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Nurturing the Pursuit of Learning

Tanya Lee Stone

cbcknowledgequest@cbcbooks.org

I am a person in fierce pursuit of learning, and I come by it naturally.

My mother was an elementary school librarian. My father is a professor of education and a writer. These are my roots. They have everything to do with who I am personally and professionally—a writer of narrative nonfiction for kids and teens, as well as some fiction. I have developed a lifelong passion for reading and writing, but the intensity of that passion was not always as strong as it is now. First, and critically important, my curiosity was recognized and validated. Equally necessary, it was then nurtured. Yes, by my parents, but also by the many teachers and librarians who, one by one, helped shape a person who believes that

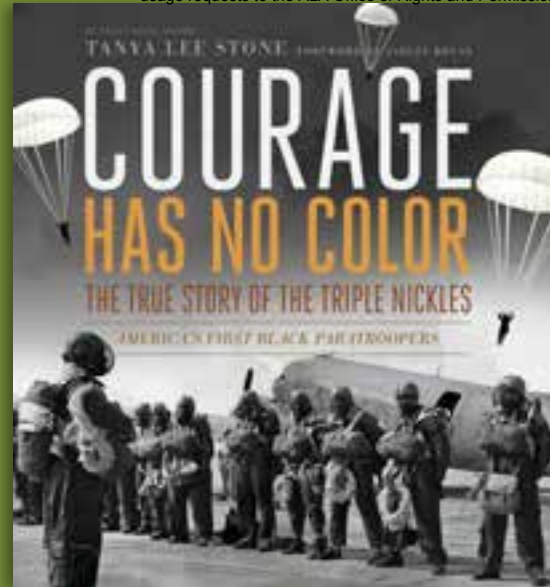
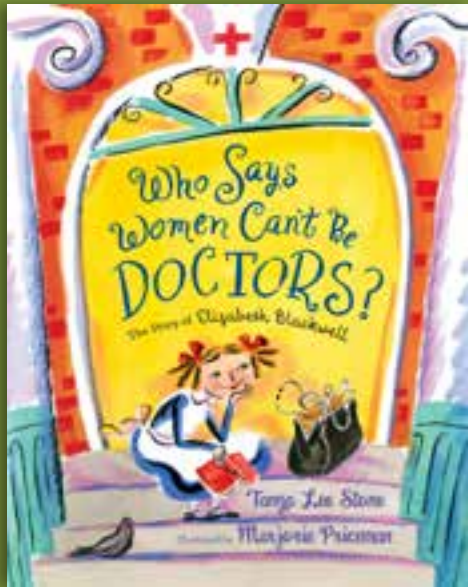
reading and writing and thinking and learning are huge parts of what it means to live a successful life.

I write to figure out what I think—about the world, my place in it, my view of it, how others see and experience it. I write to figure out not only who I am, but also who we—humankind—are, and have been. Understanding where we have been helps direct where we are going.

The first phase of my life in publishing was as an editor of nonfiction for kids. After developing and editing hundreds of library-market nonfiction series books, I moved to Vermont and wrote many books in that genre. My focus was content. That was the second phase of my life in publishing. The third phase came when I began to get too comfortable

with the books I was writing. I decided to try to write for the trade. I had a sense this new direction would allow me to look at nonfiction from angles I hadn't yet found and explore writing that didn't have to adhere to structure or format or have to fit into a series—not that there's anything wrong with that!

The first book I wrote during this time was *Elizabeth Leads the Way*. It was empowering to embrace not only thinking about what topic was speaking to me, but why—something I had not consciously done before. This change in perspective was a revelation. From that moment on, my point of view shifted to put story ahead of content, consider what I had to say on a topic, take research farther than I ever had before, and search for new truths. My intensity for learning was increasing.



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Now what drives me is finding a story I am as excited to learn about as I am to share with readers. If I hear myself telling everyone I meet, “Wait until you hear this!” I know I’m on to something intriguing. More often than not, this “something” falls into the category of people’s life stories that impact our world—otherwise known as history. If this history also serves to fill in any of the many missing gaps in our history books, even better.

Both of my newest books—*Courage Has No Color* and *Who Says Women Can’t Be Doctors?*—fit this description. *Who Says Women Can’t Be Doctors?* is a picture book (illustrated by Marjorie Price-man) about Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor in America. Her sheer determination to be accepted into medical school when

every school she applied to came back with “no women allowed” was enough for me! The more I learned about her, the more determined I became to introduce this spunky young woman to young readers.

Courage Has No Color is another story you won’t find in any social studies book (although I am hoping that circumstance will now change). This is the untold story of the Triple Nickles, the first black paratroopers in World War II. Like the female fliers in my *Almost Astronauts* who never were allowed into the space program, these brave men of the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion ultimately did not get the “win” for themselves; they were never sent into combat overseas. But what they *did* do is almost more important; they broke down barriers, helped

change how the military viewed African American soldiers, and paved the way for others who came after them. (They also stood ready to defend the U.S. against a little-known Japanese attack on the American West during the war!)

Courage Has No Color has two narratives woven together, as I could not tell the story of the Triple Nickles without discussing what life was like for African Americans at the time of World War II and just before. These two stories had to go hand in hand so readers had the context they needed to take in all aspects of the story and think about it. The visual layer of storytelling I did in that book also encourages readers to think more deeply about prejudice and discrimination and the power of people to overcome such gargantuan obstacles.

For me, provoking critical thinking is the greatest aspect of the kind of nonfiction my colleagues and I write—we are up-front about the fact that our books are not the answers to all questions, but instead an invitation to ask questions.

For example, the Charles Alston cartoons I included, with detailed caption information, offer a fascinating opportunity for readers to think more about the meanings and implications of those cartoons. They might inspire readers to think further about why Alston was asked to draw these images for the War Department, how they were (or weren't) distributed, what the different reactions to them were, and why. For me, provoking critical thinking is the greatest aspect of the kind of nonfiction my colleagues and I write—we are up-front about the fact that our books are not the answers

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If I could speak to readers, I would say this: I have put this true story together as accurately and as unbiasedly as I possibly could, but always remember that history is written by human beings and that we all see the

world in our own unique ways. So feel free to question for yourself what I have written, and if there is anything you want to know more about, please go forth and discover your own answers.

As the grown-ups in my life encouraged me to probe and question what I was learning and reading, I hope my books do the same for young readers. I am grateful that my own children have wonderful teachers and librarians in their lives, educators who appreciate learners' inquisitiveness and hand them book after book that nurtures their love of learning. This is how we help children rise to the challenge of finding their own way in the world—and that is what I call success.

Tanya Lee Stone has received numerous awards for her work, including the Robert F. Sibert Medal, Boston Globe-Horn Book Honor, Golden Kite Award, YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction, and Bankstreet College of Education's Flora Stieglitz Straus Award. In addition to her books, she has written pieces for *School Library Journal*, *VOYA*, *Horn Book*, and the *New York Times*. Learn more about Tanya and her books at www.tanyastone.com.

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