedom Summer. Still lots of Freedom Schools.**

I had to get credits to teach, so I couldn't go to Freedom Summer.

**Had you been interested the summer before?**

Oh yeah.

**I was just down in Jackson a couple years ago for the fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer. They had all sorts of programming. There were a lot of the veterans who, like you, were there. Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement, had**

**done work in the South, in Mississippi. Amazing to meet so many and hear their stories of how they have continued remarkably so to lead lives of activism in so many forms. When I read that you were participating in all of this and now you write such amazing literature, it's like, of course. These people who were going down there fifty years ago are an amazing bunch. I would love to hear about that.**

I don't know if we were amazing. I had one of my dearest friends from college who was down there and stayed seven years. He worked for John Lewis and Bob Moses and he was in the McComb, which is about an hour and a quarter from New Orleans. My then boyfriend, we all went to college together, he went in '64. And then he said, "I'm going to go back in '65, you should come." I said I would.

We were already very involved in struggles here. We were trying to get the UFT, the teachers union, to support integration and be so tied into neighborhood schools, support bussing, which we thought was needed. We were involved in a lot of things. It was an extraordinary summer. And there were so many Jews in the Civil Rights Movement because it hadn't been so long since our families were affected by antisemitism. And now, we don't think about it that much, even though there is antisemitism and a lot of other antis. The generation of our parents, my father changed his name to go into show business, and a lot of performers, he wasn't a performer, he was a musical arranger, but a lot of people hid, and unlike Blacks, you could pass because you were white. You may not pass by your cultural style, but you could pass.

It wasn't even a question in the lives of most of my friends not to be involved in the Civil Rights Movement. It was our time! Every generation has a time. You have a time. I hope you guys are going to do good. We are counting on you. Got a lot of battles ahead, so we're counting on you now.

**Where were you growing up?**

I grew up in Jamaica Estates. I went to School of Performing Arts. I was a pianist. I went to Brandeis University, which was established for Jews who could not get into colleges. In those days there were very tough quotas. Then I came back to the City and I taught music. I taught music and then I drifted into fifth grade, then third grade reading, and whatever. I taught in Harlem. I taught all over. And then I actually went back. I was going to study music more seriously again. I went to France to study with this very famous woman. I came back intending to just do my music and I got some jobs writing educational materials for friends who had left teaching and were doing reading kits and various things and then I started writing and I didn't come back to the music. A lot of journeys.

**You had a lot of passion when you turned to writing. I know you have written that some of the things you were teaching about in your Freedom Schools, you were then translating them for an audience beyond Mississippi by having books in libraries and schools. What stories were you drawn to writing?**

I first started by doing nine books on Black history. When I taught in the Lower East Side, or the South Bronx, a boys' detention center, kids were predominantly Black. And that was the movement of our era, the Civil Rights Movement, to be supportive of people down there and also to see where we could do something. My father was a musical arranger, a vocal arranger, which means you arrange for the voice. He arranged a lot of Black spirituals, folk songs, and we had a lot of Black friends, and gay friends, and Asian friends. Because he was in show business it was a very mixed world that I grew up in. It wasn't a shock to me that there were people of other economic means, or color, or background.

I once got invited to a festival of African American authors in Charleston and I sat down, "I have to tell you something, I'm not Black, I'm white." She said, "You're kidding!" I haven't been able to do the last x-number of years, as many books of people off center as I started out, I can't get the publishers to do it. Now Carole has just finished a gorgeous book on Fannie Lou Hamer. I did a trilogy on Black history that is picture books and she's in it. I desperately tried to sell Candlewick, the same publisher she did it, when I started with them eight years ago, "Let's do a biography of Fannie Lou Hamer." And they didn't know who she was. So times change. Some of the people are more mainstream.

I'm doing a book on Wilma Mankiller, first woman chief of the Cherokee Nation, picture book biography. You could address with people, I think, writing from another culture, about another culture and what that means. So I can talk a little bit about the Black books and how I handled that. Wilma is a good example. She was an extraordinary figure as a human being. I contacted her husband, she had died, he answered immediately. I arranged to go to Oklahoma to talk at a conference and I met him. I thought I'd get an hour from him. We became fast friends, I got seven hours, we spent the whole day together. We really bonded. Among the things I asked him to do, was critique the draft of the book, and probably down the line, to critique it when it had the pictures in it. And if he could at any time help me dig a little deeper into things. I wanted to use some words that were Cherokee words. I wanted to get the photos of Wilma and how she dressed. We wanted to break the stereotype that Indians all dressed in costumes. There were sometimes when she had artifacts. He has read it twice.

I asked for advice on getting a Cherokee illustrator, I wanted a woman. I looked and I saw that almost all of my books, except for my book with Emily, have been done by men, and I was flabbergasted and beyond embarrassed. He gave me the name of someone, she was too busy. My editor contacted this person. Then he gave me the name of another person who was not a Cherokee but a Choctaw, but in Oklahoma, there are no reservations, Indians are spread all over. When I went to this conference, and I was autographing books next to Tim Tingle, almost everybody in Oklahoma whose grandparents lived there is part Indian, because the Indians just dispersed all over, because there are no reservations. There is a very different feeling and mixing. It is a different kind of society than reservations in particular. So he helped.

My friend Dorothy Carter who taught at Bank Street, Black woman, she had been an actress, she had been in Lillian Hellman's *The Little Foxes*. She taught literature there.

She read all my Black books. Just little things like I was describing hair, I talked about it being wooly. She said, "I can get away with that, you can't. Don't use that word. It's not right, but you will be criticized and be taken as a negative from your perspective." And the question of using dialect sometimes, when to use it, when not to use it. In the Indian book, I also have a friend who is half Cherokee. She critiqued the manuscript. When I sent her the first, the Wilma, I started talking about how poor the family was, she said, "Why don't you start talking about how there were no jobs in Oklahoma and that was why they were so poor." Which from her perspective as a Cherokee was crucial, because that could have reinforced a stereotype, even though I did not mean it.

But I have to say, you know, when I do books on Jews in the shtetl, I go to experts to, because, what do I know about being in the shtetl? If you are crossing over in another time, another ethnic or racial background, you have to have respect and find people who are "experts" who are going to maneuver you through some of the difficulties that even a Black writer, or an Indian writer, might have. You don't experience certain things in life.

The same way, when I did my book on Jewish resistance, which is not a picture book. I had six experts read it. I had someone who was a specialist in Greek Jewish resistance, I had the guy who was the project director and curator of the Holocaust Museum, I had the head historian of the Holocaust Museum, I had two resisters who worked with me. You need to do this because the art of doing the picture book biography is to simplify and not dumb down, which means you have to get inside the material. You have to find an angle.

The easiest one to write was the Dr. King book. You know why? Because I was in the goddamn movement. And I managed what I have not been able to do with the other ones. That is the simplest book I ever wrote, and you know what, it's the most powerful book. But each of them has an angle. Eleanor Roosevelt, it's about her quietness and how she opens up and how the teacher helps and the situation of having to stand up to her mother-in-law later. Helen Keller, it was the teacher, and her incredible resilience and desire for language when she understood that words have meaning. In Frederick Douglass, he said it in the quotes, "You have seen how a man became a slave. Now you shall see how a slave became a man." So I knew it was journey and kids should see that. So you are looking for the kernel that is going to illuminate the life and you know you are going to leave out a lot of material, but you're not going to dumb it down. Not going to dumb it down. And that's the hardest part. Because you do a lot more research than you are ever going to use.

### **How do you decide what are the important kernels?**

It all comes from the research. It comes from thinking what was Eleanor's life like? I have thought about doing an expanded biography and calling it, *Keep Quiet Eleanor Roosevelt, You're Not the President*. I knew that couldn't be the title for this one, but all of a sudden I realized, yeah that is what happened. She couldn't keep quiet. So let's start the book when she is shrinking and feeling terrible about herself and see along the way what happens to open her up and how she uses it. Like your problem is going to be in the thesis, how are you going to find the focus of what you are trying to say. You are



going to interview a lot of people. What is the angle you are going to want to talk about. You should talk about picture. You should make stabs yourself and not be hesitant. And that's why Andrea would be good, because her husband does the art. If when you are writing a picture book and an artist brings in a picture that says what you are saying, you take out your words, because it's got to be a visually poem. It's this marriage between the picture and words. So sometimes I might find I am adding a lot and sometimes I am taking out a lot, "Oh my God, how did he ever think of that?" Well, he's a fucking artist and I'm a writer. You know. That helps you with the focus too. I do get to see all of the sketches. I do not know about other writers. I have been told they don't. It used to be that they didn't let any of the writers see any of the art, but for some reason I have always been able to see the art. Maybe because I have done history and they are looking for the writer to have some input because you have more information.

Now I am not criticizing how the artist is drawing, I am thinking about what he is telling, I am going to give you Matt Tavares's phone number. We had a whole thing happen when we did *Lady Liberty* together, there was a section in that book on Joseph Pulitzer, because nobody wants to give money to build the pedestal and dig the foundation, he went to his readers to get the money. I saw Matt's sketches. Most of them were great, but this one of Pulitzer I thought was completely wrong. Because to me, Pulitzer was using his words, he was using his newspaper, that is how he was communicating it, and that's not what Matt had done. He had done something else. I wrote a single spaced page critique of what I felt. The art director and editor, now it was very graceful, but I am pretty intense, so it was intense, let's be real, so they figure out how they are going to send it, they might edit it. It's the best painting in the book because I made him having Pulitzer, well he came up with it, Pulitzer is at the typewriter, intensely looking at what he is writing, up on the board is a little thing of the statue and you get the whole feeling of this man using his words and his power, which is what we want kids to use, we want them to use words to empower themselves. In that sense, I might criticize something.

I am in awe of these illustrators. In my trilogy on Black history there is this whole about the collar they put around the slaves and I thought, "How is he going to do this? How is he going to do Emmitt Till and the coffin? How is going to do a lynching?" And they magnify and intensify text. And I have among the best illustrators. I really got them. I don't know how I've got them, but I've got them. To be historically accurate, emotionally accurate, and be illuminating the text. In the Eleanor Roosevelt book, there is a wonderful piece that Gary Kelley did, and I use it with kids all the times when I go to schools because I want them to think about looking at pictures. They don't understand that pictures are telling a lot. There is one about Eleanor and Franklin in her courtship, they are in a boat, Franklin is holding an umbrella over her head, there is a man rowing, they are on a pond, and there were swans in the picture. First I ask, "Why is there another man in the pond? What is the artist telling us?" Most of the times, sometimes they think he has already had polio. Then I will say, "Well, I have a pond, and my husband and I go out rowing, and we don't have anybody row for us. What does that tell us?" Finally, the kids get to it that they may want to have more time together, they have enough money to hire somebody to do it. Then I usually add that in those days when you were wealthy, it was not considered okay to be alone with a man unless you were engaged or married. So the

picture is telling something. Then, "Why are there swans in the picture?" The kids always say they're symbols of love. Then I say, "Here's what my husband told me. He told me that swans mate forever. So that is part of why they are symbols, it's not just the grace." So that picture illuminates so much of the text and since it had quotes, I had this quote, and then I realized I never said where this quote came from in a way, and I wrote, "She wrote to him." And I added that after seeing the picture. With some of the quotes it is obvious where they come from and other times it was important that she wrote a letter to him because you don't write a letter anymore. So that is important.

**Amazing to hear how that comes together and you get inspired by each other.**

Absolutely. It makes the book more powerful.

And in the Frederick Douglass, the one when Frederick wakes up and his aunt is being beaten and he looks through the door and you just see the whip. I was terrified, "How is he going to do it?" You know, the same way the writer knows how to reduce without dumbing down, the artist knows how to reduce visually to make an impact. I never thought about that before. It's the same thing. He could use the image to do that.

**In the art of reducing without dumbing down, I think one thing that you have done is tell stories that have been told, but only told incompletely previously. Like Helen Keller, which too often stops so short of her full person and all the people she advocated for.**

Right, everybody used to stop with just the learning to talk. In fact, I would have even liked more about her latter life. Could only get 48 pages.

**I am curious how you balance, it sounds like a lot of things at play, for whose lives you write about. You said you started off with more Black history, lots of stories, then focusing on picture books about specific lives, and then you have editors saying, "Who is that?" One thing Carole did say, is that she has been blown away by how picture books are teaching adults at the same time.**

I find it scary. I find it scary.

**I know you said they didn't know about Fannie Lou Hamer. She said that she thought everybody knew about Fannie Lou Hamer.**

Of course she did!

**That everywhere she goes. Even people her age, go, "Who's that?" What is so powerful is that these actually teach history to children and also grownups as well. Help us collectively remember people and struggles in powerful ways. How do you navigate that? Here is an important story that maybe has been told and I want to add more depth to it? Or, here's a story that hasn't been told and since it hasn't,**

**people are not thinking it is valuable enough, people are not going to give you the option to write the book.**

When I was asked to do the Martin Luther King book, it came about because my editor had gone to her kid's school for Martin Luther King Day and seen the books and thought they were terrible. There had to have been 30 books out, this is 11 years ago. I said, "The world does not need another book about Martin Luther King." She said, "Yeah, but none of them hit on nonviolence." I said, "Yeah, they don't hit on it for little kids because how am I going to say this?" She went like this, "I know you can do it."

