

The Accidental Nonfictionist  
(for California School Library Association)

by

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I have a confession to make: I didn't start my writing career with a longing to write nonfiction. No, I began by writing picture books and middle-grade novels, my first loves. I also began by collecting two-and-one-half Xerox boxes of rejections—some good (meaning the editor actually wrote something personal), some bad (meaning a form letter addressed to “Dear Author”), and some ugly (meaning nothing more was returned than a coffee-stained, cigarette-smoke-injected manuscript, sometimes one that was not even my own). Still, I persevered. And wrote. And attended conferences of writers.

At one point, I was at a summer conference having lunch with Frank Sloan, editorial director of Franklin Watts, Inc., a nonfiction house. He suggested I send something to him. As he explained it, “You're a teacher. You simplify things for your students on a daily basis. Nonfiction is no different. You take the complex and make it understandable by young minds.” I'm sure I mentally must have given him a massive eye-roll, but he handed me his business card, which I dutifully tucked away in my wallet. Several weeks later I watched as young teens performed stunts on their bicycles in my San Diego driveway. I was intrigued and asked them what it was called. They said, “BMX freestyle stunt riding.” I wrote Frank a one-page letter to see if it might be the sort of nonfiction book he would publish—part history, part how-to. (I assumed there was a history to the activity.) About three weeks later he phoned to say he wanted to make an offer on the yet-to-be-written book. I recall him saying, “The question is, will you be able

to accept our terms?” Terms! He was offering me terms. We chatted about the format of the book and made small talk. Finally, he said, “Well, think about it and let me know if our terms are acceptable to you.” Like a locomotive, it hit me that he really was offering me, an unpublished book writer, a contract for something that didn’t yet exist on paper, and I was so fearful he was going to disconnect and realize what he’d done that almost without skipping a beat, I said, “You know, Frank, I think your terms sound just fine. Send me a contract and I’ll begin my research and writing right away.” *BMX Freestyle*, a book that went through something like sixteen printings and was an IRA Children’s Choice selection, was on its way, and suddenly, I was a nonfiction writer. I had a long and happy career with Frank Sloan. When Franklin Watts opened Orchard Books, my first picture book was published, followed shortly thereafter by my first (and sadly ONLY) chapter book.

*STRIKE! The Farm Workers’ Fight for Their Rights* marks my one-hundred-fifty-eighth book for young readers. Over time, my writing has grown and my subject matter has changed from sports, science, and natural history (and all of those planet books and Rookie Readers®) to topics closer to my heart, like civil rights, social justice, and equality. When I wrote *We Are One: The Story of Bayard Rustin*, my picture book editor suggested I send it to Carolyn P. Yoder, the editor of a new United States history imprint at Boyds Mills Press called Calkins Creek. The book came out to starred reviews and won some nice awards. This was followed by *Birmingham Sunday*, a Eureka! Gold winner, about the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963, and from that title sprang *Black & White*, my Robert F. Sibert honor book and winner of the Carter G. Woodson Award. These are books that balance hope with the nitty-gritty, that show

history with its warts exposed. I like to think of this as shedding light on *inconvenient truths*, things that likely would have been left out of history books not so many years ago but things that add dimension and sometimes understanding to the motivations or influences of the subjects being written about.

We are taught in writing classes that no character, no matter how good, is ALL good. Similarly, no character, no matter how bad, is ALL bad. This is true in fiction. It is true, also, in nonfiction. In *We Are One*, I didn't hesitate to mention that the reason Bayard Rustin was the forgotten man of the civil rights movement was because he was gay and many of his African American colleagues found this to be an embarrassment, an inconvenient truth. Fortunately, this attitude evolved, and Rustin is now celebrated as the movement's intellectual engineer. Birmingham's Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth, featured in *Black & White*, demanded obedience from his African American congregation and other followers. That I chose to write about this almost dictatorial aspect of his personality might have offended some who knew him, but it did not. His undoubting belief that what he was doing and the way he was doing it was right and just made him successful in his fight against Eugene "Bull" Connor, Birmingham's racist commissioner of the police and fire departments—and it made him interesting to me as a writer. These are the nitty-gritty, warts-and-all details that make up history and add dimension to it. They make the characters that peopled history real for young readers, and not-so-young readers. Primary source materials in the form of actual quotes gleaned from newspaper accounts, letters, and diaries, and observations and opinions of critics help me paint in words nonfiction characters that are rounded—characters that otherwise would be flat, one-dimensional, and...well, uninteresting. Today's histories are not in the business of

teaching moral lessons, as they were in the past, or of silencing critical voices. They are about presenting a narrative in such a way that young readers will ask questions and come to decisions on their own.