



Invited Dialogue

Chronicling Extraordinary Lives through Children's Biographies: An Interview with Carole Boston Weatherford

Alan R. Bailey

In this interview, award-winning author Carole Boston Weatherford discusses why she writes biographies for children and the importance of introducing young readers to significant, yet unrecognized, African Americans.

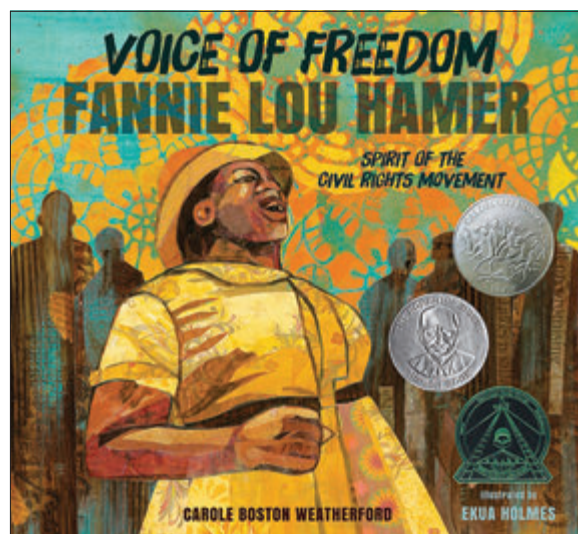
For this issue of *Language Arts*, I had the pleasure of interviewing award-winning biographer and poet, Carole Boston Weatherford. In this column, Carole shares what inspires her to write intriguing biographies of extraordinary African Americans such as Jesse Owens, Fannie Lou Hamer, Matthew Henson, Harriet Tubman, and Billie Holiday. She also explains her research process and discusses why she writes about the African American experience; when and how her first poem was written; and her experiences collaborating with her son Jeffery. In addition, we get a sneak preview of two forthcoming books.

Born and raised in Baltimore, Maryland, Carole received an M.A. in publications design from the University of Baltimore and an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. She currently resides in North Carolina. In addition to being a prolific poet, Carole is a professor of English at Fayetteville State University in Fayetteville, NC. Carole's books have garnered much praise. For example, *Becoming Billie Holiday* (2008) received a Coretta Scott King Author Honor, and *Birmingham, 1963* (2007) won the Lee Bennett Hopkins Poetry Award. *Freedom in Congo Square* (2016) received the Charlotte Zolotow Award, which



is given annually by the Cooperative Children's Book Center to the author of the best picturebook published in the United States. *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer, Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement* (2015) and *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* (2006) both earned Caldecott Honors.

This excerpted conversation was recorded on March 26, 2018, and has been edited for publication.



Alan R. Bailey (ARB): Carole, thank you for speaking with me today. Please tell me what inspires you to write biographies.

Carole Boston Weatherford (CBW): I am curious about history, and my mission as an author is to mine the past for family stories, fading traditions, forgotten struggles, and forgotten heroes. Many of the people I write about are forgotten heroes. I think so many African American heroes have been lost to history; we will never know some of their names. Then there are others that we discover along the way. These are the heroes that I heard about later in life, and I want to rescue those people from obscurity or at least share them with a younger generation. So that's the main reason why I write biographies.

ARB: Intriguing. You mentioned writing biographies about some of the forgotten people, but you have written about very well-known people like Harriet Tubman, Matthew Henson, Billie Holiday, Jesse Owens, Fannie Lou Hamer, Lena Horne, and so many other remarkable individuals.

CBW: Yes, I've written about many well-known people. I assume most adults know about Lena Horne, Matthew Henson, and Fannie Lou Hamer, but these names are still unknown to many. And I definitely don't expect most children to know them. When I'm doing appearances, so many people say, "I had never heard of Fannie Lou Hamer," and few have heard of people like Arturo Schomburg. So while some biographers write about very famous people, I often write about very obscure ones.

ARB: I had never thought of it that way, since I am seeing things from my knowledge of African American trailblazers.

CBW: Right. But you would be surprised by the number of people who are unfamiliar with these "well-known" African American individuals. I go places where people have never heard of Leontyne Price. And I'm not just talking about White people; many Black people do not know about folks like Price or Fannie Lou Hamer. There was a church in Louisiana, right next door to Mississippi where Fannie Lou Hamer lived all of her life and did a lot of her work, and I was told that in that congregation of 300 people, only three people raised their hands when asked if they knew who Fannie Lou Hamer was. I'm always surprised at how many people—

particularly how many adults and educators—don't know about the people I write about. I not only have a responsibility to the children who are my primary audience, but also to the adults in their lives. I feel particularly responsible for educators, because if educators don't know about these folks, they can't teach children about them. Every American should know about Matthew Henson, just like most Americans know about Lewis and Clark.

