



**Candace Fleming**

**Teachingbooks.net Original In-depth  
Author Interview**

**Candace Fleming, interviewed from her studio in Oak Park, Illinois on  
December 3, 2010.**

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You are the author of the award-winning biographies *The Lincolns* and *The Great and Only Barnum*, the student favorite *The Fabled Fourth Graders of Aesop Elementary School*, and the popular *Boxes for Katje*, among many other books for children. You seem to be someone who likes to write in a variety of formats and thoroughly enjoys her work.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I love what I do. I love sharing the things that I'm excited about: things that make me laugh or things that make me curious. It is just so great that I get to do research and spend time with a topic I'm really interested in, and then I get to write about it and send it out into the world.

I also have these great readers—I don't think there's any reader like a child reader. They're enthusiastic, and they always respond in the most honest of ways. They'll write me a letter, or they'll tell me what they think. It creates a connection for me with my readers. How great is that? It's just about the best job you could possibly have.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Have you always enjoyed writing? What were you like as a child?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** Ever since I was a kid, I have seen the world in stories. Before I knew how to write, I was a storyteller. I can't remember a time when I wasn't telling stories. Some people might have said that I was a fibber, because I would make things up.

For example, I had a series of stories about my three-legged cat, Spot. We didn't have a cat; my mother was allergic. We didn't have any animals at all, but even grown-ups in my neighborhood would believe me. I figured out early on that if you told a story with enthusiasm and well-chosen details, it worked really well. It is pretty powerful as a kid to have grownups stop and listen to you. I could actually hold them for a little while, and they enjoyed whatever tale I was telling. Once I learned to write, I didn't really need to tell people stories anymore. I put them down on paper instead. I wrote lots and lots of stories, and my mother kept many of them.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What kinds of stories did you write when you were young?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I can see what I was reading as a kid by what I wrote. In sixth grade, I wrote a mystery, and it takes place in an English manor house. It has shades of Agatha Christie, whom I was reading at the time. I can see where I was reading *Madeline* and writing about France. I was writing about places I had never been except in a book.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** It sounds like at a young age, you began to understand certain elements to writing in terms of details and story and language.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I have always loved words—just the sound of a word can be magical. I learned the word “cornucopia” in second grade at Thanksgiving, and I skipped all the way home to the beat of that word.

I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t reading, or someone wasn’t reading to me. I came from a family of readers and a mother who was extraordinary in the fact that she could give you the very book that you needed exactly at the time you needed it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Where did you grow up?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I was born in Michigan City, Indiana. When I was in fourth grade, we moved to Charleston, Illinois, which is where my love of Abraham Lincoln comes from. Nobody grows up in central Illinois without being a Lincoln fan. He becomes a part of the family there.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How so?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** The Lincolns settled there when they moved to Illinois in 1831. In Charleston, everything is marked. If Abraham slept here, they marked it. If he spit on the sidewalk someplace, they seriously marked it. If he dug a well there or helped build a bridge or surveyed one of the towns, they marked it. So you literally bump into him, it seems, everywhere you go.

My friend Emily lived in a house that Abraham Lincoln slept in when he came back for the Lincoln Douglas debates. Her bedroom was the room he slept in. I went to school with someone who descended from cousins of Abraham Lincoln. The family name is Hanks. Incidentally, Tom Hanks, the actor, is part of that family.

The Lincoln log cabin is in Charleston, and we played in it as kids. There was no park ranger or any of that stuff. Somebody came in and locked the door to the cabin sometimes, and other times they didn’t. We would just ride our bikes out into the country, and if the cabin was open, we’d play in it like a playhouse. We were playing in THE Lincoln log cabin with no adult supervision.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** So it was a given that you would write a book about Lincoln.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I always said no when someone suggested I write about Lincoln. I felt like I'd known him all my life, and I thought, "I'm not that curious. To write a biography that length requires a lot of curiosity." But the more I thought about it, I realized I wanted kids to know *my* Abraham Lincoln, who really is a friend of the family, a neighbor. I think that's why I started it.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Why did you choose the scrapbook format?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I have my own sons, and they are big readers, but they're not thrilled with long nonfiction books. So, *The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary* was my attempt to make this kind of book more personal and include more visuals, which I think 21st century readers appreciate. With the scrapbook format, I got to include really cool stuff that I wouldn't have been able to include if I'd used the traditional form. There just wouldn't have been enough space. Part of my motivation is for the readers, and part of it is for myself. I always want to share something extra with my readers.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You have done four scrapbook biographies to date. Please talk about your interest in history.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I think the biggest word in history is story, and it really is true. It's all one big story about people. I know that when I was in school, I can remember some of my early history classes, and they were all about events and dates. I'm not very good with the dates; dates are not important to me.

History is really about people, and people fascinate me because they do really extraordinary things. I read a lot of biographies as a kid, and then I got my bachelor's and master's degrees in history.

