

Book Links

BOOKS AND AUTHORS:
TALKING WITH MELISSA SWEET
BY CYNDI GIORGIS

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Talking with Melissa Sweet



In 2012, *Balloons over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade* (2011), written and illustrated by Melissa Sweet, received the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award, the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction, and a Golden Kite Award. Previously, Sweet was awarded a Caldecott Honor in 2009 for her illustrations in *A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams*, written by Jen Bryant. In her latest releases, Michelle Markel's *Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909* (2013) and Jen Bryant's *A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin* (2013), she contributes masterful illustrations in her trademark watercolor-and-collage medium. These two recent titles exemplify Sweet's interest in illustrating individuals who overcame challenges or who have made a difference in society—through their actions or through their art. Recently, I had an opportunity to talk with Sweet about her research as well as the decision-making process she engages in to create her picture-book art.

BKL: Interviews of nonfiction authors often include questions about their research process, but, generally, illustrators are not asked about the research involved for creating visual images. How did you approach your research for *Brave Girl* in order to learn about Clara Lemlich, who is a real person, and to provide the reader with a sense of time and place?

SWEET: I began by looking at the bibliography of resources that the author, Michelle Markel, had accessed. I needed to know what I should be reading to understand the events of the era, the fashion during that time, and the world this character was living in. Then, I took a trip to New York City to visit the Tenement Museum. Years ago, a tenement was boarded up and now looks as if three families walked out one day and never came back—there's peeling wallpaper and thick linoleum on the floor. The families who lived there were garment workers who sewed clothing from their apartment. They would be sweating away in the kitchen, taking care of their families, and all the while doing piecework. The tenement was very close to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. I realized how little I knew about this time period, which was basically the genesis of the fashion industry. Here were these laborers making beautiful, expensive clothing for wealthy women all over New York City—clothing that the makers could never have afforded themselves. Then I read about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory

fire in 1911 that killed 146 people, an event that occurred after Clara's story. I thought it was pertinent to know about that fire because those workers' conditions were the same as Clara's. I also looked on the Internet at images of hairstyles, hats, and shoes during the early 1900s. I also needed to know what New York City looked like then, so I researched that as well. Developing Clara as a character led me to find a documentary film about her. That gave me a huge sense of who she was, especially her commitment to women and workers' rights. The research was all done before I started my artwork.

BKL: How did you approach illustrating Clara as a character, knowing she is a real person?

SWEET: I tried to capture the essence of her with her hair color and hairstyle. I didn't know exactly what clothing she had worn. I also considered her body language. Clara was petite, and she was also feisty and determined, so I wanted my pictures to reflect that. She was not a bystander; she was participatory, and so at one point she has her arms crossed and is glaring at the men who question her fortitude. Those are subtle things, but you want the book to portray the feeling of her as well as physical appearance.

BKL: Can you talk about how the pictures extend what is stated in the text?

SWEET: I illustrated one scene in *Brave Girl* in which the reader is looking down on hundreds of women factory workers lined up at sewing machines. In the text it says, "Rows and rows of young women bend over their tables, stitching collars, sleeves, and cuffs as fast as they can." In my research, I found a map of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory that had an architectural rendering of a room showing the number of tables, the length of the tables, how they were lined up, and how many people were at each table. I had to honor those women by drawing each one of them distinctly. I didn't want them to appear as a fuzzy or random snippet of that scene. I wanted to say each woman there counted. A lot of times when I get stuck, I do more research. I keep going until I can find an image in my mind or one like what I described that tells me that this is what I need to draw.

BKL: Could you speak more about your decision to incorporate sewn pages, ribbons, and swatches of fabric into your illustrations?

SWEET: I wasn't positive I was going to do that when I started *Brave Girl*. As I was researching the story, I read descriptions of the factory that said there were garbage cans filled with fabric and thread. You could feel that there was so much sewing stuff around them. Once, I visited a woman in Portland, Maine, who makes clothing for her boutique, and she had cloth everywhere around her feet and a big cardboard tub of fabrics. I took some of the remnants home and used them in the book. I wanted a feeling of scrappiness, so I deliberately used bits and pieces of fabric and left ragged edges. I love to sew, but it wasn't about me

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sewing, and it wasn't about me being clever. It was about using these materials to give a feeling of Clara's life.

BKL: *Were some of the ribbons and material vintage?*

SWEET: The ribbons are vintage, and the background papers are from old ledger books. There are earthy shades of linen because the shirtwaists would have been cotton or linen, and I was emphatic about not using synthetic material or anything with too much pattern in it. There are some old and new materials, but nothing was meant to look contemporary.