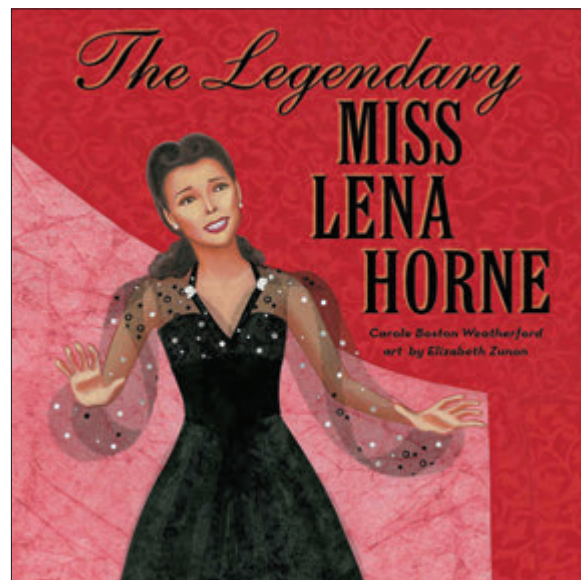
ARB: I totally agree. In addition to educating children, you're educating parents, teachers, and others reading to children.

CBW: Yes, because the people I write about are not always portrayed in textbooks. In trying to get some of my projects published, I have been told, "Oh, this person's story is a footnote to history." The lack of knowledge when it comes to African Americans and African American history surprises me.

ARB: Me, too. How do you choose which individuals to write about?

CBW: First of all, I have to be interested in the person myself. Maybe I already know about the person, or maybe I hear something I never knew about the person that's a revelation to me. And there must be something I think others can learn from that person.

ARB: Your point reminds me of *The Legendary Miss Lena Horne* (Weatherford, 2017), which is a book I simply love. How did you learn of Miss Horne's love of reading?



CBW: It was probably in another biography written by someone else. But we learn from Lena Horne that reading can be healing sometimes; she was grieving after losing her husband, father, and son all within the span of a year, and she dealt with her grief by retreating into reading. Many of my subjects' lives teach the same lesson: if you persevere, you can overcome adversity and can beat the odds.

ARB: That is a lesson many young children need to hear again and again.

CBW: They really do. I focus on the subject's early years in my biographies, because I believe the seed of who a child is to become is already in that child. Somehow that seed gets nurtured and watered and gets the sunlight of love—often through the love and the caring of the adults in that child's life. This love allows the child to flourish and become whatever he or she is meant to be or decides to be. So that's also a key message in the lives I chronicle in my biographies.

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ARB: And you deliver that message with passion. I realize that writing biographies requires a lot of research. Can you tell me a little about your research process?

CBW: My research process is multifaceted. It may consist of reading secondary research, reading a biography that another author has written, and reading and/or listening to oral histories and interviews. My research may include visiting a historic site or a museum, or combing through an archive like the Schomburg Center, either in person or virtually. Sometimes it might include going to places decades before I even write about the subject. You see, the research is not always intentional; sometimes it is organic and just part of my life because I love history so much. I visited the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama and the 16th Street Baptist Church years before I wrote *Birmingham, 1963* (Weatherford, 2007), yet that visit informed and grounded my work. So my research really is



multifaceted; sometimes it can be done over a period of months or years. It just depends on the subject. Because I work on multiple projects at one time, the duration of a project might depend on which is given priority.

ARB: Working on multiple projects intrigues me. How many projects do you work on simultaneously?

CBW: I'd say three, four, or five different projects at a time. Some are works in progress and some I am turning around in my head. By "works in progress" I don't mean just an idea; it might mean I have something on paper and have begun to develop a manuscript of some sort, but it could also mean I am in the process of researching a project and have not put pen to paper yet. I may go weeks or even months without working on one of those projects, but I still consider them things that I'm working on because I'm thinking about them. If I need a break from one project, then I turn to another manuscript that might be more stimulating. Maybe it's a project that does not involve a whole lot of research, or it may mean writing something I already have inside of me—something I have already researched. I thrive on having different works in progress, allowing me to immerse myself in one, and then to resurface and work on another for a while. My work is my refuge.

ARB: Do you feel multiple projects prevent writer's block?