I worked briefly at the Chicago Historical Society, which is now the Chicago History Museum, doing some exhibits. Maybe that's where the idea for scrapbooking about history came from. I wrote picture books for a few years, and when I decided I was going to do my first biography, I chose the one man in history that I wanted to meet more than anybody else: Ben Franklin.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** How did you develop the scrapbook format for *Ben Franklin's Almanac*?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** After years of research, I wanted to pinpoint Ben Franklin's many talents and discuss them each by chapter. I wanted to share his story thematically, as an inventor, as a writer, and as a statesman.

I had all these great stories about Franklin: wonderful, humorous, fabulous stories, that went along with a lot of the fabulous visuals. You would think a man who lived his entire life in the eighteenth century wouldn't have a lot of visuals, because we think of them as film and photographs. But there are amazing sketches that Franklin

made of the things he'd studied or invented. There are incredible letters, and portraits of him that Charles Willson Peale painted on the spot, or things Franklin's grandson, Temple, had done in the margin of a book that I thought were absolutely fascinating.

I wanted the book to actually reflect Franklin's life, so I thought it would be nice to do it in an almanac form. But, I still couldn't quite see it and was still searching for how to put all of it together. Then I heard Dr. Eliza T. Dresang give a talk about her Radical Change theory, and it all sort of clicked. I think I just needed somebody to give me the courage and encouragement to step outside of the traditional biographical format to create *Ben Franklin's Almanac*. I love how it looks and reads like *Poor Richard's Almanac*, which Ben Franklin wrote and edited for 40 years.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What kinds of stories do you like to include in your biographies?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** It's the little things about peoples' lives that are the meatiest and best part of history and biography. I really think history is found in dinner table conversations, shopping receipts, diary entries, newspaper articles, how pets were treated, and what the neighbors thought.

When I start a biography of Eleanor Roosevelt or Ben Franklin or the Lincolns, I always make a list of things I want to know—questions like, “What did they carry in their pocket, what was their favorite food, what was their favorite color, did they sleep on their back, did they believe in God?” It's that kind of stuff I'm interested in.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Reading your scrapbook biographies, a reader can learn more details about the subject because of the format—without reading the long, heavy text of a traditional biography.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** Yes. The reality is, even those icons that everyone thinks they know can't *really* be known because they lived for 70 years, at 365 days a year. That's a lot of time that doesn't get covered.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** With the scrapbook format, you're telling a lot of short, illustrated stories.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** It's exactly what I'm doing—I'm telling stories, not just relating facts. When I was a reader of history in grade school—I would look at the pictures and read the captions first. I decided to do that with my biographies. There's a lot to be learned if you can actually see history. Readers don't even have to read the books in page order to learn something.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do readers learn from opening up *Our Eleanor*, your Eleanor Roosevelt biography?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** They can open up *Our Eleanor* to the middle, and they see a picture of Eleanor Roosevelt shooting gun, and then they read this great story underneath it. Then they've learned one thing about Eleanor Roosevelt. Then if they flip to the first chapter, and they see a picture of her as a baby, and they read the story about her babyhood under that picture, then they've learned two things about Eleanor Roosevelt. Then they flip to chapter six, and they read about her in World War II, and now they've learned three things about Eleanor Roosevelt.

In this way, readers are working just like historians do because historians never have a whole picture. They get bits and pieces, and they have to use that historical evidence and form their own picture of this person themselves.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** You took on the question of Eleanor Roosevelt's sexual orientation.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** Absolutely. The entry is called, "Was It or Wasn't It." There's a chapter about her relationship with Lorena Hickok and also her relationship with Marian Anderson.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What was your conclusion?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I couldn't draw a conclusion. I actually spoke to Eleanor's granddaughter, who said she didn't think it made much of a difference at the end of the day except that Eleanor Roosevelt's relationships with lesbians really did make her who she was. They were women on the cutting edge and were used to being on the fringes of society, so when it came to forming things like the League of Women Voters or pushing for more political power for women in the 1930s, these women led the way and showed Eleanor the way politically.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Why did you write a book about P. T. Barnum?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** Barnum was unexpected. I didn't know anything about him, and frankly, I didn't think I cared. When I was working on the Lincoln biography, I came across Barnum. This is the beauty of research: you never know where it's going to take you.

I was researching about the time that Lincoln went to give the Cooper Union Address in New York City in 1860, before he ran for President. He was there four days, and I began to wonder, "What else did he do? This guy from Springfield, Illinois went to New York City. What did he think of it? It had to have been astonishing." I finally discovered that Lincoln took a stroll down Broadway, and he got the corner of Broadway and Ann, and he came upon this incredible museum. I wanted to know if Lincoln had gone into that museum, which was P. T. Barnum's amazing place. I never was able to determine if Lincoln went in, but in the process, I began researching the Barnum Museum.