You're lost, you don't know what you are going to do. I went out with Daisy Rosenblum, my goddaughter and assistant, smarter than I am. I said, "Alright, I am going to try to do this." What I told her is, "If I could find a different way to tell his life, I will do it. If I can't, I'm not doing it." And we went and I said, "Let's read all the speeches and the sermons and the letters and the interviews and we were typing at the end of a week and we would meet and we would talk about phrases we would like and she would type them into the computer, we had ten pages single spaced, didn't have an idea in the world how I was going to handle it. Then I said, "Okay, let's retell a branch of some of the other major biographies and let's get more of the thoughts. So I can sift through, it's not just the Montgomery Bus Boycott and what in his personal life we can do. Then we read his four autobiographies and Dr. King told me how to tell the story because he is the one who said, his mother, he looked at these whites only signs and they made him feel terrible, and his mother reminded him, he remembered her words, "You are as good as anyone." And all of a sudden it comes together. Words save him and he saves the rest of us with his words. That was it.

With Helen Keller, it was, oh it was interesting, the original title I wanted for Helen Keller was *Helen Keller's Dark Silent World* because that's what it was. My editor said, "Yeah, it was dark and silent." I thought that was a brilliant title at that time. She said, "It was a dark, silent world. But what happens to the world?" I said, "Well it opens up." And she said, "And it becomes big, doesn't it?" So it became *Helen's Big World*, because you want the emphasis on the positive and not the negative and good editors are the backbone of writing all books. I spent an exhausting afternoon on my book on Walt Disney going over the copyeditor's comments for a picture book that took two and a half hours. And then I had two and half hours on my Jackie Robinson book, which is not a picture book, my editor from Candlewick.

These editors and copyeditors in children's books, they catch things that are not in the biographies that I read that writers have taken 20 years to do. Maybe because they are smaller, I don't know, it was extraordinary, I have find out, Jackie Robinson was hit six times. The copy editor said, "Well, in 1908 a law was passed that if you got hit, you automatically go to first base. He was hit six times, what happened to him? Did he go to first base on those times?" I read six major biographies of him and footnotes, and I read the books from the footnotes after that, nobody ever discussed this. I am going to call the Baseball Hall of Fame and I'm going to find some expert to help me to figure out, maybe that will be a footnote. It does bring up a question, he was hit, did he get on base all of

those six times, or did the umpires ignore it? I love the editors. I love the art directors. I love the editors. I have been very lucky. Many of them have left the places. If an editor leaves and a new editor comes and they don't like your work, you're out. They have to like it to feel enthusiastic. I have had a good career.

**You are inspired when those questions are raised. How can I figure this out? You constantly talk about how you focus on footnotes and the biographies to go to the primary sources. You find the person speak in their own voice.**

One of the biggest problems in doing picture books now is schools have so little money so they are very conservative with what they buy. They are not sure at Hyperion that Wilma is going to sell well. But I told them, "I'm not doing any more books unless we do her."

**That's great.**

You got to do it. Indians sell. We are doing these books. But they are caught in this bind. Because we are not talking about the quick books that Scholastic puts out. We're not talking about those series. Though you know, they are not picture book biographies, but they are really good, I really like them, the Who Are? books. I think they are really good, they are really written well by a lot of different people. I really admire them. So what do you leave out and what do you put in? There is no mention of Martin Luther King's children in the book, or his wife. It only has one focus. What else do you want to know?

**What does your writing process look like once you have a vision of how a text is going to be? You are rewriting and that changes a lot. The various stages of your writing, what does it look like?**

I try to make, if it is a picture book, in the book with Jackie Robinson it's almost easier because there will be so much more information in each chapter, but if it is a picture book, I try to figure out what I think are the main sections I am going to talk about. They give you these little boxes. So I might put down, "Early life, Wilma in Oklahoma. Learns she has to move to Oklahoma, put in Trail of Tears. Because it's similar and she feels it's similar." So I will outline what I think it is. Then with a picture book, you are talking about limited space, so you just start writing it and then you have to look at the whole thing together, and then you have to see, "Oh my God, there's way too much information! What am I going to take out?"

With my Jackie Robinson book, it started off as a picture book. My editor at Candlewick said, "It's not working. The way you've set it up, it really begs for a full scale biography for middle grade kids." I went home, I thought she was going to tell me how brilliant I was. We do want to hear how brilliant we are, you know that. I realized she was right. The book has fourteen or fifteen chapters in it, it's a book for older kids. Sometimes if you find there is too much writing on a page, you know you have not narrowed your focus enough, that I haven't really made a choice of the theme of the book yet. So you are always trying to hone in on the theme of the book and what it is.

So before I send it out, the first read, I have rewritten it five or six times. I will ask for help on things. I will say, "I know this needs a transition, I can't make it. I'll work it out." Or, "Do you have any ideas?" Because sometimes you need ideas to help you make a transition or something. Or, "I know this is exploding of the page, can you make any suggestions of cuts that will not destroy what I am trying to develop?" So I lean heavily on the editors asking for help.

**I am inspired by your broad body of work, especially those tales of resistance, be it slave resistance, or Jewish resistance in the Holocaust.**

That's all I write about is resistance. All of my people resist. Some don't have to resist as much because they come from a better background, but even Teddy Roosevelt resists.

**I think those particular subjects, slave resistance and Jewish resistance in the Holocaust, there are so many myths, about the docility of both. I think your books bring in such a life to the people who are so dehumanized by failures to portray them as full people who would refuse to be so dehumanized and put in such conditions. Shedding light on how they lived and the ways in which they resisted is brilliant and so needed.**

It comes from the Civil Rights Movement. It comes from meeting people. There's a man called Steptoe, a great Black man in McComb, Mississippi, he was not nonviolent, he did have his gun ready, he said, "If they coming, I'm shooting right back at them." But who could be more inspiring than the Carter kids in *The School Is Not White*? This mother and father, they're sharecroppers, their courage to let their kids do it, I met the whole family and that's just a story that might be, that's in some way a group biography of them. I had read the adult book written by Constance Curry, who was a field worker for the Quakers, who met the Carters in Mississippi, in Drew, Mississippi. She wrote about the kids integrating the schools, and what happened to them and I clipped the article about the book, a couple of years later I read the book. I contacted her, said, "I'd like to do a kid's book on them, could you get me in touch with them?" She said, "I'll tell them you want to, but I am not guaranteeing."

All eight interviewed me on the telephone. I sent all eight at least two copies of each of my books. One of them, Gloria, happened to be coming up North, she met me and my husband and we spent the day together. It's a big responsibility to tell someone's life. What happened there was I didn't want them to read the book, because I wanted it to be a surprise. So I was going to Ohio, where one lives and is a teacher. I wrote, "I'm coming to Ohio, I'm going to speak, I'd love to meet you. Let's go out to dinner. She said, "Oh great, can I go to the speech?" I said, "Sure." Then she wrote me that her sister wanted to come. I was going to read the book. I get up to give my talk, which is on heroic Americans, and I say that we had two heroic American heroes here and I am going to read what I wrote.

As I am getting ready to read it, I am thinking, "What have I done? I should have let them read this book. What if they don't like it? What if it's no good? What am I going to do?"

After a couple of lines, I saw they both put their hands over their eyes and I knew they were crying. I said, "Thank God. Thank God I did it right." I did have Constance Curry read it who is white, who wrote about them. She was my expert, not them. It is important to have an historian or expert read your book. No matter how much I do research, I am not spending too many years on something, I am spending a year and a half researching something, it's very different.

The other thing you might want to talk about is how long it takes for picture books to come out. If it takes me a year to research year, another six or seven months to write it and rewrite it, then let's say you get an illustrator immediately, and that might not happen, it takes them a year, that is two and a half years, then it takes at least another year until it goes through copy editing and design and this and that. And then it takes at least six or seven months until they market it. It could take four years to five years from start to finish until a book is done. With books that have taken a lot of care.

### **What have you learned about your craft that you would like to share with aspiring writers?**

Don't be afraid to tackle a subject you think is really important. Don't be told that the market's not going to want it. If you don't write from your gut, you can't write it. I had a couple of books that I couldn't sell, no one wanted it, until I sold a few books, then they wanted those two books. You will get discouraged, just move away from it for a bit. Come back to it. The answer always is within you about how to do it. You may need to do more research. If it's a book of imagination, you may have to do research. J.K. Rowling did a huge amount of research to create that Harry Potter book. And you have to care about every single word. You have to read. Read other people who are doing things. I don't think anybody reads Jean Fritz anymore. Jean Fritz was the first one when I started writing. She was very funny. She wrote history with an attitude. I don't write the way she does. But I do write with my attitude. Find your attitude. Find your style. Find the way you want to tell the story and just struggle and last it through when it's not going well. Maybe work on more than one book at a time. Because you do get stuck. All writers get stuck. Tell them they can do it. Tell them they can do it. When you think you can't do it, think of Helen Keller. Right?

### **When you say find your own attitude...**

It's your voice. Don't try to copy anybody else. You are who you are. We are unique human beings. If you don't use your uniqueness, you are never going to get anywhere. I mean you could end up writing some of these series kind of things, which is a formula, but if you really want to write, you have to blast your way through it.

### **One of the ways you helped to introduce in more ways now is the words of the subjects themselves.**

It was Dr. King and there were the words. I never even thought about it. John Lennon, it was the lyrics. And then all of a sudden, I thought it gave an immediacy. There is my

narrative, but how did that person feel? Instead of me tell, writing is about show, don't tell, the words are a very good example of show. In mine, I am trying to show, but I am telling a life and they are showing how they feel. It has become very big.

**We talked a bit about this on the street, about childhood and your politics and you writing about resistance. What do you feel are the particular responsibilities are that writers have in these times?**

To speak up the way Eleanor Roosevelt did for what they believe in. To not be cowed. Who would have thought James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On The Mountain* anybody was going to go and buy? Who would have thought *The Invisible Man*? Who would have thought Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* would become a classic about a woman trapped? Write from your gut and write because you think what you are doing is important and believe that other people will receive it and will be affected by it.

Obama was on television today and he's too optimistic for me because I am completely panicked of the situation. But he spoke about, he believes people will find the way. The writer can help, of history. And this is true of fiction too. It gets kids in touch with feeling and life and being an orphan. You can affect other people and open the world to them to see and think differently from where they are thinking.

Years ago, I was in Indiana working in a junior high school. I was doing writing workshops along with kids reading my books. I had this exercise of a turning point in your life and I read something about my life and my parents. Then the kids did something. Then the kids wrote theirs. This girl writes about seeing a commercial on television that was antiabortion. It was totally graphic the way she described it, it was totally confused too. And I am in John Birch territory. Her piece was a mishmash. I kept pulling out, "When did this happen? When did this happen? When did this happen?"

Then other kids read their pieces. One kid read a wonderful piece about a tornado. I never forgot it. How his mother shooed them all downstairs and then when she counted she was missing a child. One of the kids wasn't in the house. The end of this period, the girl comes up to me with a friend. She says, "Can I ask you a question?" So I said, "Sure." She said, "Well how do you feel about abortion." I said, "Well, I am pro-choice." She said, "Then why did you help me, my story is about anti." I said, "My job is not to tell you what to think. My job is to help you learn to think. " I think she learned from me that there are other ways of approaching life, just from that thing that I modeled, I am not afraid of your thing and I am going to help you say it.

**You also shared about being Jewish and to me also being Jewish...**

You're Jewish?

**I am Jewish.**

Oh God, I guess you're so Midwestern I guess that caused it. The Midwestern Jews are so different from us.

**There is a very tiny number of us compared to here.**

No, there are Jews in Milwaukee. I don't know about East Lansing.

**There are some certainly, but more on this block.**

Right.

**For me, as I have come to read your books, and meet so many inspiring people who felt so deeply called to action by the experiences of our people. To me that is so much a part of Judaism is learning stories and acting from them.**

Absolutely. "If not now, when?" Rabbi Prinz said at the March on Washington. "If not now, when?" It is a great tradition.

Duncan Tonatiuh

1/23/17, 32 minutes, telephone

**What has inspired you to become both an author and illustrator? What is exciting to you about being able to practice art in these ways together?**

I got into drawing because when I was fairly young, eight or nine, I was really into comic book and that was one of the reasons why I started drawing. I was trying to make up my own superheroes, my own comic books. And I also got into writing when I was in elementary school. I would read a lot, I would borrow books from my school library. I would write a lot and get carried away. When I was in high school, I definitely tried to pursue it more. I took a poetry class, some electives that related to writing. It was something I just kept doing.

In college, I went to design school, and I also took writing. So I was always interested in both things. I never considered doing children's books until later on. I was about to graduate from college and I was working on this project I did in school based on the story of an undocumented worker I knew who was Mixtec, which is an indigenous group from Mexico, and that's kind of how I started drawing in this pre-Columbian inspired style. From there this professor liked what I was doing and she introduced me to a children's book editor and he liked my work, "Usually picture books are written by one person and illustrated by someone else, if we get a manuscript that fits your style we will get in touch." And I told him I liked writing also and he told me some very basic things about picture books, "They are usually 32 pages long, it is a good idea for the protagonist to be someone young readers can identify with." Some months later I wrote my first manuscript, which became my first book, *Dear Primo: A Letter to My Cousin*. I'm really



glad, it's very lucky that I started doing children's books. That that opportunity presented itself to me because it's such a great place to do both writing and illustrating, which is something I have been interested in doing since I was a kid.