CBW: Kids often ask me if I ever get writer's block or they ask if I can give them advice for when they have writer's block. I always say, "Well, write something different or do something different that uses a different part of your brain, like doing a puzzle, coloring, cleaning up, if that floats your boat." But I will tell you, cleaning up is not going to cut it for me (laughing)! Some people just need to move around to get the creative juices flowing. You can loosen up by taking a walk or writing something else, if you feel like it.

ARB: I see how taking part in various activities can be helpful. I know it's impossible to include every intriguing piece of information you uncover while you're researching the lives of these extraordinary people, so how do you decide which aspects to write about and which ones to exclude?

CBW: Oh, that's hard. Sometimes I fall in love with a detail and I say, "This just has to stay." Because my biographies are often picturebooks, the details need to be something that can be illustrated, so that helps me choose episodes from the person's life that can be visually conveyed. I also try to decide which details are most interesting and which details really capture the essence of the person; such details show just how remarkable the person is, which is so important when most of your readers are meeting them for the first time. When creating biographies, it's important to have round characters as opposed to flat ones.

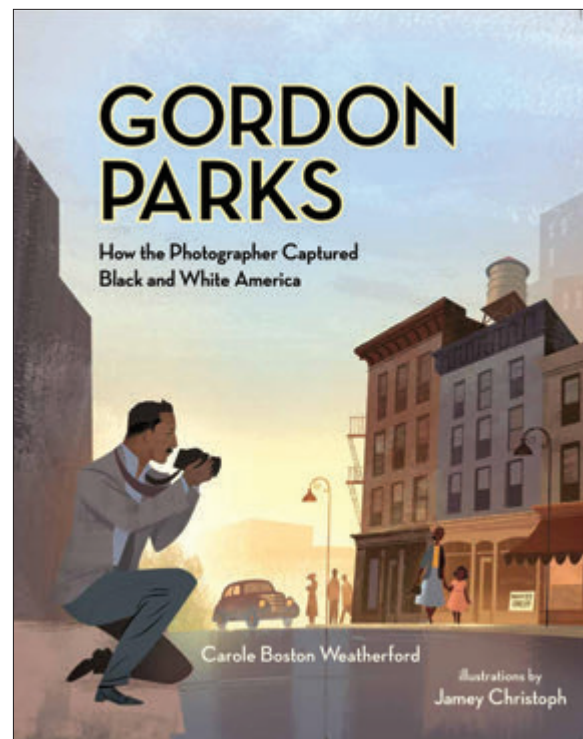
ARB: That's interesting because with picturebooks, you are limited to a rather small number of pages. Since being confined to a limited number of pages also limits the amount of text you can write, you can only choose the most significant elements.

CBW: And sometimes the editor chooses for me (laughing)! That can be helpful. But sometimes editors want more. My writing is rather sparse when I am doing book-length poems, and editors often want me to add more in order to explain a concept to kids. In these cases, I sometimes resist, because I often think more writing is unnecessary; kids get it (and they have proven to us time and time again that they get it), and they want us to get it, too.

ARB: We are in total agreement. Children are savvier than many adults could ever imagine.

CBW: Yes. The subject matter of my books tends to be sophisticated, so my approaches are often different—they could be considered nonlinear. But while I take novel approaches to the subject matter sometimes, I still think kids get it. For example, I wrote a biography about Gordon Parks, a talented African American photographer, called *Gordon Parks: How the Photographer Captured Black and White America*. Although it is Parks's biography, the book is also about the making of his photograph, *American Gothic*. The subject of the photograph is a charwoman (custodian) who worked in the same government building as Gordon Parks.

The very last line in the book is, "You don't have to hear her story to know her prayer" (Weatherford, 2015). The editors were afraid children might not understand that last line, and I appreciate that concern; after all, editors want books to be clear to children, and I certainly understand that abstract ideas must be clear to children. When we write about discrimination, for example, we must be clear about what discrimination is, and we must be clear about what hopes and dreams are. Younger children need even more direct text. So, to retain that last line, I added almost six lines ahead of it explaining the obstacles against her. These lines



emphasized what Parks's American Gothic picture—a woman standing against the backdrop of the American flag holding a mop and a broom like the subjects in Grant Wood's painting American Gothic—already told us visually. That photograph captured the struggles of this woman's everyday life and the effects of racism.

When I read that last line with kids—"You don't have to hear her story to know her prayer"—I ask them, "What do you think her prayer is?" What they come up with is amazing. They can see her life depicted in these photographs; they know she wants a better world for her children, and she wants our country to live up to its promise. One part of the book shows that she's a worshipping woman, so we know she also wants her God to look after her and her family and to help her provide for the children she lives with in a small apartment—the best she can afford on her very small salary of \$1,000 a year. Children see so much and understand what she is praying for.