Just the little bit that I discovered about P. T. Barnum in the time that I had was absolutely tantalizing, and I wondered what else there was to learn. It was one of those tangents where I should have been working on the Lincolns, but suddenly I'm working on the Barnum Museum.

Is it serendipity, or is it just awareness that opens up these new doors? Either way, suddenly I was aware of P. T. Barnum, and things started to stick. I'd see an article in the *New York Times* about Barnum's New York, and then I read something in *Smithsonian* about the beluga whales at the museum. Pretty soon, I was completely beguiled by Barnum and his life. I didn't know much about him as a person, but I became completely taken by the things that he created. They just felt so magical.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What's an example of one of his inventions or creations that struck you?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** There's a lot of really great stuff he brought us, and a lot of really not-so-great stuff. He created the first U.S. public zoo, the first U.S. public aquarium, the first museum as we know it—even though it's a far cry from the kind of museums we have now. Barnum would make things up to make a better story.

His museum was the first of its kind that was meant for everyone to visit, from the wealthiest Americans to immigrants. The only people who were barred from the museum were African Americans. However, Barnum had a special day for African Americans to use the museum, which was unheard of in the 1840s.

Another thing I learned was that up to the time of P. T. Barnum, only lower classes went to the theater. He democratized entertainment and made theater going something respectable to do.

Barnum gave us the circus on a very big scale. He was the man that invented the three-ring circus, so that folks could see it better. He promoted the idea of entertainment—that idea that one should enjoy oneself, that life could have entertainment to it. Up until this point, people did not go about spending their money for fun and leisure.

So those were all things P. T. Barnum brought to us along with the whole cult of celebrity and advertising. He's the father of advertising. For example, Barnum brought Jenny Lind, the great Swedish opera singer, to the United States. Nobody in the U.S. knew her, but Barnum made her famous before she even got here with his promotions, so much so that people were clamoring to see her by the time she arrived.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Perhaps your most beloved historical picture book to date is *Boxes for Katje*. What inspired you to write this book?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** It's my mother's story. She probably had six stories that she told all of the time about her own childhood. She told them exactly the same way every single time, like a storyteller. She used the same inflection, hand gestures, breaths at the same place, etc. When I was a kid, I loved those stories, and I constantly begged her to tell them.

This one was my favorite: the story about how after World War II it was a goodwill gesture, like thousands of other Americans were doing, to put a few things into a box and send it to war-torn Europe. Those boxes would end up in a child's hands. My mother's box landed in the little hands of a girl named Katje Van Stegeran, who wrote my mother back.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** I know *Boxes for Katje* is used in a lot of schools, and I've seen it on many school booklists.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** It is used in a lot schools, and I get many letters from kids who, after reading it, feel compelled to do something themselves. I had not expected that. I never know where the stories in my books are going to go. The impact of *Boxes for Katje* was not something I saw coming.

After reading that book, children send things to soldiers in Afghanistan or Iraq. I had a Girl Scout troop in Florida recently tell me they were collecting blankets for homeless people. It's amazing that they read something that I wrote, based on something my mother did in her childhood, and feel compelled to perform an act of kindness.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Are you continuing to create historical picture books?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I have one coming out. It's the coolest story about a submarine. In the 1850s there was a crazy inventor, Lodner Phillips, who improved upon the submarine significantly. His submarine had an underwater light, and it had salvaging gear on the front, and it was big enough that he was able to put in red upholstered chairs and a red carpet on the floor. One afternoon in July of 1854, he took his wife, his three children, and even their dog for a Sunday afternoon ride under Lake Michigan. Then he wrote the U.S. Navy to tell them that he had invented this submarine, and the U.S. Navy wrote back and said they were only interested in boats that float above the water.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you enjoy about writing picture books?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** What I love about picture books is they really are play. That's not to imply that they're easy, because in many ways, I think they are the hardest thing I ever write. But I use the other side of my brain when I write picture books.

I can be doing a lot of heavy-duty research about the Civil War or the First Amendment, and at the same time, I can be writing a really great story about an alligator.

Also, I can write an original fairy tale and really play with the language. I can use dialect if I want and really play around in it. For me, that's really what it is about. All those things that I loved when I was a second grader, like the word "cornucopia," I get to pop into my picture books.

I think about the language, and how it reads, and I try to create a really great story distilled to its very essence. For me, it's a lot of fun. It goes hand-in-hand with the nonfiction, sort of left brain, right brain. One sort of feeds the other.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** When you're working on your text for picture books, do you read them back to yourself out loud?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** Yes. I read them aloud, and I re-write and re-write so that they have a certain cadence—a nice pace so the words have an internal rhyme. It is sort of like poetic prose.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you feel are the most important elements of a picture book?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** My biggest thing with picture books right now is that I really think they need to have a story. Sometimes I think maybe I'm too traditional when it comes to the picture book, but it seems like right now we are publishing a lot of books that don't have a lot of heart to them or substance—that aren't more than just a one-liner, more than just a comic strip that is 32 pages. I think picture books should have a real story with a soul.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Do you have a favorite book of yours? Often authors say they can't possibly choose . . . can you?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I did write a picture book that I absolutely love. *Clever Jack Takes the Cake* is an original fairy tale where Jack represents all boys and is clever and persevering.