**Amazing that you have been so inspired by the Mixtec Codex and through your art are honoring such a beautiful tradition, as well as sharing with children that there are so many histories to people and traditions and art that haven't always been told, but you continue to tell them. Would you share specifically what draws you to telling a particular story?**

When I was a kid I was excited by comic books and by anime. Then later on when I was a teenager, I liked different painters. I wasn't always interested in Mexican art or pre-Columbian art. What happened is that I grew up in Mexico. When I was a teenager I came to the US. Then as I kind of spent more time in the US, I began to miss things that were around me in Mexico. I just kind of began to see them in a different light, appreciate them more, things that were around me that I used to not pay much attention to. When I started to do the project about the Mixtec worker, I started looking at Mixtec artwork, and there was images like those of pre-Columbian art in textbooks when I was a kid. I was familiar with it, but I just didn't pay much attention to it. Years later, looking at it again, it really clicked. I really wanted to do a modern day codex and try to draw in that style.

The subjects of my books, they deal a lot with Mexican and Mexican American culture. I think a big reason why I became very interested in that and why I wanted to make books that relate to those kind of themes was because I left Mexico and came to the US and became more aware of Mexico, but also the issues that affected people of Mexican, of Latino origin in the US. I think that is a big reason for my interest in that and what my work is about.

**Amazing how that personal experience has shaped the stories that you are drawn to. You have written a lot shaped by your experience of being American and being Mexican and navigating the boundaries and betweenness of all of that. A lot of what you have written has been shaped by the life you have lived and also there is additional research that goes into writing your books about Sylvia Mendez or Diego Rivera. What does your research process look like?**

I have done several nonfiction books. Each one has presented a different challenge. I have done things slightly different for each. The first one I did was the Diego Rivera one. With the Diego Rivera book, the challenge was that there was so much information about him that I was really trying to pick and choose and see what I wanted to include in the book. That book, the first part of it is like a biography, and it tries to imagine what he would be like nowadays in comparison to things that he painted. I read a lot of other books and watched documentaries and went to see a lot of his murals and artwork. But then it became about selecting and finding what makes him. There were things that I did not include, like everyone knows he was married to Frida Kahlo, and that is something I did not include in the book. There were a lot of things that I had to leave out. That was part of the research and also part of revision, or actually creating a manuscript.

Then the book *Funny Bones: Posada and His Day of the Dead*. In that case it was almost the opposite challenge. Because Posada was not famous during his lifetime. There is very little information on him. Sometime there is conflicting information. There is a lot of things that are not known about him. So in the book I tried to learn as much as I could. I decided to go ask questions about things that may or may not be true, but give context. So I ask, maybe this is what inspired this particular drawing. Or this as going on in Mexico when he created these images so that this may have inspired that. Since I could not know for sure I decided I would ask questions and try to understand why he might have made a certain image and what he was trying to say with it.

With Sylvia Mendez's book. With that book I first learned about the case and thought it would make a good book, I wanted to write a biography and to learn about it. I found articles and documentaries and books and then I was at a book festival in Texas and Sylvia Mendez was there. So I got to meet her and got to hear her speak and I got to ask questions. And later on as I was finishing the book, I got to visit her. She shared some images I put in the back of the book and looked over what I had down and gave me her blessings so to speak. Those were some of the places where I did research. I was also able to access court transcripts, so that was another source for trying to understand the case and some of the things that were said and just trying to understand it better and explain that. I guess a challenge with the Mendez book is that I was trying to find a good balance, I wanted to make sure there were dates, there were names, there were different judicial concepts, but I also wanted the book to be accessible for children and for children want to read it and not being overwhelmed by all the information.

**When you delve into learning so much, how do you make the decisions of what you want to put in the story, what is something that is interesting but you are not going to include? How do you make the story engaging and accessible as you are navigating that process of writing the story and creating the art?**

There is definitely a lot of revision. When I make a book, I try to go from big to small. I write a manuscript and whatever is going to be on that page I do a little doodle of what picture will be there to think about the design of the book. I kind of map out the book and do little thumbnails of the entire book, to see what is going to be where, just kind of like map out the whole book. I find that really helpful. I start trying to find the shape of the book, then from there I can see the different parts. At the end is when I look through the words and the sentences. As opposed to trying to start with a really beautiful perfect sentence, I try to think of the whole book first and then go down and get more specific and get more specific. That helps me.

**How does it feel illustrating a book versus writing and illustrating a book? What are unique challenges of both?**

I really like both. I like when I get to do both. Most of the books I have done I have written and illustrated. I like that a lot because I have a lot of control. Usually I write first then I have in the back of my head or make little doodles of what the images will be.

Then when I start sketching and laying out the book then maybe I will see that there was something superfluous in the text and I could cut it out. Or maybe I will change something in the text based on the illustrations. So I can kind of go back and forth between the two and hopefully they will work more seamlessly. I enjoy when I have that control.

I have illustrated books for other people twice. I guess a nice thing about that is that the writing is done. I don't have to worry about that. I just try to do my thing. It has been fun. One author included all of these sounds. That is something I don't usually do. It was fun to try to draw those sounds out and I took it as an opportunity to do handwritten type. I guess a nice thing about doing someone else's book is it can be encountering things you don't do, can be an opportunity to try something out.

**What difference do you hope to make with your books after you put all of this in and your books go out into the world?**

I definitely am interested in this issue of diversity. It is something I find important and try to speak about it. Only about 3 percent or something like that of children's books each year are about Latinos or written by a Latino. Obviously it is a huge problem. The children in our schools, it is very important for them to see themselves in books. When kids view books about their cultures, about their families, their experiences, their histories, they feel proud. They are much more excited to read those stories. It also lets them know that their stories are valuable and meaningful and important. That is what I am trying to accomplish. I write about the Mexican experience, the Mexican American experience, because that is what I am familiar with, that is what I know, and I hope that other children that have a similar experience can relate to it will feel proud of the group and the background and of their heritage. For children that are not Latino, I definitely hope that it is a window into a different world and an opportunity to learn about people that may be different from themselves and I think that is really important. I think that if kids through books learn about other cultures, other religions, other sexual preferences, other races, other physical abilities, I think as they grow up and as they become adults, they will be less likely to be afraid of people who are different from them. I think that is another thing I hope my books accomplish.

**What advice do you have for aspiring authors and illustrators? Maybe it is what you say, advice to publishers to publish more authors and illustrators of color to create books for all of your children and connect to their experiences. You could answer either what you would like to see in publishing, just also thoughts on wisdom you have gained through your writing, through your illustrating that you would like to pass along to aspiring artists, aspiring authors.**

To be a good writer I think you have to read a lot and learn to read like an author and you learn what tools and what an author needs. So that you can use those tools and techniques in your own work. Similarly, with illustration, I think it is very important to try different things out. There is not only one correct way to draw. The more techniques you learn about. The more artwork you are familiar with. Then you can start to pursue what works

for yourself and develop your own style. The more time and energy you dedicate to something, the better you get. The more effort you put into writing, the more effort you put into drawing, you keep on doing it, it's going to improve and get better and you just have to give it the time and energy so it gets good. We were talking about earlier, sometimes I think when people are starting, they can get hung up trying to get that one perfect sentence. I think it is really important to think when it comes to picture books about the whole and the shape of the whole of the whole story and the design of the whole book and to work from big to small is something that I find very helpful and different people have different ways of working but I think it definitely is worth trying out.

In terms of the industry, I do think there has been some progress. People that have been vocal about it, the We Need Diverse Books campaign, the idea that there is interest in it, and publishers seems open to it. As authors we can write these books, as illustrators we can illustrate these books, as publishers we can publish these books, as readers or consumers we can buy these books, we can borrow them from the library, we can ask for them in our schools. I think the more effort we put into having more of these books around, whatever our role is, the more of them there will be.

### **Could you share a bit more about your own path to publication?**

I was pretty lucky, like I said, there was this project about a worker. That is what I am currently working on. The story has two parts. In college I did the first part and I never did the second part. Now I am finally doing the second part and it will be published next year and it will have that second part, which is what I am working on now. The professor introduced me to this editor. An editor named Howard at Abrams and he liked my work. He is the one that told me some basic things about picture books. Then I wrote the manuscript about two cousins. One cousin that lives in a rural community in Mexico, one cousin that lies in an urban center in the US and they send letters back and forth to each other, about their everyday experiences. I wrote it and I sent it to him and when I first wrote the manuscript it rhymed. I thought well it's for children, let's make it rhyme, but I am not that good at rhyming. When the editor read the manuscript, he wrote back to me. He said, "We like the concept a lot, we like the artwork a lot, we want to make this book, but no rhyming please. Please rewrite it again without any rhymes." So I rewrote the manuscript and revised it and eventually that became my first book, so it was kind of like my first job out of college was making that picture book.

Then after that it was actually trickier, I assumed whatever I write it is going to turn into a book and the editor was like actually I don't think that is the right project for us you are going to have to work on it some more. I wrote several more things and they got turned down. At that point t I had to take on different jobs to supplement my income, I was doing all these other odd jobs. Eventually I wrote my second book, that I sold *Diego Rivera: His World and Ours* then I did a third, then I did *Pancho Rabbit*, then by the time I did *Separate Is Never Equal*, I was able to fully dedicate myself fully to writing books and all the books I have written and illustrated have been published Abrams and been edited by Howard. So I have a good relationship and I really enjoy working with Abrams.

Hopefully we will keep working on many books to come. That is sort of how that started and I feel very lucky, I know there are a lot of people that have always wanted to be a children's book author and get rejected and rejected and rejected. So I was very lucky that they took a chance on me right away. I felt a little of that rejection afterwards for my second book.

**So much of what you have talked about is so important for our children and for grownups to read these stories as well. I am curious if you feel that there are any particular responsibilities of writers and illustrators in these times that we are living in?**

I think that children are extremely intelligent and that is why some of my books deal with subjects that you know may seem a little controversial. I am talking about segregation, I am talking about immigration. I think kids totally can it is a matter of doing it in appropriate way that they can understand, in a way that is engaging for them. Children can handle these subjects and know a lot and they care about these issues and it is important for them to know. I am definitely interested in history and I guess one aspect of history that I am interested in, it's also a reflection on figures, when people study the Civil Rights Movement, or what not, they learn about Martin Luther King, maybe Cesar Chavez, and these large heroes that are very important, but sometimes we forget to talk about other people that also made important contributions and other kinds of people that have experienced different kinds of segregation and injustices and I think it is really important to try to share that. I definitely encourage other authors to find those stories. There are so many of them.

Emily Arnold McCully

3/21/17, 60 minutes, apartment in Greenwich Village

Lately, I have been writing longer books, and I intend to keep doing that. Partly because writing is easier. But, as for the picture books, I do keep doing them. First of all, taking a life that kids don't know about and even ones that they may know about, find a new wrinkle, a new way of approaching them. And then the challenge of reducing it to something words and pictures can describe in 32 pages, it's a puzzle and it is always fun. Each one is different. Each one is as if I am starting all over again because they all have different challenges and different approaches, different periods, I love history, I just love reading history. Seeing not only what's different about it, that old saying of a foreign country, but also what's the same, or corresponds to what we are experiencing.

**That I think is something, it's so important and often so lost in the teaching of history, that it is not irrelevant but actually lives on through everything in the present. I think you so beautifully take moments of the past and lift them up to help us gain insight into the present moment. To see people who were brave then and how we can be brave now. You have talked before about growing up in Illinois and your family library having lots of books of history. Was history always something to**

**you that was living, something that mattered to you today? How did you get a sense of looking at centuries past that still mattered?**

Well the main thing was, yes the library, but I actually didn't grow up in Illinois. I was born there. We moved to New York and then to Long Island when I was five and six. I felt completely displaced because first of all my parents had deep roots in Illinois and many associations they talked about and I grew up knowing about and a library of history of the area. It made me feel I had to stay connected there and that I belonged there. That's where my roots were. That I didn't have roots on Long Island. This kind of alien place, even though I went all through all through the school system in one town. It wasn't really my town. My connection to history was kind of defiance even of where I was. And I loved imagining how things used to be. When I was growing up on Long Island, of course there was lots of history there. My sister and I rode our bikes from the Queens border all the way out to the end of the Island. There were farms, there were very few developments. I could see where Walt Whitman lived, you know. Lots of places that had tremendous history and associations and that's what I loved to do. I guess it's really, it's a matter of feeding my imagination because that is what I did and that is what needed feeding.

**It is fun to read on your site about building forts out there and having lots of fun and feeding your imagination and fun to think about how you do that now through your creative work.**

Well the thing, when I was a child we had a real context to our lives, it was certainly not until my own children were growing up that things changed so radically from the way it used to be. My first son was born in 1968 and the second in 1972. They grew up in a different world but they saw the vestiges of the world I knew when they were little. How old are you?

**I am 26.**

Alright, you don't know what I am talking about.

**Open to learning. We learn through books, we learn through conversations.**

I can see that. That is wonderful.