BKL: *How important is it that your illustrations are accurate and authentic?*

SWEET: I feel it's essential. Sometimes there's artistic license when you get to a certain point in a piece. Should I make a railing on a staircase? In one instance, I didn't have a reference for that railing, but I had researched enough that I could create a reasonable interpretation of it. If I am at all in question, I find evidence or research to prove my point. I feel that the book deserves authenticity to the best of my ability.

BKL: *You have also included newspaper headlines and images of women on strike. Did you conduct research on labor disputes as well?*

SWEET: Michelle provided me with newspaper headlines, which we wanted to be accurate. And then there was the signage for the Triangle Shirtwaist factory. That is authentic in the book. On that same page with the sign, I initially had Clara saying "Strike" on different floors in the building, when actually all of the workers were on one floor. One of the fact-checkers at HarperCollins caught that mistake, so I had to change it. It sounds like a small thing, but it's not. When you realize you have made a mistake like that, it's gigantic, and you have to fix it.

BKL: *There is a Yiddish quote in Brave Girl when Clara is talking to a large group of people and urging them to strike. Was that quote originally in the text or one that you created as part of the illustration?*

SWEET: It was in the text. I love hand lettering and incorporating quotes within the art if it's appropriate. I felt, in this case, it would be more potent in the art. The quote could be big, and the lettering itself could reflect an emphasis that can't be done with type. If we had left it in the text, it wouldn't have been as powerful.

BKL: *Brave Girl begins and ends with Clara looking at the Statue of Liberty. Was that your decision?*

SWEET: I had done a fair amount of research about immigrant ships and knew that they stopped at Ellis Island or the Statue of Liberty. That was my choice, because I wanted the idea of freedom and liberty to be what Clara was talking about. It was an obvious choice at the beginning and then lovely to be able to incorporate it at the end.

BKL: *At times, your illustrations are watercolors, while at other times, they include collage. How do you decide which medium to use?*

SWEET: I want to carry elements throughout and look at the book as a whole. I have a wall in my studio where I put up all the pages, which allows me to see, for example, that when I am showing a factory from the outside, I don't need fabric in that illustration—it might even be a distraction. The collage elements have to be purposeful. On the back cover and inside of *Brave Girl*, there is a piece of paper containing a table of wages. That was from an amazing little book someone had given me. When Clara is at the rally, you see a document in her hand, and it's that paper. Whether a kid notices that element or not is OK, because I know it. Collage is stronger than paint, because it has a texture to it that you can't mimic. I love the juxtaposition of the collage papers with watercolor.

BKL: *You are known for your illustrations on endpapers, but Brave Girl has solid pink endpapers.*

SWEET: We had increased the page count in order to lay out the book the way we wanted, and there wasn't room for illustrated endpapers. I enjoy creating endpapers. It's such an opportunity to set the stage for the story. I usually do endpapers last so I'm ready to be a little looser in illustrating them. I've told the story through art, and now I have freedom to bring you into it and lead you out.

BKL: *The initial endpapers in A Splash of Red capture readers' attention with an image of a painter's palette, inviting them into Horace Pippin's life, while the concluding endpapers show a map where Pippin's art is exhibited.*

SWEET: Jen [Bryant] and I wanted to include that map and received permission to show a few pieces of Horace's original art. We thought it was imperative to leave kids with the idea that they can go see this artist's work. We are working with our website designer to create an interactive map where you can click a star, and the museum website will pop up.

BKL: *Were there differences in how you approached your research for Brave Girl and for A Splash of Red?*

SWEET: One of the biggest differences was that Jen and I decided to go on our research adventure together to look at Horace's art and to talk to museum curators. I was able to see Horace through Jen's eyes and understand why she wanted to do the book. Being able to talk to a curator gave depth and breadth to an artist that you don't get by just reading about him.

BKL: *What is the appeal for you in illustrating picture-book biographies?*

SWEET: The reason we want to tell the stories is because these people have done gigantic things. They have overcome a challenge or devoted their lives to something. I always think about

what was it about this person that kids might be able to relate. Clara came to this country as a child. How might she have felt? Horace didn't have any drawing materials, but he used a piece of charcoal from the fire until he received this incredible gift of art supplies. These are things that might help kids imagine what it might be like to be in [the subject's] shoes. If we can establish a connection, then kids will be more interested in a person's life and the things he and she has accomplished.

BKL: *You depicted Horace's life and also had to represent his art. Did that pose other challenges for you?*

SWEET: I think I danced around that for a long time. I had to make it feel like it was Horace's art, yet it had to be my own. One of the things that I did was to look at his paintings and his war notebooks. I kept coming across certain things in his paintings, such as chickens or clouds. I didn't copy him exactly, but I brought those elements into my paintings. At the end of *A Splash of Red*, there is a scene in which N. C. Wyeth walks away after viewing Pippin's paintings. There is a red bench under a tree, and there is also a red bench in one of Horace's paintings. The bench isn't exactly like his, but it was a deliberate device on my part. I peppered the book with those connections because I thought it would be fun for kids to see Pippin's art and then read the book to see how I interpreted it.

