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Talking with Tanya Lee Stone

Tanya Lee Stone's books for children illuminate social injustice and the work of individuals and groups to overcome inequity. The prolific author of more than 100 books, she has received numerous accolades and awards for her body of work, including the Robert F. Sibert Medal, an Orbis Pictus Honor, the YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction Award, and inclusion in the Jane Addams Children's Book Awards and the Amelia Bloomer Project List. Stone's work also regularly collects starred reviews—admiration that's reflected, also, in her fan letters. Writing in an accessible style, Stone respects her young readers and allows them to come to their own conclusions, while her meticulous research and care for her topics result in accessible, thought-provoking picture books and narrative-nonfiction titles.

In a recent conversation, Stone provided insight into how she selects topics, conducts research, and shapes her groundbreaking books for youth. And she also explores the exciting present and future of narrative nonfiction.

BKL: *How did you develop your writing career?*

STONE: My career to date has three parts. It began with a decade of editorial work in children's nonfiction. I developed and hired writers for a series-driven, linear, straightforward line of books for the library market. In these series, there might be 30 books on animals, 12 on biomes. I would decide what they would look like, what the specifications would be. I would do the editing, get permissions, write captions, hire authors, and select photographs. I loved it and had no idea I would ever do anything else.

I had to leave that job in 1996, so I asked the publisher to give me a shot at writing one of the books for a series I had just developed. I wrote the first book on celebrity activists who were focused on medical causes, using primary sources and first-person interviews. I continued to write for school and library market publishers, including what I call "gateway," or introductory-level biographies.

THESE books were drastically different from what I write now. They were series driven, and topics were assigned, but I was able to cultivate skills in interviewing, writing, and developing research strategies that editing hadn't allowed me to focus on. Once my skill-set level reached a certain point, though, my creative instincts started to get restless. I decided to shift to trade

books rather than the library series I had been writing. As I was getting into this new market, I had to learn what worked and what didn't, and I have a thick rejection folder to show that this took some trial and error. I did start to get some editorial letters, and this feedback helped me figure out what was working.

BKL: *When you are researching a new book, do you have an audience in mind?*

STONE: My young learning self is the audience. My dad was always taking us on educational field trips to learn about some person or some event that many people had never heard of. Life was a constant "seek and discover" journey with him. I'm glad a little of it rubbed off on me! One of the main things that drives me is my own delight in continuing to be a learner. If I'm having fun learning about something, I assume I will eventually find a way to share this excitement with kids.

I can also trace this approach back to my graduate degree in science education. The goal was to look at the process of learning, rather than the product. I'm always looking for the "really?!" moment, as when I realized that my college-educated female friends didn't know about Elizabeth Cady Stanton. I thought, "Really? I'd better start with the little kids." This developed into my own "trickle-up theory." I ask, "What do I not know? What do my friends not know? How can I fill the holes that we have?" There are a lot of extraordinary people who have helped shape our nation, and their stories are little known. I want to add to children's knowledge base in a way that's fun and will stick with them so that when they grow up, they'll know who Elizabeth Cady Stanton is. I want them to love the idea of learning.

BKL: *How do you balance historical and biographical information in your books?*

STONE: I think about what information I must include to give the readers a foundation. What background will they need to understand the story I'm trying to tell? For example, *Courage Has No Color: The True Story of the Triple Nickles, America's First Black Paratroopers* needed information about segregation. One difference between writing for children or young adults, rather than for adults, is that for adults I wouldn't have needed all of that grounding information about segregation in the South. We can't assume that a 12-year-old has any emotional or literal understanding of that, so I have to think about what will support that reader.

BKL: *You've used a second-person perspective in several of your titles.*

STONE: I want to get to the story as quickly as I can. It took me a while to find this [point of view] with *Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote*. I fight with myself about using it, and wonder "Is it OK to go to second person again for this?" I want to make a direct connection with readers and make them see that this is important to them.