**You say you are turning towards longer books, but you actually started by writing a couple of novels.**

I was illustrating books only as just a way to earn a living, I got into that by accident, you probably read about that. I wanted to write adult novels and I actually didn't have a whole lot of commitment to children's books. It was just a way to get steadier work than I was getting otherwise. But then I realized, I really should be writing them too. I shouldn't just be illustrating other people's stories. That made it a much more solid kind of thing to do. Also, getting novels published isn't easy and it takes months and months and months to

write them. How do you eat while you are doing that? So I just gradually moved over and the more involved I got, of course, the more satisfied I was.

**When you were working on a picture book you said it is this art of compression and also even if it is called a picture book biography, it is not a story of one's whole life, you like to zoom in on a particular experience or moment that might be symbolic of the larger life. How do you do that? What moments are so significant to you? How does that come to you?**

Well, first of all, there has to be drama. There has to be a kind of window into the person of what's important about that person and some incidences in the life will illustrate that. One good example is the John Muir book. John Muir wrote about his own childhood and his youth and his youth and they were fascinating to me and I wanted first to do a picture book about his childhood. Then I think it was my sister who went to Yosemite and sent me a book about the little girl in Yosemite. And I thought, wow, this is two people who are so different and yet so alike and they had a connection that is really a revelation about his character and how neither one of them wanted to grow up. They loved the wildness of the park. They had this emotional connection and they both wanted to escape the world in a way. That really was a large part of what he was about and what he had to overcome to become the public figure he became. I thought, this is good, it is always good to have a child in a book.

In fact, I have had proposal rejected by the editors who said, "There is no child here." That was the book called *Wonder Horse*. It's about a horse who was trained by a former slave in the South using the technique of kindness instead of just feeding them treats or beating them or whatever. But patience and kindness were his watchwords. This former slave had already become rather rich, just because he was so clever and so good at what he did. He bought a race course and then he decided he would buy a racehorse, a champion, and ended up buying an Arabian who he bred and the Arabian had a foal and this foal was going to be the answer to Bill Key's dreams. And the foal was born with crooked legs, it could hardly stand up, it was clearly just a mess, and the mother died in the process of giving birth. So Bill was devastated.

He noticed that this little foal was really smart and was going around opening drawers and taking apples out and stuff like that. So he began training him and eventually trained him to read letters, to read numbers, to operate a cash register, to recognize the local celebrities in audiences, and to stamp out, pick letters that spelled their names. What he did was phenomenal. So he began touring around the Jim Crow South with this horse and eventually children in the audiences had to sign pledges saying, "I will treat animals with patience and kindness." This was just as the first Humane Societies were being formed. They formed a connection. At one point, Bill was accused of being a fraud. Psychologists from the department of psychology at Harvard came to inspect the horse whose name was Jim Key and pronounced him, yes, as intelligent. It's this lovely story of two real underdogs who triumphed and contributed. They were really famous back in the 1890s. He contributed to the humane movement in the country. I did end up telling the whole

story of Jim Key. In fact, the animal books I've done do tell the whole story because that is easier.

Now this one, Elizabeth Cady Stanton also had a long, vivid, and complicated life. But I wanted to emphasize, I wanted to show her trying to vote, because I thought that would be dramatic. I knew one of the times she tried to vote was in the election of 1884. I figured it would be great if she took a little girl with her and that would be our stand in for the reader to enter into the story. I found that she had a granddaughter, but the granddaughter just wasn't the right age. So I invented a neighbor girl, and Stanton was a great horse woman, at this time she was like this wide and this high, but she had been a great horse woman and she was teaching this little girl to ride a horse. But it was Stanton's old horse who was too old and decrepit, Stanton says, to jump a four foot fence, which is what this little girl wants to do. The other thing about Stanton is that she was writing a history of woman suffrage, about the movement, so I could get in details of her own childhood that she tells the little girl about her father, who said, "Oh, if you were only a boy." And so on. And how her brother had died and her father threw himself on the brother's grave. Having a daughter just wouldn't help. That is what she had to overcome as a child, the little girl hears all this.

Then Stanton says, "I'm going to go vote, you can come with me." The girl says, "What? Why would you vote? That is what men do. You don't want to vote." So we get insight into how other people felt about suffrage. And Stanton insists and says, "You can ride the horse there." So the girl rides the horse there and she encounters boys and men hanging around, doing cat calls and insults and so on, and men in the voting room itself, when they see Stanton arriving, they throw their arms around the ballot box and cover it with their hats. Meanwhile the girl is having to suffer all the insults of the boys out there. She ends up jumping a four-foot fence against all odds. Because Stanton didn't get to vote and she didn't win the vote for woman, at least this girl jumps the four-foot fence. That's another way of compressing something big into a little story that has some momentum.

**It seems you are really able to do that while thinking of what you can add, a little historical fiction to tell more, to paint more light on an event that actually happened. Or a person who actually lived.**

And that is tricky. I think increasingly, I mean you don't use these books with kindergarteners, or maybe you do. Picture books biographies have gotten more and more complex and now librarians are demanding, I think that there are even footnotes in some of them. So you can't make up dialogue. You can't make up events. You can't make up what I did here. In a lot of picture books that are used for older kids. Which is okay. I like making the story better. I think it is more fun.

**How did you decide to approach the strike in *Bobbin Girl*?**

That one, the girl on whom I modeled my main character, I can't remember now, was she, the girl either, either I modeled the main character on her, or I actually used that person, in any case, she grew up and was active in the suffrage movement, no I made her up. But



she is based on a woman who as a little girl worked as a bobbin girl and wrote a memoir afterward. So all of that is true. Everything that happens is true. I decided that because this also is a downer as a story of protest and of reform because they lost and it was impossible for them to win at that point. So I decided to give her this older friend who is fired after they strike. Then she, I say that she goes on to, because she is older, she gets to speak, and speaking in public was absolutely shocking at that time. So she's the heroine of the strike and she moves onto another mill. She is not going to be defeated. She is going to go on. So this isn't a biography of anybody. It's a look at one of the first episodes in the American labor movement. It's taken out of a memoir and it's a tiny episode in her memoir because she did live a long time and she went on to fight for women's rights the rest of her life. That is a little segment that was a big story.

**Cool to hear that background of how you decided to approach it.**

This too, there is almost nothing known about this person, the paper bag inventor.

I don't even know what language that is. I couldn't find it in English.

**How does that feel to have your books translated?**

Oh it's wonderful, it is just great. *Manjiro* too has been pretty big in Japan, never made a dent here. But the Japanese loved it, of course he is Japanese, and many Japanese still visit the library up in Fairhaven,

Now this I am going to talk about, since you are going to see Andrea Pinkney soon. You are familiar with the whole scandal of Washington's cake?

**Oh yes.**

So this is about Oney Judge who worked in the Washington household. This is the guy who supposedly baked George Washington's cake. I don't know if that is true or not. She was born at Mount Vernon her father was a white indentured servant and her mother was a slave. She was asked when she was very little by Martha to come into the household and learn how to make her crisply ironed caps. So the little girl does, she joins the household. She's a seamstress. Then she becomes a playmate to Martha's grandniece I think, or granddaughter. Washington is elected president. So they have to move from Mount Vernon, first to New York. She learns that she is going to be moving to New York. What she does is make these caps look nice. So they go to New York and there is a lot of hoopla. She worked in the kitchen and she's given a lot of freedom and sent on errands and so on and she meets Black servants, some of whom are not slaves. She asks, "How do slaves get free?" Some bought their freedom and moved here, others ran away or were freed by their masters. And the law in Pennsylvania is that an adult slave who lives here six months must be freed. So what did Washington do? He sent them back to Mount Vernon every five and a half months, so they couldn't be free according to Pennsylvania law.

There is a lot of other stuff about the Haitian rebellion. This guy was great. He was very independent. He actually would sell leftovers at the back door of the kitchen and that book, George Washington's cake, has a daughter baking a cake with him, but the daughter was never in the president's household, the daughter was back in Mount Vernon and he. Well I will get to that. Well he was not at all the character that was portrayed in that book. Finally, she learns that she, Oney is her name, Martha tells her one night that after Martha dies she is going to be sent to live with her granddaughter in Virginia. Oney realizes that Eliza has always mistreated her and she feels she is going to be sold down the river if she is sent back to Virginia. So Hercules, the chef, tells her that the husband of Eliza has already started selling some of her slaves. So Oney realizes she has to do something. Meanwhile, she's now in Philadelphia. She has met some free Blacks who say they will help her. She escapes late at night, while the family is at dinner. She goes to the waterfront and they put her on a ship and she ends up in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, having no idea where she is headed.

One of the first things that happens is, she hears a little voice say, "Why Oney Judge, what are you doing here?" It turns out to be the daughter of the New Hampshire senator, who was a friend of her playmate. So she tells her father who tells Washington. Washington then begins this relentless process to get her back and gets the customs agent to interview her and he is really impressed by her. And he writes, "I don't want to touch her, she has a thirst for complete freedom. And I don't want to do anything to her." The Washington's are furious. Especially Martha, she can't imagine why anybody would run away from them. The main thing had been that she was forbidden from being able to learn to read of course, so now she is learning in Portsmouth. Eventually she marries somebody, but meanwhile, Martha tells her nephew, or Washington's nephew, to go to Portsmouth and kidnap her. So he heads to Portsmouth and goes to stay with the New Hampshire senator and tells him at dinner that that's why he's there. And the senator goes back to the kitchen and finds somebody to go warn her. Which is just extraordinary to me that that happened. So she gets away. She lives the rest of her life, until about 1845, sort of on the run and very, very poor, but just proud that she did what she did.

This book didn't sell because people I guess didn't want to know that about Washington. I think, because it is certainly a good story, it is a heroic tale, but it didn't do very well. But it did get mentioned one or two places when the cake book came out. I wish it could have profited more from that ridiculous thing.

**I think there are so many books that exist that praise all of the founding fathers. And it's really important to actually present the narratives that holding people into forced servitude, enslaving them, was terrible, and children and keeping them from being able to read. Despising their thirst for freedom while proclaiming to be champions of freedom, seems like such a vital story for us to recognize to see the contradictions that have existed deep in the foundation of this country.**

At this very hour they are having a hearing with a guy who is an originalist interpreter of the constitution. People should know. Kids should know for sure. Children like, that was one of the things about history that most attracted me too was that it was full of

contradictions and full of challenges to what we were being told in the 40s and 50s, which was much worse than now, and it offered a counter narrative to what we were learning. So that made it irresistible. I think that is still true or should be.

**I am interested, how have you navigated that tension between feeding into myths that are popular and actually risking it and breaking those and challenging stereotypes and challenging conventional narratives, even with the knowledge that it might be less popular to do that.**

Well I always do that because that is what interests me.

Icy Smith

3/11/17, email correspondence

**What inspired you to become an author?**

I grew up in abject poverty in Hong Kong. My siblings and I worked many odd jobs to support our family since we were very young. And I witnessed a lot of injustice and violence growing up. Partially because of this background, I dreamed about writing on human rights issues and maybe to becoming an investigative journalist. When given an opportunity to do some historical research for a community project many years ago, I found my passion to write history, especially untold stories. Writing gives me a sense of empowerment.

**What draws you to writing about historically significant events through the lives of children?**

My childhood experiences played a major role on my writing through the lives of children. It offers a compelling and true perspective. I also enjoy the creative part of bringing a bit of history alive.

**What does your research process look like?**

I make a great effort in research utilizing government archives, organizations, museums, university and public libraries. But my favorite source is interviewing elders, survivors and the people who lived through history. They were a key resource with many of my projects.

**How do you decide what moments of history and people you would like to focus on?**

I try to fill in the void of books on diversity. My focus is on little-known and untold stories. All of my books are on such topics. My next book is about the journey of Vietnamese refugees to America in the late 1970s and early 80s.

**What are the merits of historical fiction? When are you drawn to using this approach versus nonfiction?**

Both historical fiction and nonfiction are equally important. It is important for kids to learn the lessons of history and civil rights through nonfiction. Historical fiction with diversity content can enhance children's ability to think critically, understand cultural and historical contexts of racial groups and global issues. My books are based on true events and stories with a non-fiction back matter.

**What does your writing process look like?**

Most of my book writing is actually done when I take my rare vacations. I am quite prolific when away from the office and with a clear mind.

**How do you keep your writing engaging?**

I will put myself in the perspective of a child reading the story. Making sure the narrative is presented logically, and the voice of the author is clear to the intended audience. I like to write an inspiring story with an end on a positive note with hope.

**What difference do you hope to make with your work?**

History has been repeating itself. It is important to teach students on how civil rights of Americans have been affected. As there is a saying "Those not remembering the past are condemned to repeat it."

Today, 27 million people worldwide are still in slavery. Tens of thousands of children die every day because of starvation. Thousands are imprisoned because they spoke their minds. Books can bring these important issues to the forefront.

I hope my work can make positive change in our classroom, community, country and our shared world.

**What was your path to publication?**

In times of war or economic downturn, certain groups of Americans—because of their ancestry—have been adversely affected. For almost a century, Chinese Americans were made scapegoats for perceived economic problems. They were subjected to the racism institutionalized by the Chinese Exclusion Act for 61 years. So I spent years interviewing elders to learn then shed some light on this through my first book *The Lonely Queue*.

During World War II, Japanese Americans were stereotyped as spies for the Japanese government. Without any proof of wrongdoing, 120,000 of them were interned. To make this an important part of American history available to children, so I wrote the *Mei Ling in China City*.