Poetry is my go-to language because it's my first literary language. I started out writing poetry as a first grader, and I continue to find the same joy and magic in writing poetry today.

ARB: Yes, Gordon Parks's photo certainly adds a fascinating and sophisticated storyline to his biography. Now let's turn to a different topic. Who would you love to be the subject of a future biography?

CBW: I am thinking about writing about Paul Robeson. I'm not sure whether I want it to be a picturebook or a verse biography for older students.

ARB: You do both so well. What a perfect segue to my next question. You have written biographies in both poetry and prose. How is the writing process similar and how is it different?

CBW: I have only written one collective biography in prose. Everything else is poetry, although it might not be viewed or marketed as such. My poetry gets called *lyrical prose* or *poetic text*; I suppose it's because I'm writing in the picturebook category. But I don't know what

makes people want to classify it as something other than poetry.

I only have three children's books that I consider to be something other than poetry: *Sink or Swim: African-American Lifesavers of the Outer Banks* (Weatherford, 1999), *Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-Ins* (Weatherford, 2005), and *First Pooch: The Obamas Pick a Pet* (Weatherford, 2009). Poetry is my go-to language because it's my first literary language. I started out writing poetry as a first grader, and I continue to find the same joy and magic in writing poetry today. In first grade, I made up a poem; it came out of the blue, so to speak. While my mother was driving me home from school one day, I told her I had made up a poem. I recited my poem, and she must have been in a state of shock because she parked the car even though we were just two blocks from home. Then she looked at me and said, "Can you say that again?" When I recited the poem the second time, she wrote it down. From that moment on, I've been composing poetry.

ARB: Okay. So that was your first written poem.

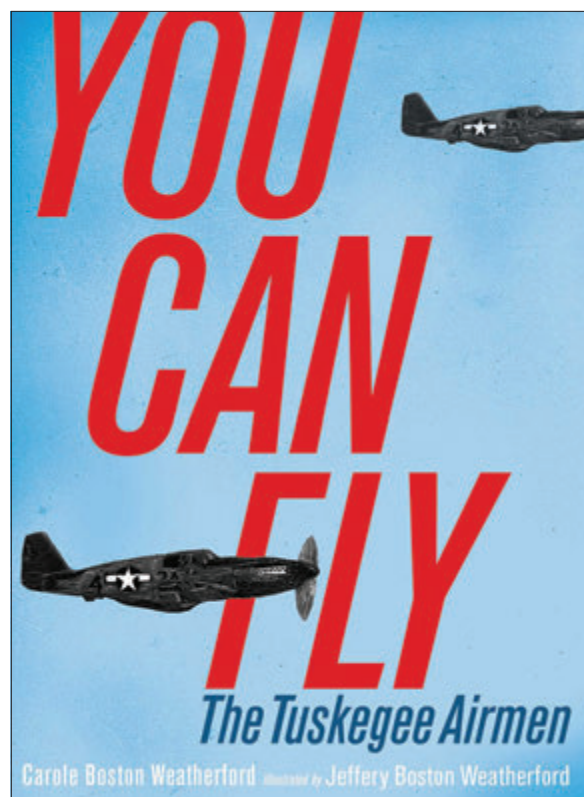
CBW: When I was growing up, I did not aspire to be an author. I did not even declare myself a poet until I was 24 years old and had my work published for the first time someplace other than a school publication. One thing that's important to know about me—not only did my mother write down that first poem, but it was actually her idea for my father to "publish" it. He was a printing teacher and head of the industrial arts department at Frederick Douglass High School in Baltimore; they used my poems as typesetting and printing exercises and printed them on what amounted to little index cards. So at a very early age, before there was any such thing as a personal computer or laser printer, I was able to see my work in print. I was thrilled to see it, but it was just, "Okay, my daddy's a printer."

I grew up around the print shop, so I had seen the letterpress working, and that was fun for me. But it gave me the audacity when I was in my 20s and 30s to continue to believe that I could get a book published. Even in the face of repeated rejections by major publishers, I just never gave up. I kept writing and practicing and refining my craft, and eventually, my work was published.

But it was my parents who recognized the seed that was in me and figured out ways to nurture it; they encouraged me and gave me opportunities to demonstrate excellence that ultimately enabled me to endure that inevitable rejection within the publishing industry. My dad is now deceased, but I am grateful he lived long enough to see some of my books published. Not the major ones, but he saw the beginning of my career—the fulfillment of that promise within me.