Before I used this strategy, *Elizabeth Leads the Way* was missing my authorial voice, and that was why I couldn't sell it. Then I watched the film *Iron Jawed Angels* and was so outraged, and I realized that the book needed some of my anger. So I changed to second person in the opening questions to the reader on the first page: "What would you do if someone told you you can't be what you want to be because you are a girl?" It worked. I used this again in my picture book *Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors? The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell* to establish an immediate connection with readers.

BKL: *What is your research process like?*

STONE: I start my research process with total immersion in a topic. I unearth everything I can get my hands on and read, and read, and read, and read. I make notes; I highlight; I photocopy snippets. Then, after I've read everything—and looked at photographs, and watched documentaries—I begin to shape my thoughts on what I think about everything I've just examined. I start to put the jigsaw puzzle together for myself. Then I can start drafting.

BKL: *A good deal of your research involves interviews that offer perspective on your topic.*

STONE: The primary source interviews that I do are unreliable. I have to do a lot of corroborating research. For example, an event someone just described to me couldn't have been true—she said it was winter, but a photo clearly shows it was summer.

You also can't just rely on a flat, one-dimensional account of something to have an inkling of what happened to somebody. If you have any possibility of sitting down with someone and watching his or her face while they're talking to you, listening to the intonation of their voice, and watching their body language, you do it. While I was working on *Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream*, Jerri Cobb told me in person—not through e-mail, not on the phone—the story of what happened in LBJ's office. Because we were together, I could see almost what she didn't want to tell me; intonation, facial expression, body language all give words different weight than they have when you just read them.

My goal is to be transparent. I never want to smooth over the rough edges of the truth, because life is infinitely messy. In *Courage Has No Color*, there were things that two subjects, Walter and Clarence, disagreed about. But we are talking about events that happened 60 years ago. Sometimes through the telling and retelling in an interview, a memory becomes clearer; a mystery is solved. There's nothing more fun!

BKL: *How is the whole field of nonfiction changing?*

STONE: I think the real shift is in trusting the reader to be able to have critical-thinking skills and assimilate information—to not have to be spoon-fed. One difference between kids now and when I was in school is that their access to real information and

news is radically different. My son, Jake, comes to his reading with sources like the BBC, Reddit, CNN, and even the *Onion*! Today's readers have an increased capability of assimilating all this information that my 16-year-old self didn't have. Many of them don't find *Courage Has No Color* difficult; they don't have any trouble noticing authorial point of view. Readers are different now, and the newer nonfiction rises to that. If the topic is compelling, we can trust that it will engage the reader.

BKL: *You write about nonfiction and are involved in a collective blog: INK (Interesting Nonfiction for Kids). What do you bring from that larger conversation into your work?*

STONE: When you work from home, having a peer group isn't an easy thing to have. Over last five to seven years, it's been crucial for me from an intellectual and creative point of view to be able to call [my fellow authors] and ask, "What do you think of that?" While this is also important to me socially, it is invaluable from an intellectual point of view. It's worthwhile and valuable to spend time thinking about what you are doing and why you are doing it. Being involved in the bigger conversation is a fascinating part of the whole picture of a writer's life.

Sampling Stone

Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream. 2009. 144p. illus. Candlewick, \$24.99 (9780763636111); paper, \$17.99 (9780763645021); e-book, \$17.99 (9780763656096). 629.450092. Gr. 5–8.

Courage Has No Color: The True Story of the Triple Nickles, America's First Black Paratroopers. 2013. 160p. illus. Candlewick, \$24.99 (9780763651176); paper, \$17.99 (9780763665487); e-book, \$17.99 (9780763668204). 940.5403. Gr. 5–9.

Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote. Illus. by Rebecca Gibbon. 2008. 32p. Holt, \$17.99 (9780805079036); Square Fish, paper, \$7.99 (9780312602369). 305.42092. Gr. 1–3.

The Good, the Bad, and the Barbie: A Doll's History and Her Impact on Us. 2010. 136p. illus. Viking, \$19.99 (9780670011872). 688.7. Gr. 7–10.