*Half Spoon of Rice*—I decided to write about this difficult topic to young adults because the dark history of the Cambodian genocide is largely untold in schools around the world. It took about three decades after WWII before American schools included the Holocaust in Nazi Germany in their curriculum. Today, 38 years after the end of the Cambodian genocide, little is taught in schools on this subject.

And *Three Years and Eight Months* was based on my family and other survivors' experiences during WWII under the Japanese occupation in Hong Kong. My father was a slave boy for the Japanese military and witnessed the daily brutalities. Today, 70+ years after the end of WWII, *Three Years and Eight Months* is the first children's book on this topic. A story of struggles and hardships that the people of Hong Kong endured for those three years and eight months.

**Why was East West Discovery Press created and what are your hopes for it moving forward?**

Because of the lack of diversity in children's literature, I founded our press in 2000. EWDP is one of the very few independent Asian American publishing companies in the U.S., specializing in multicultural and bilingual books. We focus on history, culture and social justice but also have an eclectic mixture. Currently, we publish and distribute books in 50+ languages. My goal is to write and publish multicultural literature to reflect the lives of children and adults in today's multiracial communities.

Today, children's books with diversity content still represent a very small percentage of the overall number of books published for children and teenagers. According to a study in 2015 by the CCBC, only 10% of the children's books published have diversity content—7.9% were about African Americans, 3.3% on Asian Pacific/Asian Pacific Americans, 2.4% on Latinos, and 1.2% on American Indians. The percentage of trade books by and about Asian Americans has increased to only 2% in the last 10 years.

My hope is that teachers, librarians and parents will help ensure children will have the opportunity to see themselves in books.

**What advice do you have for aspiring authors?**

Know your audience. Show your book to as many parents, teachers and children as possible and get their feedback.

For story ideas, authors should pay attention to hot topics and trends in the industry. Talk to booksellers and children's librarians about which books are popular. Knowing what's hot will help authors present and market their own manuscript to publishers.

**What do you feel are the political responsibilities of writers in these times?**

In our current political climate, it is critical to support students and educators alike in building their own competencies around social awareness. By teaching history, students—refugees and migrants—can feel able to tell their stories for the first time, while others gain new sensitivity from hearing their experiences. Learning to connect events from the past to present can equip young people to carefully consider the moral and ethical choices they face in their own lives.

Books that document difficult events can enhance people’s ability to think critically and understand diverse perspectives. It is our responsibility to prepare young people to take up global issues and become advocates for positive change.

Jabari Asim

6/15/17, email correspondence

**Your phenomenal writing spans multiple genres and mediums, what sustains your broad interest or is it that breadth itself that is sustaining for you? Are there particular lessons you have learned through all of this writing that feel particularly important when writing for children?**

I think it’s both/and instead of either/or. I’m comfortable with Susan Sontag’s description of a writer as someone who’s curious about everything. Writing a book provides me with a cherished opportunity to learn more about something that intrigues me. At the same time, I take delight in moving from subject to subject, however disparate each appears to be from its predecessor. I favor brevity when writing for children. I like to make a point or dramatize an experience without belaboring it. When young readers are involved, I’m much more concerned with exhausting their attention and wearing out my welcome.

**How does it feel to hold a position once held by W.E.B. DuBois? Do you feel writers have a political responsibility? How do you feel about writing a book commending a controversial figure with whom he at times strongly disagreed?**

I recently stepped down as editor of *The Crisis* after 10 years. It was a great honor and a great responsibility to sit in DuBois’ chair. I think writers have a responsibility to tell stories as best they can. If the story turns out to have a political component (and they often do), it makes more sense to me to embrace that aspect rather than run from it. But I’m speaking only for myself. I don’t want anyone to lecture me about my obligations as a writer, so I wouldn’t dare be prescriptive myself. I had no problem with writing about Booker T. Washington, DuBois’ rival. I find both men equally fascinating. I was inspired to write *Fifty Cents and a Dream* when teaching a class on black ambition and popular culture at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I assigned *Up From Slavery* and realized Washington’s heroic efforts to get an education would make a great story for young readers. I hope someday to produce a similar manuscript about DuBois’ early years.

**What draws you to writing picture books about an episode in the life of a particularly important historical figure? Do you believe the picture book format is limiting in forcing you to zoom in on a particular moment or is it liberating in that you do not have to include everything but instead can focus on telling one piece very well?**

I think the picture book format is in no way constraining. I focus on single episodes because I like to, not because I have to. I look for an episode that is particularly instructive and set about determining ways to best illuminate it. I read a book about Abraham Lincoln when I was in the first grade. It covered most of his life, I believe. But one passage stuck with me. It showed him as a boy, using a piece of coal and a shovel to practice his math and handwriting. That's the kind of episode I'm drawn to, one that tells us significant things about the subject's character.

**You have said that before writing a picture book one must read 100 of them. Through your work reviewing books for newspapers as well as for prizes and pleasure, what have you learned about the art of reading? How has that shaped how you write?**

In addition, those experiences have told me a lot about the art of writing, and also that there is an enormous amount of tremendously gifted authors out there. One thing I've always been very conscious of when reading a less-than-successful book is noting the point when I lost interest in the narrative, when my mind wandered and I began to think about things far beyond the story. As a result, when writing, I'm very concerned with attracting and keeping the readers' attention throughout the book. When revising, I try to identify the places where the narrative flags. Then I do my best to inject momentum into them.

Jen Cullerton Johnson

5/22/17, email correspondence

**What has inspired you to become an author?**

I am not sure that I set out to be an author. I liked writing and reading but growing up, I had horrible problems with spelling. My reading comprehension was low. At university when I told a professor I wanted to be a writer, he said, "Not sure that is the best career choice for you." So I dropped his class, found a more supportive professor and she taught me to proofread.

I've traveled a lot and spend time teaching in different countries. I've had many types of jobs. The ones I like best help me balance.

I began writing in earnest when I was in my late 30s. It takes work to be disciplined, as writing is a practiced art. On days I do sit down and open myself up to exploring through words and images, I've been happy and productive.

**What draws you to writing picture book biographies?**

Most people think biography is about the life of one person. To me biography is about all the connections that person has that have helped her on her way. We are connected.

I write about women who live life boldly and without apology. I write about young girls who stand up for their education, their rightful place in society. I write about mothers who walk for miles to feed their children. I want young people to see there are women models out there for them. For too long, women have been made to feel small and kept silent. If we want to have a world where there is a possibility of peace and social justice, there must be room for all voices, especially women's voices.

**How does being a teacher inform you as a writer? What impact do you hope your own writing has? Is this any different from the impact you hope to have generally on your students as their teacher? How does your restorative justice work relate to your writing for children?**

I teach in Chicago. We are a tough city that is faced with even tougher problems: shooting, violence, poverty and now pollution of our beautiful Lake Michigan. I love teaching. I love writing. What teaching and writing have in common is what I love best: connecting with others and myself.

I teach young people who are incarcerated and are awaiting adjudication. When I started working there seven years ago, everything was bleak and sterile. There was nothing green. So I wrote a couple grants, reached out to the University of Illinois and together we created the Karma Garden where incarcerated youth work from May to October planting and harvesting. I am finishing up a book about this experience.

You know the saying, "real knows real?" Well young people know Wangari is real. When I talk to young people about *Seeds of Change*, many of them want to know why Wangari Maathai was put in jail and how that experience was for her. I am very proud that Lee & Low allowed me to keep that fact in the manuscript. There are many biographies of Wangari Maathai, but none of them except *Seeds of Change* talk about how and why she was imprisoned.

**You actively promote green literacy to foster children looking critically at the impact people have on the environment and ways in which people are making change. You seem to live the values that you write about. How important is this to you as a writer? What do you believe the political responsibilities of writers to be?**

This is the nicest questions anyone has ever asked me an interview. Thank you. It makes me feel wonderful that you do notice what I firmly believe: being a writer is a political



act. I am proud to be a writer. I use my words to shape my world. I use my words to help other speak until they can speak for themselves.

When I was in my early 30s I met my very favorite short story writer named Tillie Olsen. She is from the Great Depression era and lived in Berkeley. I asked her the same questions you asked me. Her response blew me away. I can see her now telling it. We are in her small kitchen, where she is washing a rose colored juice glass because her dishwasher broke last week. She tossed a blue checkered dishtowel on the counter and says: "After Hiroshima, there was destruction everywhere. I knew I had to write on the side of light."

I write on the side of light. Light that shines brightness into the shadows of racism, genderism, and classism.

### **What advice do you have for aspiring authors?**

Be open. There is room for everyone in writing. Be true. You will make your way with your own, hard won words. Be brave. Words are more powerful than a weapon or kiss.

John Hendrix

2/10/17, 21 minutes, telephone

**For especially your book on John Brown, I read you were inspired as much by the story as you were by famous paintings of him. I think picture books are such an exciting medium because they do get to have illustrations that drive the story forward, as well as being meshed with the text. How was that experience for you, getting to work as both the illustrator and the author? How did both of those dimensions impact each other to create something that you would like for the readers to experience.**

If you are a writer and you start with words you might have different motivations, but for me, as an illustrator, I tell young artists to write to the visual, write to things that you are drawn to as an image maker in a way. If the book is going to be a vehicle for visual storytelling, don't ignore the pictorial parts of your interests. For me, with John Brown, I was initially, I had lived in Kansas and I knew the story, I met a scholar who was my pastor of my church in Jersey City, and he had written a book on John Brown. And you know very much attracted to the visuals of him and how great he was as a visual subject matter on top of his civil rights story and legacy and how I felt like his reputation had been maligned in, even in some artistic senses as well, so it was kind of a full package with him. Ever since I have used that book as a template to find an entry point into storytelling. I am doing a book now. Long form novel graphic novel on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his story. It is very similar. I am very drawn just to him and that era as a subject matter, but I am also incredible moved by the story. So it is a little bit of both. You can't really isolate one or the other.

**How does that experience relate to the books where you have just been the illustrator? Here you got to come up fully how the images were going to tell the story and add your words to it. As opposed, to having the words already for you to bring additional inspiration to.**

I think it is healthy to not always be in charge of your subject matter. I do some that I write and some that I don't and it's kind of a different setting for the way you think about imagery and when you are writing a book, deep down you know you could change the words when you reach that wall visually, which sometimes is not a good thing. When you are making images for text, it is fixed. Another author has poured blood, sweat, and tears into that and you really try to honor their work. That is enjoyable too. It's a different kind of task.

**You said that John Brown's story had not been considered in the light that you thought it should be. How was that versus illustrating the poem about presidents. Presidents who are always heralded regardless of the awful deeds they might commit. So here is someone who was hanged by the government as opposed to the figures who have always been the face of the government. How was that?**

It's kind of funny because you are talking to children so you do have to be sensitive. With John Brown it is difficult because he did violent things that I think, even as a biographer who wants to portray him in a positive light, you still have to say, he did things that were not great, but is that any different from a president who has done things that are not great? It's a very interesting conversation. When I go to schools and talk about stuff like that, the kids love having those conversations of, you know, not really moral ambiguity, but it is kind of what does it really mean, what do values really mean?

**It sounds like that you believe that we should be honest and it is okay for children to grapple with really big subjects and complicated histories. How does that shape your perspective as you did your research for what parts of the story to include and be honest with the reader? Were they those that came to you in a most visually compelling manner?**

You have to think what's the issue that you really want to talk about with the children with that person. Any one person is going to have 100 things you could pick to talk about their character or their choices. In the picture book format, you have to essentialize it. Sometimes that can mean leaving stuff out. And you also don't want to whitewash or be accused of it being a narrative for some sort of editorial context that is unfair to the historical figure. With Brown, really what I wanted them to think about is if someone came onto your street who was with the authorities and said we are going to take them away and I am the police and they belong in somebody else's house. We would say, "Oh, well they are the police, they know what they are doing." Trying to give the kids the context he was fighting back with violence, because the police, the authorities were not trustworthy, they were paid by militias and by law men that were enforcing these laws unjustly. It's just kind of to get them to think about, when is a time when you would no

longer protest verbally, but you would actually act? That seems to me to be what John Brown's life is really about. He hit the point where he was no longer willing to just vocally be disruptive, but he had to physically act to save his friends. You can talk about whether that was right or wrong. But it's pretty interesting and I have found that kids respond to that.

**I have read that you encourage folks to who want to become illustrators to have a lot of patience and you would like for them to follow their passion. Is it different advice or the same you would offer to aspiring writers who are interested in the work and the stories that you tell?**

I think if you are approaching it as a writer you still have to follow the idea of write what you are passionate about or what you know. You don't need to be good at everything to tell a very good story that you are interested in. The book I am working on now, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor who participated in the Valkyrie plot to kill Hitler. That is a very tough picture book and I had been working in picture books for years and I loved the story and I could not find a way to get it into the picture book world. So eventually I just wrote my first young adult novel basically. It really could be a hybrid graphic novel experience. The form was completely determined by the idea of the content. I think as a writer you just have to, I mean truly calling myself a writer feels fraudulent, I know I have just written this giant book, but it does feel kind of making it up as I go, and if you do have a point of view and something you want to say, that is really the most important thing. I think that editors and publishers pick up on that. I think they know when they read something that has passion in it, or has a point of view that is kind of unwavering. Even if at the end of the day you spent a couple of years working on a manuscript that you love and are passion about, you still have it. It's still a piece of work that you want and aren't you glad it exists? That can be enough, just the satisfaction of making something you are happy with.