BKL: *Jen Bryant credits you with the book title, A Splash of Red. How did you decide where that splash of red was going to be in each one of the illustrations?*

SWEET: I had to rein myself in so that I didn't have too much red—to keep it to a splash. It was very organic. For instance, on the page when Horace draws the face to enter a contest, I placed a red stamp on the page because he mailed the drawing. Sometimes there are bits of red line or I've outlined a letter in red. It wasn't hard to find a place for the red. A little bit of red goes a long way.

BKL: *Was it your idea to pull the quotes from the text of A Splash of Red and place them within the illustrations, similar to what you did in Brave Girl?*

SWEET: The quotes helped me to get to know Horace Pippin. He said these beautiful truths about making art. I felt the quotes deserved to be hand lettered to make them more substantial. When they are part of the art, the reader can really take his or her time and revisit them.

BKL: *There is a quote by Pippin on the back cover that reads, "Pictures just come to my mind . . . and I tell my heart to go ahead." There is so much heart in your illustrations. You have helped children appreciate these individuals and their challenges.*

SWEET: I'm so honored that I get to do this. I can't even tell you how good I feel.

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Balloons over Broadway: The True Story of the Puppeteer of Macy's Parade. By Melissa Sweet. Illus. by the author. 2011. 40p. Houghton, \$16.99 (9780547199450); e-book, \$16 (9780547529301). 791.5. K–Gr. 2.

The Boy Who Drew Birds: A Story of John James Audubon. By Jacqueline Davies. Illus. by Melissa Sweet. 2004. 32p. Houghton, \$16 (9780618243433); e-book, \$16 (9780547767390). 598. Gr. 2–4.

Brave Girl: Clara and the Shirtwaist Makers' Strike of 1909. By Michelle Markel. Illus. by Melissa Sweet. 2013. 32p. HarperCollins/Balzer and Bray, \$17.99 (9780061804427). 331.892. K–Gr. 3.

Mrs. Harkness and the Panda. By Alicia Potter. Illus. by Melissa Sweet. 2012. 40p. Knopf, \$16.99 (9780375844485). Gr. 1–4.

A River of Words: The Story of William Carlos Williams. By Jen Bryant. Illus. by Melissa Sweet. 2008. 34p. Eerdmans, \$17 (9780802853028). 811. Gr. 2–5.

A Splash of Red: The Life and Art of Horace Pippin. By Jen Bryant. Illus. by Melissa Sweet. 2013. 40p. Knopf, \$17.99 (9780375867125); lib. ed., \$20.99 (9780375967122). 759.13. Gr. 1–4.

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Common Core Connections: Melissa Sweet

The following are suggestions for implementing the Common Core State Standards with books illustrated by Melissa Sweet. You can find more information about the standards at www.corestandards.org.

In the Classroom: Melissa Sweet's illustrations are based on research, particularly those in picture-book biographies. After reading one or more of Sweet's illustrated books, have students select an image that provides important information about the individual, the time period, or the setting for the story. Next, have students generate a list of details that they discover within the illustration and then, as a class, revisit the text to determine which details are mentioned explicitly and which are included only within the illustration.

Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.4.1.** Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

In the Classroom: After reading Michelle Markel's *Brave Girl*, have students engage in further research about Clara Lemlich and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union as well as the tenements in New York City. Or, after reading Jen Bryant's *A Splash of Red*, students can investigate other resources related to the life and art of Horace Pippin, including Bryant and Sweet's website, www.asplashofredbook.com. Then, have students compare and contrast the information they have found on the Internet and in print sources, along with the narrative in the respective books.

Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.4.6.** Compare and contrast a firsthand and secondhand account of the same event or topic; describe the differences in

focus and the information provided.

- **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.

In the Classroom: Discuss the illustrations in *Brave Girl* or *A Splash of Red* and talk about the characters, setting, events, and problems and solutions that are represented. What do the illustrations tell you about the person? Where is the story set, and when? What are the challenges that Clara or Horace had to overcome, and how did they deal with them?

Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.2.7.** Use information gained from the illustrations and words in a print or digital text to demonstrate understanding of its characters, setting, or plot.
- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.3.7.** Explain how specific aspects of a text's illustrations contribute to what is conveyed by the words in a story (e.g., create mood, emphasize aspects of a character or setting).

In the Classroom: Explore Melissa Sweet's artistic techniques. What shapes and colors does she use? How do those colors make the viewer feel? How does Sweet incorporate collage into her illustrations, and why? How do different media contribute to the meaning and tone of the biography?

Common Core Connection

- **CCSS.ELA-Literacy Reading Anchor Standard 7.** Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.