The House that Jane Built. Illus. by Kathryn Brown. June 2015. Holt/Christy Ottaviano, \$17.99 (9780805090499). 361.2. Gr. 1–4.

Sandy's Circus: A Story about Alexander Calder. Illus. by Boris Kulikov. 2008. 40p. Viking, \$16.99 (9780670062683). 730.92. Gr. 1–3.

Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors? The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell. Illus. by Marjorie Priceman. 2013. 40p. Holt/Christy Ottaviano, \$17.99 (9780805090482). 610.92. K–Gr. 3.

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Common Core Connections

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with books by Tanya Lee Stone. You can find more information about the standards at corestandards.org.

In the Classroom: Since the 1960s, women have successfully become astronauts. What are the requirements for being an astronaut today? NASA's website (1.usa.gov/1cYfJcQ) outlines what's needed to become a contemporary astronaut, and it also includes links to videos of female astronauts, including this clip of Karen Nyberg talking with students: [youtube.com/watch?v=8jzKD-nWfQ#t=111](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8jzKD-nWfQ#t=111). Ask students to compare these requirements with those that the women from the *Mercury 13* faced, as detailed in Tanya Lee Stone's *Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream*.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.2.** Determine two or more main ideas of a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.6.7.** Integrate information presented in different media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively) as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

In the Classroom: After students have read Tanya Lee Stone's *Courage Has No Color: The True Story of the Triple Nickles, America's First Black Paratroopers*, ask them to explore this website devoted to the 555th Parachute Infantry's history: triplenickle.com. Invite readers to compare the Triple Nickles' experience with that of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African Americans trained by the U.S. Army Air Corps. (This website can be useful for comparisons: nps.gov/museum/exhibits/tuskegee/airoverview.htm.) Citing references to both Stone's title and the suggested web resources, discuss as a class how both groups faced racial discrimination and paved the way for the desegregation of the military forces. For additional reading, suggest Shelley Pearsall's novel *Jump into the Sky*, which offers a fictional view of the Triple Nickles.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.7.** Draw on information from multiple print or digital sources, demonstrating the ability to locate an answer to a question quickly or to solve a problem efficiently.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.6.1.d.** Review the key ideas expressed and demonstrate understanding of multiple perspectives through reflection and paraphrasing.

In the Classroom: Chapter 7 of Tanya Lee Stone's *Courage Has No Color* describes the work that the Triple Nickles did as smoke jumpers in fighting fires in the northwestern U.S. According to Stone, "The Triple Nickles were on the cutting edge of learning this new method of fighting fires." Invite

students to learn about and compare current smoke-jumping practices with the experience of the Triple Nickles. Karen Magnuson Beil's *Fire in Their Eyes: Wildfires and the People Who Fight Them* could be a useful starting point.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.6.** Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.9.** Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

In the Classroom: After reading Tanya Lee Stone's *Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote*, have students research voting requirements and create a time line of how those restrictions have changed over time with respect to minority groups. Next, pair Stone's title with other books that encourage readers to consider different types of elections (mayoral, presidential), such as *Vote*, by Eileen Christelow, as well as those that introduce voting rights in other parts of the world, such as Elinor Batezat Sisulu's *The Day Gogo Went to Vote*, set in South Africa.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.2.** Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.8.** Describe the logical connection between particular sentences and paragraphs in a text (e.g., comparison, cause/effect, first/second/third in a sequence).

In the Classroom: In *Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors? The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell*, Tanya Lee Stone writes that it may surprise readers to learn that at one time, women "weren't allowed to become doctors." Blackwell didn't plan on becoming a doctor initially, but she had many qualities that would have enabled her to pursue any field. *Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors?* and Stone's *Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote* lend themselves to some natural comparisons between two strong women who addressed discrimination based on gender. As a class or in groups, ask students to make text-to-text connections between these two picture books and identify the personal qualities that enabled both women to combat societal beliefs and practices and pave the way for gender equality.

Common Core Connections

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.1.** Ask and answer questions to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.3.9.** Compare and contrast the most important points and key details presented in two texts on the same topic.