**So many of your stories touch on themes of very brave people trying to do brave acts. Often challenging harmful government practices, be it slavery or Nazi Europe. These are things you have been drawn to know for a while. Do you feel there are particular responsibilities of illustrators and writers in these times or do you think you need to keep doing what you have always done in telling these brave stories so children can learn to be brave and it is okay to question and challenge the government and stand up for people and make sure they are treated fairly. Curious how that is impacting your thoughts in these moments?**

It does feel like we are in a moment where we have a responsibility to make things. I certainly did not go into doing what I do as any kind of political response. Most of what my interest comes from, oftentimes I pick people who are of faith and who are using their faith in a way that is, counterculture is the wrong word, but I think that we think of religion as divisive and I like thinking of these figures where the faith was the sort of element that pushed them to question the state or to challenge the status quo based on that. Even the Christmas truce book in a way was kind of similar even though there is not really a protagonist. It is more of the idea of challenging war with faith. That is the

common thread through all of these things. It is really more coincidence that I am doing a book about the rise of totalitarianism. I started this project years ago and certainly it feels very relevant because of how the church is interfacing with the government now. And this is almost that exact same story just 70 years ago. It is very interesting. I do think that artists do have, responsibility is probably the wrong word, but that is part of the artist's job to make stuff that makes us question our choices and our histories and all of that stuff.

**Did you grow up with an experience of seeing your faith as an inspiration for social action or social justice? Or in a way are you trying to help people to draw those connections? Actually the church can inspire people or people can have faith and do brave things and not do and say hurtful things. I think it is always contested what faith means and how it is used to oppress people or to liberate them. I appreciate you pushing back in a way to those more harmful voices, in saying that it has long inspired people so how can we take inspiration from that?**

I think more the latter. I'm not sure that I was really raised with a sense that church or the message of the gospel of the bible was a liberating force necessarily, but I do agree that the narrative of religion in our current moment is, not always, though mostly, it's kind of a divisive thing that causes all of the world's problems. I think it is unfair to a huge chunk of the world that is faithful people that are motivated but do very different things. Martin Luther King being one of them and I think John Brown had a ton to do with Martin Luther King and certainly the writings of the era that inspired Brown went on to inspire W.E.B. DuBois, which went on to inspire Martin Luther King. In the thread of all these things is this weird faith, which I think some more secular folks would prefer that not be there or as some sort of side part to those figures' stories. I think if you uncover these figures they actually have a lot to teach us, even if you take the theological claims out of it. That is a later conversation.

If you get these figures and they are all motivated by the same thing, that is kind of interesting. And I do like challenging this ever since the crusades religion has been at the core of all the world's problems, which I think is frankly kind of lazy. Just as we would challenge someone who says all immigrants are terrorists and would say that is a very lazy conclusion. I think the same thing could be said of people who think that religion is the ultimate divisive experience. It's not untrue, it's just far too simple to categorize completely that way. And you get to the bottom of it. What it really is is that people are very different. It's not this category, it's that people experience this stuff and do different things with it. I find it endlessly interesting and I continue to write books about it. I will probably will get tired of it eventually but for now I am having fun.

Kate Schatz

5/21/17, 22 minutes, telephone

**You have written that history is not only written by the victors. That it is also written by writers. That we can also use it as something that is subversive that tells the stories of we really need of lots of brave people who have been overlooked. I am curious how you relate to all of this and how you think about the political responsibility a writer has?**

I have always been very interested in the political responsibilities of all artists. We are in a particular moment. Especially with work like mine that is dealing with history, I am putting these people out there to young people. It is offering a counter narrative to what they get in school. Introducing them to people who are not traditionally included in history books in classes.

**It is amazing to see the books taking on such an incredible life. I remember you shared at your book release in Brooklyn that you were so moved by a picture some person took of their kid reading *Rad Women* on the floor, totally ignoring this debate that was going on on the television that the parents were watching. I am curious what you still think about that now. You are saying that we actually need the same stories and we still need to focus on the same people and support learning about them. I wonder if you feel that your work has helped to continue to ground people by not focusing not on the distractions, but the continuing and ongoing threads of feminism that have grown and need to be continued and everything isn't just changing, although everything is in a very confusing and horrible place.**

Literally exactly what you just said. Especially in this political moment that we are in right now, I think there is a new kind of role that my books can play that they offer historical perspective. We are so caught up in the moment, and for very good reasons, the moment is crazy, but we, especially Americans are very ahistorical, we are very moment to moment, we are very in the now. For me as a writer, working on *Rad Women Worldwide*, was very therapeutic and soothing in a way. Because it is very easy to feel like the current moment we are in is the craziest thing that has ever happened, the worst it's ever been, oh my God, it's the end of everything. And not that it makes me feels better to read about struggles, but it can offer some perspective and I find it kind of humbling. Especially when I would get caught up in moments of feeling, "Oh God it's horrible, it's just so unbearable." Okay, now I read about Lucy Parsons or I read about Funmilayo Ransome Kuti or I read about these feminists who have endured so much more. Donald Trump is a fucking nightmare, but like he also is nothing compared to what people dealt with in Argentina in the early 70s when people were just getting murdered and kidnapped.

It gives you a perspective both globally and historically that is pretty important for people right now. Just in terms of calming them down or like you say grounding us. It is not an

isolated moment, it is part of larger cycles. But I think we can also learn so much from these activists, whether they are from 30 years ago or 200 years ago there are lessons that I think we can glean from these women and that is something I hope is helpful, both for adults and it is exciting for me to think about young people who are growing up right now reading these books, and aren't necessarily cognizant of what we are dealing with politically right now, they are getting a different perspective. Their childhood may include a Donald Trump presidency, but it can also include books like these and stories like these, hopefully they can counterbalance.

**How do you think about biography as a form to make history engaging and accessible to young people?**

Part of the power is that biographies are just this really consistent constant deeply rooted part of the American educational systems. Biography is super problematic in many ways, trying to avoid creating these particular hero narratives. The thing is every classroom in this country is doing a biography project, going to be doing a report on a famous person. For me I am interested in being able to offer these biographies. I know, I hear all the time, that kids are doing their reports on Yuri Kochiyama or they are doing them on Ursula Le Guin. They are doing their famous person report on Angela Davis. To be able to add to the existing list of people, it is exciting to build upon this form that already exists and is pretty boring and banal in a lot of ways. But it is such an ingrained form for teaching that I think it is a big reason why teachers have been so excited about these books because they know every year they have to do the famous American project and are getting tired of it. So something is fresh for a pretty old and tired form.

**I think the way that you write is challenging to that simplistic heroic lone actor narrative, in that there is a community of people across time and place who are making changes, as well as you are highlighting the movements and other aspects of their work that they were a part of and in community in doing. How did you decide to focus on this compilation of lots of stories as opposed to telling a biography of one of these people?**

I have definitely thought about that at some point I might do a single biography, but I think that if I did it would probably be about more about a movement. Another problematic way in which history is taught is that you pick these particular figures out of movements and they kind of become representative for the whole time and that is a very limited perspective. I really try in my writing to be connecting the person to larger cultural and political moments, I try to point out other people they were connected with and in community with. I am especially conscious of doing that when I am writing about somebody who is very well known. So when I wrote about Ella Baker in the first book, I was really conscious to include information about how many times we think that Dr. King and Rosa Parks acted alone, but they were actually a part of these really big networks of organized trained activists. Definitely trying to put in that kind of information. When I write about Frida Kahlo, I make sure to mention that she as a part of a vibrant art scene that there were a lot of other people that she was connected to who were also making art, that she was not just this one little person painting paintings. That

is something that I definitely try to get across. And also to connect people with time periods or movements that I think the readers should be familiar with.

**Were you able to include the stories that you wanted to include? Was there any pushback from editors? There is so much power that editors have to say this story is not important enough to be told, but then also times change because activists and communities raise the profile of certain people who they want stories to be told about.**

We have total creative control over our books. We have been able to write about exactly who we want, which is incredible. Super lucky. Miriam and I got incredibly lucky with these books, in that my publisher, City Lights, they really were willing to take a risk with us. None of us had any idea where the book would go. They are a press that are totally committed to freedom of speech and to progressive radical publishing and we worked really hard on the people we were writing about, but we got zero pushback from our editor. I think it is because of the success of the book that we have continued to be able to get to do that.

I know the book has opened the door. I see the books that are coming out now. And it is the truth about how publishing works. I give City Lights many kudos for being able to take a risk with us and a book that has all these women that a lot of people are unfamiliar with. We have been very lucky in that respect. I think a big part of it is that *Rad American Women A-Z* was my first children's book and it was the first children's book ever for City Lights. So I think because none of us really knew what we were doing, it actually gave us a lot more freedom. We didn't have these preconceived notions of what would sell and what wouldn't because none of us had ever done this before. We got lucky and it has paid off. We switched publishers after the first book, so now we are publishing with Ten Speed Press, which is part of Crown Random House. But similarly there, we gave them the proposal for who we wanted to write about for *Rad Women Worldwide* and they said, "This looks great!" We are doing a new book with them and I just turned in last Sunday the final list of who we are going to write about for that one and they think it is great.

**While *Rad American Women A-Z* was your first picture book, you have been writing for a really long time. What advice do you have for aspiring authors?**

One of the most important things is that kids are really, really smart. They are often smarter than we give them credit for. They can handle topics and ideas and concepts that we might think are too advanced or too complicated or too scary or too dark. Kids have a really incredibly strong sense of justice, right and wrong. They are pretty obsessed with it. They are obsessed with good guys and bad guys and what is fair and what is not fair. So I think when it comes to political or sociological topics, I would really encourage people to push the boundaries and the expectations of what they think qualifies as appropriate for kids. Kids are super smart.

It is super important to take risks. It's a challenge that so much of publishing is predicated on trends. You could go that way and pitch the book that's just like the other books that are out there. But if you have an idea for a kind of book that you are just not seeing out there, I think those are the most important books to really, really aggressively pursue and get out there. For me it was *Rad American Women*. At the time I did not see any books like that out there. There were a lot of anti-princess books, but they were still really gendered and pink and fluffy, which I am not entirely opposed to, but I just didn't see this kind of book existing. So I realized that I was going to be the one to try to create it. So I think that if anybody has got an idea, it doesn't have to be political, if you have an idea for a series about dinosaurs that you aren't seeing, I think that is the stuff to really go for.

**I am so grateful you went for it when you did not see it. Your books are so powerful and so needed. It is amazing to see that not only they are inspiring kids and teachers and families, but it seems like a whole host of authors and illustrators as well. Thank you.**

If you ask any group of adults, like no matter what their socioeconomics, race, regional background is, "What are some of your favorite books of all time?" It is astonishing how many people reference what they read before the age of 13. Like really, go to a party, and ask, "What are your favorite books of all time?" You will get so many people talking about books they read as a kid. So many go back to favorites when they were young. Whether it was in school or at home. Even in conversations with people who didn't have access to books, they will still talk about the stories their parents told them. Or the stories their grandparents told them. Those stories that they hear, I think have lifelong impact. It is a lot of pressure when you really think about it. As a children's book writer, this is not just a beach read, a novel that somebody is going to read and forget. This has the potential to stick with someone. I think about that a lot. I realize in 10 or 20 years I will probably encounter people who are in their 20s who will talk about reading my books when they were little kids and that is humbling and exciting.

**Thank you for beautifully articulating that incredible responsibility and the immense potential and power of bringing great books to kids.**

Matt Tavares

6/14/17, email correspondence

**You are drawn to baseball, yet while you are writing about sports, you are also writing about larger social issues. For instance, segregation and challenges to it run throughout your book *Henry Aaron's Dream*. How do you consider weaving in the broader historical context of one's life, the ways in which people are shaped by them, and also end up shaping them?**



When I've written about baseball players, I try to tell stories that aren't just about baseball. One of my favorite things to hear from readers is when someone tells me they aren't even a baseball fan, but they love my baseball books. They're really just stories about people. When I was a kid I would read anything if it was about baseball. So I know there are kids who might pick up one of my books because they want a sports story, but then they'll also end up learning a little bit about the civil rights movement (in *Henry Aaron's Dream*), or World War Two (in *There Goes Ted Williams*).

I learned while working on my first picture book biography, *Henry Aaron's Dream*, that in this format, it doesn't really work if I try to do too much. A 40-page picture book biography is never going to be a comprehensive 500-page biography. So instead of trying to hit all the major milestones in a person's life, I narrow my focus and just try to tell a great (true) story. For *Henry Aaron's Dream*, for example, I originally assumed the story would end with him breaking Babe Ruth's all-time homerun record, since that's the thing he is best known for. But once I started reading about his life, I found that I was fascinated by the story of his early years. And that was a story that hadn't really been told before. So I decided to focus on that. In the end, the home run record is only mentioned in the author's note. Each of my picture book biographies has an underlying theme, and everything in the book is built around that theme. That helps me decide what to leave in and what to leave out. Sometimes major milestones are left out, because while they might be a big part of the person's life story, they might not be a part of this story that I'm telling.