ARB: What a powerful role your parents played in nurturing your gifts as a writer! Speaking of family, your son Jeffery illustrated *You Can Fly: The Tuskegee Airmen* (Weatherford, 2016). Tell me about that collaborative experience and if you plan to work together on future projects.

CBW: Jeffery was interning with a children's book publisher while I was writing *You Can Fly* (2016). He completed a set of digital illustrations based on the poems I had written. My publisher gave him the contract for the book, and he began creating scratchboard images. Once he was hired, I was no longer collaborating with him. It was just like any other author/illustrator collaboration. I did the writing and Jeffery did the images.



We are working on some projects together right now, though. There are two verse novels—one is a contemporary verse novel and the other is a historical verse novel about our family heritage on the eastern shore of Maryland. The historical verse novel builds on our family history; we had a great-great-great-great grandfather on the same plantation where Frederick Douglass was enslaved. The novel is set on the plantation during the slavery era and later in the Reconstruction era, as well as in villages that members of our family co-founded on the eastern shore. For this historical project, I am writing the text and Jeffery will be doing the images. But for the contemporary verse novel we're working on, we're both doing some of the writing, because Jeffery is a poet as well. I'm so excited about that.

ARB: Both verse novels sound fascinating, and I look forward to reading them. Carole, what do you enjoy most about writing for children?

CBW: Well, first and foremost, I like writing poetry. I'm just writing it for a very important audience—children. I enjoy the notion that a child might learn something from my writing, particularly about subjects that I care about. I just love the idea that children whom I will never meet, whose schools I will never visit for an author appearance, will read my books and perhaps be touched by them. I find it amazing to know that children may be changed or encouraged in some way by my books, or that my books may awaken something in them. Sometimes after my visits to schools, kids will say to me, "You've inspired me to write or to keep pushing toward what I want to do." So that's important to me as a mother, an author, and as a human being. I think that's what we are here for—to be a positive influence and make a positive impact on somebody else's life.

ARB: That is quite powerful. Finally, what advice would you give aspiring writers?

CBW: I always say do a lot of reading and practice your craft, which often means a lot of revising and patience. The practice may also include joining a critique group to get feedback from like-minded writers. Just persevere!

ARB: Great advice Carole. I appreciate you taking time out of your busy day to grant me this interview. Thank you so much.

CBW: My pleasure, Alan. Take care.

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2018 NCTE Children's Book Awards

Charlotte Huck Award for Outstanding Fiction for Children

Sweep: The Story of a Girl and Her Monster by Jonathan Auxier (Amulet)

HONOR BOOKS: *Can I Touch Your Hair?* by Irene Latham, Charles Waters, Sean Qualls, and Selina Alko (Carolrhoda Books); *Everything Else in the Universe* by Tracy Holczer (G.P. Putnam's Sons); *Ghost Boys* by Jewell Parker Rhodes (Little, Brown and Company); *Merci Suárez Changes Gear* by Meg Medina (Candlewick Press); *The Day War Came* by Rebecca Cobb (Candlewick Press)

Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children

Between the Lines: How Ernie Barnes Went from the Football Field to the Art Gallery by Sandra Neil Wallace, illustrated by Bryan Collier (Simon & Schuster)

HONOR BOOKS: *Champion: The Comeback Tale of the American Chestnut Tree* by Sally M. Walker (Henry Holt and Company); *Pass Go and Collect \$200: The Story of How Monopoly Was Invented* by Tanya Lee Stone, illustrated by Stephen Salerno (Henry Holt and Company); *The Secret Kingdom: Nek Chand, a Changing India, and a Hidden World of Art* by Barb Rosenstock, illustrated by Claire Nivola (Candlewick Press); *Thirty Minutes Over Oregon: A Japanese Pilot's World War II Story* by Marc Tyler Nobleman, illustrated by Melissa Iwai (Clarion Books); *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga* by Traci Sorell, illustrated by Frané Lessac (Charlesbridge Publishing)

Both awards were presented at the Children's Book Awards Luncheon during the 2018 NCTE Annual Convention in Houston, Texas.

Learn more about the Charlotte Huck Award at <http://www.ncte.org/awards/charlotte-huck> and the Orbis Pictus Award at <http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbisdictus>.

Want to be there when the next round of Children's Book Award winners is announced? Registration for #NCTE19 is open! Go to <http://convention.ncte.org/> and save the date: November 21–24, 2019, Baltimore, MD!