

Carolyn Yoder Interview

<Jennifer>: Hi, this is Jennifer Crow here in the Arne Nixon Center for the Study of Children's Literature at Fresno State, and we're very grateful today to have with us author and editor Carolyn Yoder. She's written three books in the *We are American* series; she has also written *George Washington: The Writer*; and she has a new book coming out later this month called *John Adams: The Writer*. She's the senior editor of history and world cultures for *Highlights for Children Magazine*, and she's the editor for Calkins Creek books which is an imprint of Boyd Mills Press.

Hi, Carolyn

<Carolyn>: Hi, how are you?

<Jennifer>: Good. I was wondering if you could tell us today a bit about Calkins Creek Books.

<Carolyn>: Okay, Calkins Creek is actually a creek and it's in Boyd Mills, so hence the name, and hence the history reference, I guess. Calkins Creek started a few years back and I believe our first books came out in 2005. We are primarily - I should say solely - an American History publisher, non-fiction, historical fiction, chapter books, picture books, novels mostly for middle grades. So that's chiefly our focus.

<Jennifer>: Okay, I was wondering when you get in manuscripts, what are you looking for? I mean what is it that says, you know, you're going to publish that one? What?

<Carolyn>: First they have to be on American history. And I don't mean to be glib but we do sometimes get manuscripts that aren't, so that's key. And the second thing I look for is, I guess the first thing I look for is, strong research because with strong research comes strong writing. And I'll go to - first I'll probably go to the cover letter to see what really brought the author to that piece. Why he or she is excited about it, by it and whether he or she is the best person to write on that subject. And then I'll go to the bibliography and just take a look at how strong the research is. And if the research seems to be sound and detailed, then I know that when I read the manuscript, when I enter into the author's world, I'm pretty much going to be entering into an unusual world. Because again the research is what drives the imagination in historical fiction and nonfiction, so...

<Jennifer>: Well I've heard that you actually encourage the writers to anchor the characters in the time and the place, and so what do you mean by that? How do they do that?

<Carolyn>: Well it's interesting. I get a lot of manuscripts which don't have any kind of, no sense of time and place. It's as if the characters seem to exist into a vacuum, and there are no details. There's no sense of environment, or atmosphere, and tone. So instead of the historical context coming through in dialog, it really needs to, the author needs to create this very real world. And again that comes from feeling a comfort in the research.

And once an author does feel comfort in the research, they can really start molding that world. And so you have characters that are realistic to the times. They talk the times, they dress in the times, they inhabit a world of that particular time period, and they just - just minute little details that really add to a manuscript. And again that's what I mean by it has to be anchored. And that's difficult. I think that's one of the chief weaknesses I see in manuscripts that I receive. That either the historical and cultural context is so stilted it's almost in a dialog like: "Oh, over there, who goes there? Oh it's George Washington, walking down the street. Oh, hence what is he doing? Oh, he's fighting the battle of Long Island." Uh, that doesn't really work that way. Hmm, and so again the whole sense of the manuscript has to be created, and it's a tough road. It is very hard to do.

<Jennifer>: It sounds like a lot of research.

<Carolyn>: It is.

<Jennifer>: Well I see you, you know, you have your book coming out later this month, *John Adams: The Writer*. Can you tell us a bit about what kind of research you did for that book?

<Carolyn>: I had, we had, published a book, years ago, with Harold Holzer, who's a Lincoln scholar, called *Abraham Lincoln the Writer*. And he sort of started the ball rolling. And he created a biography of Lincoln told through in his own words. And so then I wrote a book on George Washington the writer and that took - I think that took about five years to put together. It's quite a lot of research. And so because I had written a Washington book and worked on another project, I knew a lot about John Adams. So I was able to sort of use my old research, which is always good to do. Hmm, I think for writers who feel like research is drudgery, you know, you can get a lot of miles out it. So anyway, I would say I worked on the research for John Adams, probably about two years. I spent a lot of time in Quincy, at his home. I spent a lot of time at the Quincy Memorial Society, at the Church of the Presidents there. I worked very closely with an Adams scholar who helped me rev . . . you know, helped me review the outline. He helped me review my manuscript. He reviewed the page proofs. He was with me along the way. I did a lot of work at the Boston Public Library where Adams' library is, so I was able to actually look at his books, look at his annotations. So I spent a lot of time on the road, in the library. There's a fabulous library near me, in Washington Crossing called the David Library, which is just devoted to American Revolution. So, that took quite a long time and then to actually write it and to come up with the selections of his words that I wanted to use was time consuming because he is a very good writer. He was a little bit, he was easier to do than Washington who I would not classify as a writer, so So that's sort of how it came about. It takes about, all told, about five years.

<Jennifer>: Wow, that' a long time.

<Carolyn>: Yeah.

<Jennifer>: It sounds like it's fun to do that kind of thing.

<Carolyn>: It is fun. You meet really, you meet incredible people, hmm, Adams was a very real man. He, you know, he was very honest with his weaknesses and his strengths, very passionate about both, and everybody loves Abigail, so she's hard to ignore, but anyway, I think it's mostly the people that you meet along the way with your research. That helps.

<Jennifer>: Well let me ask you this one last question, what kind of upcoming trends do you see for children's nonfiction and historical fiction?

<Carolyn>: Well I've just been seeing a lot of great nonfiction coming out. A lot of unusual slants to history, a lot of great research, beautifully designed books, so I hope that trend is, you know, still going strong. I think it is, and I'm very excited for the history of nonfiction. I think it is entering its Renaissance.

<Jennifer>: Yeah, well we think, I think, you've done a really fantastic job. I think you're bringing U.S. history to life for a lot kids that are probably just sitting there with dull, boring textbooks.

<Carolyn>: I hope so

<Jennifer>: And I think you've done a great job, and I want to thank you for talking to us about it.

<Carolyn>: Thank you, it was great.

<Jennifer>: Hope you can come back to the Arne Nixon Center.

<Carolyn>: I would love to, so...

<Jennifer>: Okay, thank you very much Carolyn, and this is Jennifer Crow with the Arne Nixon Center, have a good day.

<Carolyn>: Thank you.