**You have indicated that you view yourself primarily as an illustrator, though you love to write as well. Are there lessons you have learned from illustrating that also hold true for writing? What feels different to you?**

I think I used to see writing and illustrating as two very separate parts of the process. But over the years, they have sort of morphed into one. My writing process is now quite similar to my illustrating process, in terms of starting out with big rough ideas and slowly building towards more detailed drafts. As I'm writing I'm picturing what the illustrations are going to be, and as I'm working on sketches, I'm thinking of what words can be removed from the text now that certain parts of the story are being told with pictures. The two processes are very intertwined.

**You have mentioned that for your works when you are collaborating with another author, there are some ideas neither comes up with alone that are true products of the collaboration. Doreen described the Pulitzer scene you retell in one of your interviews. Are there other examples you have? How else has this played out?**

I guess the books themselves are the ultimate example of this. I never would have thought to make a book about the Statue of Liberty, but because Doreen Rappaport wrote this amazing manuscript and Candlewick decided to send it to me, I spent a year of my life immersed in working on this book about the Statue of Liberty. Same goes for other books I've worked on—I had never heard of Sophie Blanchard, but I loved Matthew Clark Smith's manuscript and learned all about her when I was illustrating *Lighter Than Air*.

Collaborating forces me outside my comfort zone and pushes me in new directions. Really, it was the experience of working on *Lady Liberty* that made me want to write and illustrate my own nonfiction picture books, which led to my baseball biographies.

**You have worked both as an illustrator and as an illustrator/author on numerous picture book biographies. What in particular draws you to biographies? What do you feel the importance of them is?**

I've always loved biographies. I think they make learning about history much more compelling and personal. It's one thing for a kid to read a book about World War Two, but it's a whole different experience to learn about a kid who had dreamt of being a baseball player and got to live his dream, but then had to risk sacrificing that dream to serve his country during the war. Biographies bring history to life.

**You are venturing into fiction. What lead you there? How does it feel to work on? What did you discover in that process?**

My first couple books were fiction and I've illustrated some fiction books over the years, but the past several years have been almost all nonfiction for me. My move back to fiction actually happened accidentally. I wrote a manuscript for a nonfiction book about the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree. But my editor felt it needed more heart, some central characters to pull the child reader through the story. So I came up with the idea of telling the story from the point of view of a pair of cardinals who lived in the tree. Once I added the cardinals, the story changed quite a bit, and eventually the story really wasn't about the tree anymore. What I ended up with is *Red & Lulu*, a fiction picture book which comes out in September.

Michelle Markel

2/22/17, email correspondence

**What inspires you to write picture book biographies and what hopes do you have for this work?**

Children need stories about people who have overcome formidable obstacles to fight for what they believe in. Real people—not fictional characters with magic powers. Stories of real life heroes show that perseverance, and belief in oneself, make anything possible. That's a tremendous gift to a young person.

I'm drawn to stories about social justice activists—who are now being recognized by the kid lit community. Artists interest me too—creative people often face major challenges and are easily discouraged from pursuing their craft.

**What does your research/writing process look like and how does that shape your commitment to make nonfiction engaging?**

It begins by choosing a subject that I feel passionate about. When doing the research, I track down primary sources. I was fortunate that Clara Lemlich had described her experiences in magazine articles and interviews, and other factory girls had written their stories as well. For my book on Rousseau, sources included correspondence, accounts about the artists from friends and acquaintances, reviews from the critics (in the original French- which helped tremendously). This kind of material can provide evocative details for the story.

### **What advice do you have for aspiring authors?**

To bring your picture book biography to life, use sensory imagery and fresh, rhythmic language. Take the time to let your subject/main character react to pivotal moments. Focus on events that propel the story and illustrate your theme. To learn how all of this is done, study how your favorite authors convey emotion and weave imagery into the narration. Look at the back matter—notice what information was left out. Remember, you're not writing a report—you're writing a work of literature.

Richard Michelson

2/23/17, email correspondence

### **What inspired you to become an author?**

I never had a great desire to be an “author,” and I came to writing fairly late—but as a senior in high school, Mr. Ketchum helped guide me away from my persona as “class clown” by engaging me and taking my ideas seriously, rather than focusing on discipline. He sparked my lifelong interest in reading. I began, as many writers do, jotting down thoughts to try and make sense of my own life. And I found that I had a deep love for words, and the self-discipline to revise until a sentence was well-fashioned.

### **Why do you write picture book biographies? What drew you to entangling two life stories into one with *As Good as Anybody*?**

I write picture books because I started out as a poet, and picture books are all about finding the right words and narrowing your story down to its essentials. I also run a gallery and have a love for art. The picture book, when it works, is the perfect marriage of art and poetry. I cannot conceive of a better form. I write biographies because I am interested in history and people's lives. *As Good as Anybody*, followed my book *Across the Alley*, which is a fictionalized version of my own life. I grew up in a Jewish neighborhood that soon became an African American neighborhood. The Jews and the blacks did not generally play with each other, but the two protagonists in my story, because their bedroom windows faced each other, became best friends at night. In the story they rise above the peer pressure and bring their friendship out into the open. In my own life, I was not so brave, so I started thinking out others who had the courage of their

convictions and were willing to let their friendship cross racial lines, even when condemned by their peers. King and Heschel were the perfect illustration. I also want kids to know that while each individual can make a difference, change more often comes when we reach out and work with each other toward a common goal.

**What does your research process look like? How do you decide what information to include?**

Research is the most fun part of any project. The difficulty is in leaving the research behind and focusing on the writing. In every book I write, the inclination is to stuff in all the wonderful information I have discovered, and to prove how much I've learned. But for the story to work, most research, by necessity, must be left on the cutting room floor. If the information does not aid the main thrust of the story, it will only slow the narrative down. My first draft is generally overstuffed, and the manuscript not complete till I remove 90% of what I've written.

**How does believe that being Jewish has influenced the stories you are interested in writing?**

I did not grow up with any Jewish education of any kind. I was never bar mitzvahed, nor did I attend Hebrew school. My mother rebelled from an Orthodox household, and my father was too busy trying to make a living to worry about religious matters. But when my wife decided to convert to Judaism—against my wishes—I began to read the books she was studying and I found a wealth of culture and tradition that very much interested me. And I decided to learn more about my own heritage.

**How does your writing life relate to your gallery life? What is your relationship to the illustrators of your books, especially as you feature the work of talented illustrators in your gallery?**

My writing life and my gallery life are both are full time jobs which I love, but aside from the fact that I have an interest in both art and literature, there isn't much intersection. I have no say over who illustrates my books (though I sometimes make suggestions they are more often dismissed than accepted). But I have become good friends with many of my illustrators which has made my personal life immeasurably richer.

**What difference do you hope to make with your work?**

I hope to add my tiny ripple to the pond of literature that helps kids engage with language and history. The stories we hear as children often stay with us throughout our lives. What better legacy can any author hope for than to make a positive difference in a child's life; to encourage them to reach for the stars but to always remember where they came from.

**What was your path to publication?**

My first publications were small press poetry books. I had no interest in writing for children because I did not grow up as a reader and I was unaware of the great tradition of children's books. But when my son was young, he was scared of ghosts hiding in his room, and I used to play a game with him at night where I would try to calm his fears by insisting that the ghosts had been scared away by the goblins. Of course, we then had to scare away the Goblins with Witches, and the Witches with Demons, and so on. I was sharing this story to a group of friends one night, one of whom happened to be a book agent who encouraged me to write it down, and he sold it immediately. I was hooked. But I should add that it took three years to sell the next manuscript.

**What advice do you have for aspiring authors? What do you feel are the political responsibilities of writers in these times?**

The only advice I have for aspiring writers is to stop reading this interview and go to your desk—I mean NOW—and start writing. Don't wait for inspiration. There is no magic formula. Put your butt in the chair and start typing until you have something you can revise. Are you still here? Then I will say that I don't think a writer has any responsibility at all other than to write a good story. That said, I, personally, am a very political person with strong views on social justice issues, which by necessity come out in my writing, because that is who I am as a person. We can all, only be true to ourselves.

Sarah Warren

6/15/17, email correspondence

**What has inspired you to become an author?**

My art is inspired by my work in early childhood education. I began writing 15 years ago. As a mixed-race educator, I was both personally and professionally driven to make sure I shared media that celebrated diversity. It wasn't easy. There just weren't many biographies for young children that featured someone besides Martin Luther King Jr. Enough was enough! I wrote my own biographies to read to my students every week. I wrote about leaders who looked like the people in the lives of my children. My class could relate to these everyday heroes. I decided to become a professional children's author so I could reach a wider audience.

When *Dolores Huerta: A Hero to Migrant Workers* came out I couldn't wait to share the finished product. Many of my Head Start kids had parents who had recently immigrated to the United States from Central or South America, so I made sure to tell Dolores' story in Spanish and in English. After I read the book, I asked the kids what they liked about Dolores. A four-year-old smiled and raised her hand. "Dolores looks like my mom," she said. It was one of the greatest moments of my life and it's why I'm still hard at work researching and writing about the lives of exceptional women.

### **How does being a teacher inform you as a writer?**

When you read books in front of large groups of children you understand the stakes. There's nothing worse than trying to share a book that's too wordy, or preachy, or culturally irrelevant. As you probably already know, kids are amazing critics and they have no problem shutting you down as quickly and loudly as possible.

I had the chance to volunteer in a men's prison a couple of years ago. I talked with dads who wanted to learn more about how to read to their children. Many had never been read to themselves and it was totally out of their comfort zone. These tough looking guys were scared to death to read to their kids. I get it. It's super intimidating! As much as I worry and sweat over the content of my books, what I really care about is the interaction I create between the adult and child reader. A good book can inspire great conversation. It can generate joy, confidence, and curiosity. Books are tools. Teachers and other caregivers need good tools!

### **Picture books truly are works of poetry. Yours is especially sparsely worded, yet beautifully and powerfully conveyed. How do you write in such a way?**

I don't. I write the most half-baked, preachy, self-righteous stories ever. Then I spend years editing them down and getting over myself. It's a very impractical process and I don't recommend it!

The truth is, I wanted to be a poet when I graduated from college. I got a job teaching preschool to pay the bills until I became a celebrity millionaire writer. In the meantime, I read about a million and a half picture books. It was pretty easy to change my focus from writing poetry to writing children's stories. Both crafts force you to puzzle away words until you get to what's essential. I'd argue that picture books are even more challenging because the process often demands that you collaborate with an illustrator without ever getting the chance to explain yourself. You do your best to express your vision, then it gets to be someone else's vision.

### **As someone who reads picture book biographies regularly to children in addition to writing them, what do you believe they have the potential to mean for children? What impact do you hope your own writing has? Is this any different from the impact you hope to have generally on your students as their teacher?**

I was a real weirdo as a kid and I used books as possible blueprints for my life. I would stare at their covers and wonder and pretend I would look and act like the people inside one day. I gobbled up tragic mulatto stories. They are a little like princess stories only the princess dies, or marries a wounded confederate soldier and gets shunned by society, or the princess was just passing as a princess, but everyone finds out she was really just a toad. Looking back, I think ANY other kind of story would have been better for my psyche, but I really wanted to see myself in books and those were the characters that seemed to fit my profile. I didn't read those books to find my sense of purpose, but I

think they influenced what I thought of myself and the goals I set for my life. I think about self-image a lot when I teach and when I write. I think about how stories can help us find our purpose. I started writing biographies to show my students how to be change makers. I wanted to give them better blueprints.

Oh, and also, I want them to play! I want them to have fun and to be funny and happy. I want them to laugh and feel open and curious and to take risks. This is one part of my teaching that I am trying to integrate into my work as a writer. Last year, I started writing work-for-hire short stories that are pure entertainment. I'd like to figure out how to merge message with humor.

### **What do you believe the political responsibilities of writers to be?**

This is such a big, beautiful, scary question! I've always thought picture books help us form and reflect on our social politics. I also think it is the one art form where it is essential that you consider your own bias as an artist. In other mediums you create for an adult consumer who would, hopefully, have the ability to take or leave your work after evaluating it through a well-developed lens. The child audience is a captive audience. Kids are learning to discriminate and categorize and make sense of the world. Adults attach their own power struggles to that process. We have to be mindful and intentional. It's a tough tightrope. When I first started out I was pretty militant about the importance of diversifying representation in children's lit. I figured that kids NEEDED my books. They were like social justice medicine. As much as I like to believe I was being high-minded, I think I was also being very insecure. I wanted people to find my work valuable even if the writing wasn't that great. Now, I just want it to be enjoyable. I want to create a positive reading interaction. Kids will get the message if I don't shove it down their throats. Children's writers can't let their own issues jam up the works. Some young person might be forced to consume my work. I am telling them how to sort out the world. I need to make sure the way I sort the world out myself isn't totally screwed up.

Diversity in children's literature has become such a hot button topic in the kid's lit community. I'm so glad we are finally taking this seriously, but, like any movement towards equity, the changes and expectations can be treacherous to navigate. Even authors with the best of intentions can make mistakes that offend and hurt people. A recent event in Minnesota has got me thinking about this a lot. I don't know if you are aware of the debacle that happened at our art museum when they unveiled a piece by Sam Durant that referenced public execution. I feel pretty bad for everyone involved. I actually think the work itself would have been a powerful artifact that could have helped us take our legacy of violence seriously. It could have reinvigorated our need to stop the public executions happening RIGHT NOW (as I write this, the jury is still out on the Philando Castile murder). I'm so frustrated that both Durant and the director of the museum didn't reach out and partner with tribal elders BEFORE they unveiled the piece. I feel like it could have been a very different experience for all of us.

### **What advice do you have for aspiring authors?**

Write! Don't get stuck polishing one story. Have lots of stories you can play with and pitch to agents and editors.

Read! Find and dig into mentor texts. Read them in front of children so you know what works and what doesn't.

If you choose to write biographies, try writing about people who are still living. Some authors refuse to do this because it can be very challenging to highlight a living, fallible human. People have baggage that sometimes gets ignored when they become historical figures. Living heroes are still in the spotlight. They are targets, especially if they are women or people of color. You will feel a huge responsibility towards them that will test your objectivity. Still, do it.

If you do, ask permission.

One of the greatest regrets of my life is that I never asked Dolores Huerta if I could write about her. I'd gone to a conference where an author said it was better not to, when you do there's too many cooks in the kitchen. I stand by my work and I believe it honors and highlights both her efforts and her organization, but I should have treated her as a person first and an icon second. When I wrote it, I was desperate to create a teaching tool. I was a huge fan of Dolores Huerta's story, but I didn't think of her as a human being, I thought of her as a luminary and role model. I'm so proud that I get to share her story, but I should have seen her as more than her story. I can understand how Sam Durant got into the situation he's in. You think you're creating something to honor and educate and how can that be bad? I've worked to partner with Dolores' organization. I hope that makes up for my ignorant approach. I also asked Majora Carter, the subject of my newest biography for her permission and support. It IS more complicated to work with the person you are writing about, but I think the book will come from a more authentic, more respectful place.

Tanya Lee Stone

5/26/17, 21 minutes, telephone

### **You have written now 100 books. I am curious what inspired you to write for children. How has being an editor shaped you as an author?**

I was an editor of children's nonfiction, which is why I know it so well. The last job I had in house, going back 20 years, was managing editor of a children's nonfiction house that packaged books for 5 or 6 other publishing companies. When they wanted to have more books on their own list, they would have us make the books for them and then their name goes on the spine. That is why I ended up working on so many books in such a short amount of time. I was developing ideas for series and putting out children's nonfiction



books using work for hire authors when I was an editor. My jobs before that were also in educational mostly.

But then, my then husband got a job in Vermont. There was no major publishing up here. That was when I decided that I would try my hand at writing. The first kind of half of my writing career I had been writing the kinds of books I had been editing because I knew everything about how to do those books. I did a bunch of different series. Series on history, animal books, the kind that you get in the library. Using photography, they were library market. That is where my expertise, knowing how to write clearly, knowing how to engage kids, knowing how to put a book together. That is sort of where my foundation was.

That is the first half of my story. After those 50 or 60 books I did, I kind of felt like the books were good, I can make a living doing this, but what does it mean to call myself a writer? Do I want to try writing things that I am actually really passionate about? For me that was a huge shift. I left the whole library market behind and started over. The market doesn't have anything to do each other. Where I was very well connected in the library market, I had no connections in the trade market. So effectively I was starting over in terms of my ability to sell a manuscript, but of course my ability to sell a manuscript was enhanced by the skills I had already acquired in knowing how to write nonfiction.

Then there was this transition struggle teaching myself how to write the kind of nonfiction I write now. I was so rooted in that straightforward linear approach. That for me was the huge fork in the road. It started with *Elizabeth Leads the Way*.

**Since you made that shift, what excited you about the picture book format doing *Elizabeth Leads the Way*, and then the Elizabeth Blackwell book, and Jane Addams?**

My goal is always to discover something that I am really excited about as a learner. I am passionate about as a learner. And then share with kids. My mode is always what I am discovering in my research, what am I learning about by keeping my ears open that I didn't know before that I think is amazing that kids should know. Or that I think is horrible that I think kids should know. For *Elizabeth Leads the Way* it was, "Wow, almost every adult woman I talk to can't tell me what Elizabeth Cady Stanton did. That's terrible. Every female in this country has her to thank for being able to vote."

Specifically, when I working on nonfiction books that is always what I am doing. I am writing about something that I think is so cool that every kid should know about and I want to learn about it too. I want to immerse myself in learning about it and digest it and figure the ways of the story, figure out the pieces of it that hit me emotionally. Then figure out how to capture that essence in 32 pages. So they are jazzed to learn more about that person. It is always for me about capturing the essence of somebody I thought was so extraordinary that I think we should all know and we don't.

**It seems like many of your subjects were people we should know about and too often many people don't. They are people who were brave, people who pushed**

**boundaries, people who expanded rights for so many people. Do you think about the writer as having some sort of political responsibility?**

Not really a political responsibility. I feel a dedication to filling in some of the many missing gaps in our histories.

**Do you feel your research skills are similar to the research skills you had for your other books? Is it how you are presenting the information that is different?**

The books I am doing now are much more extensive than they used to be. But I also have a master's in education so I am good at research in general. But my research for the kinds of books that I do now, I try to immerse myself in as many primary sources that I can find. If the person is living I try to visit them and interview them.

**I know you write many larger books as well where you get to include a lot more information. Especially with the picture books when you are doing so much research and then leaving a lot aside so you are not telling the full life but capturing the essence, how are you making those decisions when you are immersed in all of that exciting information? What to you helps you figure out what that essence is?**

I am looking for details that kids are going to relate to, that they are going to find exciting. Two, is I am looking for my angle of the story. What piece of this person's life am I telling? I might focus more heavily where the focus for the picture book manuscript is for the research. I may decide that there are things that are too mature for a picture book audience that I don't need to include. I am not putting it in because it is too mature, it is not relevant to the story I am telling, and it doesn't fit in the story in a way that is authentic. I never just see something and say, "Oh, I am not going to put that in." I see something that that might be too old for a picture book and I kind of put it over aside and see if it fits in or not. I make a more holistic decision.

**As you talked about having extensive knowledge of the library market to shifting to trade, especially as you are interested in writing about unsung heroes and missing histories, I am curious, have there been times when you thought somebody was really important and overlooked, that there was pushback from an editor? Were there projects you didn't get to do because you haven't been able to sell them because people don't think that people are interested in that subject?**

It can be a real catch-22, which was more an issue for me 10 years ago than it is now. Now I have really solid relationships with my editors and a track record, a sales track record and a critical review track record. They are less likely to say that now. 10 years ago there were definitely conversations about that. Like, "Why do Elizabeth Blackwell? Nobody knows who she is." Then I would say, "Well, because nobody knows who she is, that's why we should do Elizabeth Blackwell." That one took a little bit of revisiting the idea a couple of times.

**That is great you persisted and created that record for yourself.**

Yeah, I am stubborn that way.

**How would you describe your writing process? How do you make your writing engaging for kids?**

I remember myself as a young reader and I try not to get bogged down in dry narrative, which often means that digesting a lot of information, writing it out the first time so I am really understanding it, then rewriting it so it is accessible for kids. Then continually revising it to make it more interesting and less dry.

**What advice do you have for aspiring authors? I know as you have become a more established writer, you have taught a lot of younger writers and emerging writers. What do you tell them? What wisdom have you gained over your career that you would like to pass along?**

You are probably getting similar answers on this question. Are you?

**In ways yes, but of course everybody has their unique way of putting it.**

I think if somebody is going to write in any genre they need to read 100 books in that genre before they can say that they have a sense of what that market is like and I don't care what genre it is. If you want to be a mystery writer, you have got to read a bunch of mystery books. If you want to write picture books, you have got to read a bunch of picture books. Really be fluent in the language of that genre and not be afraid to share your authorial voice. Be yourself, not try to be copying anybody else's style. Read, read, read, and write, write, write. There is just no way around either of those two things.

Actually, the thing that I do tell people most often is you have to be passionate about what you are writing about, interested in it, immensely interested in it. If you're not, nobody will be interested in your writing. I am always driven by, "What am I most passionate to be writing about?" Because it is hard work, you are about to spend a year or more working on it, so you better love it.

**Thank you very much, you obviously have a lot of passion that shines through in your work, which I so love.**

## Appendix C

### Permission Letter

Jay Saper would like to interview you for his master's thesis at Bank Street College on the significance of picture book biographies. Your participation is entirely voluntary and there will be no penalty for choosing not to participate now or at any other point.

The interview, which will take place in person, over the phone, or through email, should not last longer than one hour. By consenting to participate you agree to allow Jay to use your name in his thesis and include a transcription of the interview in the appendix. Before doing so, Jay will be sure to share with you any quotes from the interview that he hopes to use, which you will have an opportunity to approve or modify for content and phrasing.

Upon completion, the master's thesis will be submitted as a PDF to the Bank Street Library where it will be catalogued as part of the Library collection and downloadable via a live link on the catalog entry. It will also be entered into an international database.

There are no expected risks associated with your participation. You will benefit through being written about in a thesis that attempts to honor the valuable work of authors of picture book biographies.

If you have any questions you may contact Jay Saper or his thesis advisor Sal Vascellaro.

I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

## Appendix D

Permission from IMP Committee

December 16, 2016

Dear Jay,

I have approved your permission letters, and you may commence your independent study.

Best of luck,

Rena

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Rena Rice

Graduate School Faculty

Bank Street College of Education

## Appendix E

### Permission from Authors



Andrea Davis Pinkney

September 22, 2017

Hi Jay,

What an impressive thesis! Wow, you've worked hard. It looks great.

Andrea

Carole Boston Weatherford

June 30, 2017

Hi Jay,

I give my permission to include my interview in your thesis. Good luck!

Best,

Carole

Cynthia Chin-Lee

June 28, 2017

Hi, Jay,

Thanks for sending me the copy of your thesis.

You have my permission to include me.

Best wishes and stay in touch,

Cynthia

David Adler

September 24, 2017

Dear Jay,

Thank you for showing this to me. I made some corrections.

Best wishes,

David A.

Debbie Levy

September 24, 2017

Hi Jay,

I found this very interesting! And I'm honored that you included me.

I also enjoyed reading your original works that are included as part of the thesis. Good luck with creating picture books of your own, Jay!

You have my permission to include the transcript of our interview in the Appendix, and you have accurately conveyed my quotes.

Best regards,

Debbie

Donna Jo Napoli

June 28, 2017

The signed permission letter is attached.

What an interesting thesis. You're very skilled at interviews and at interpreting them. Thank you for including me.

Love,

Donna Jo

Doreen Rappaport

July 3, 2017

Dear Jay,

I am almost finished reading your thesis and am most impressed by your thoroughness and organization and the diversity of the various writers comments about their work and progress.

Doreen

Duncan Tonatiuh

July 1, 2017

Hi Jay,

Thank you for sharing your thesis with me. It is great. I'm attaching the permission. If you have any questions please let me know. All the best, d

Emily Arnold McCully

June 28, 2017

It looks wonderful, Jay. Congratulations on such an important, well-wrought work. Thank you so much for including me.

Best of luck as you go forward.

most heartily,

Emily

Icy Smith

July 7, 2017

Hi Jay,

Congrats on your wonderful work. And thank you for including my views in your thesis. You have my permission to include my interview transcript in the appendix. And my quotes are accurately conveyed.

Thanks again! Have a great summer!

Cheers,

Icy

Jabari Asim

July 1, 2017

Hi, Jay

This all looks good to me. Thanks for the good questions and continued success.

All the best,

Jabari

Jen Cullerton Johnson

October 1, 2017

Hey Jay:

I confirm everything you write in your thesis regarding our interview as representative of what we spoke about.

Talk soon,

Jen

John Hendrix

June 28, 2017

Hi Jay

Congrats on finishing your thesis. My quotes look just fine, I'm glad I had a chance to help you. This is hard work but worth it! I give permission for these quotes to be included.

Thanks for sharing!

John

Kate Schatz

June 28, 2017

This is wonderful! What an honor to be included amongst so many luminaries. I appreciate the great work you're doing and I approve.

Thanks!

Kate

Matt Tavares

June 28, 2017

Hi Jay,

All looks good to me. And I just read a few pages of your thesis, and it looks fascinating! Well done. Looking forward to reading the rest when I have a chance. Thanks!

Best,

Matt

Michelle Markel

June 29, 2017

Hi Jay,

Thank you kindly for sending a copy of your thesis, which I read this morning, with great pleasure and interest. I'm honored to have participated in this meaningful, well-written project. With this email I confirm that you've accurately conveyed my quotes.

I hope that you continue to write on social justice issues- which are now more important than ever. Do keep in touch.

Warmest wishes,

Michelle

Richard Michelson

June 28, 2017

Hello Jay, This is wonderful! I learned some stuff-- and I especially loved your opening poem. Congratulations on a job well done, and I look forward to reading your books in the future. If you are ever up in Northampton, stop by and say hello. Best, Rich

Sarah Warren

June 29, 2017

Dear Jay,

Your thesis is fantastic! I feel honored to be included in your research. I am a huge fan of many of the other authors you interviewed and I'm lucky I get to learn from them while reviewing your work.

You have my consent.

Take care,

Sarah

Tanya Lee Stone

June 29, 2017

Hi Jay,

Thank you so much for your kind words. Your thesis is wonderfully done.

Thank you again for your great work--you are an inspiration!

All best, Tanya