The book is about a boy that bumps along this road he's taken. He bakes a cake for the princess's birthday, and along the way he loses bits and pieces of it, but what he loses in cake, he gains in story elements. By the time he gets to the princess, he may not have his original gift, but he has something better, which, of course, is a story.

I didn't realize how autobiographical it was as I was writing it, but later I thought, "Oh, Jack is me." Not only do I love cake, but I kind of journey along that path of life looking for things to write about.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Your fabled fourth grader and now your new fabled fifth grader books are very popular with readers.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** *The Fabled Fourth Graders of Aesop Elementary School* is a retelling of Aesop's fables in a modern classroom. It's hyperbolic in places and over the top in places intentionally—and funny when it helps (and full of really bad puns). Many



of the puns in *Fabled Fifth Graders* are contributed by real students. They feed them to me now. It is so much fun.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** The teacher at Aesop Elementary, Mr. Jupiter, is a great character.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** Kids always ask me why I named the teacher Mr. Jupiter. I tell them it's because he's out of this world. (Get it?) He is a composite of so many educators that I know. I don't think people realize how extraordinary and special and quirky they are. You have to be, I think, to teach elementary school.

Every school has children with precocious personalities. As in the book, sometimes they are grouped together, and nobody really wants to teach them. They're horrifying as a group and exhausting, and then along comes Mr. Jupiter, who is pretty high-energy himself and manages to bring them around. He does it through the use of Aesop's fables. Every personality in the room has their own story.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Like other books that you've done, the *Fabled* books are collections of stories.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** Yes. Both books definitely have a narrative heart, but in many ways they are collections of short stories.

I remember when I got the idea for the first book. I'd been wanting for a long time to write something that was just for fourth grade. I have a real tender spot for fourth-graders; I think fourth grade might be the best age ever because they're so smart and so eager to do things. A teacher told me that her fourth graders weren't getting to read as much as they used to because they were studying for standardized tests. Hearing that made me want to write something just for them.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Have you seen students in other cultures glean something new from your books?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I visited the Singapore American schools, where they're following an American standard of education, and I had sophomores using the scrapbook biographies. They were surprised and delighted by the sidebars in the books. One of the students said to me, "It would be nice if we could do that in a research paper, because we could put into a sidebar that interesting but extraneous stuff that we can't put into our papers." So while I was there, my sophomores got to use sidebars, captions, and photographs in their papers. They were pretty excited by that.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you do when you get stuck?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I move onto something else if I have another project. For example, if I'm having a hard time writing a book in an interesting way, I will worked on it for an hour then do some research for a new book. Then I'll go back to the first book the next day; I will keep at it every day.

I'm a burrower—sometimes doing my work is like digging through a tunnel underground. Sometimes that tunnel is real small, and I can't see any light, but I know that if I keep digging, I'll dig my way out. If I dig long enough, and I can't find my way out, then I know that this is an idea that isn't ready to be written yet.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What's a typical workday like for you?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I get up and do a few things around the house, drink some coffee, and then get to work. I like to be at work by 9:00 or 9:30. I'll work for four or five hours if things are going really well. If things are not, I'll work three hours then quit and do my e-mail, have lunch, go to the gym, come home, and look at my work for another hour or so. I don't really do a lot of work at night, but I'll come back and maybe gaze at it. I think that primes the pump for the next day.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you like to tell teachers?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** When I talk to teachers, I talk a lot about history and research and stories. I do teacher in-services and workshops about research. We talk about how to chose good research topics and how to choose good websites.

I also talk about how to make research relevant; how to take a topic and make it much smaller so that the research becomes more personal. For example, if you're going to write a report about Benjamin Franklin, and you say that Benjamin Franklin was born on this date he died at age X, and in between you give this list of accomplishments, that's just boring for everybody. But if the teacher makes the topic really narrow—maybe they say, "Just tell me about Benjamin Franklin's first year in school," then the topic is a little more relevant and there's some connection to the student's own life. The topic becomes so specific that the child is going to be forced to do some real research.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** What do you like to tell students?

**CANDACE FLEMING:** I tell students that writing is fun. It really isn't about those five paragraphs or the topic sentence. It really is about reaching in and expressing something that you feel inside and putting it on a piece of paper. It doesn't have to be perfect—it just has to speak one's truth.

I tell them that when I'm writing fiction, I actually walk around my office, talk in funny voices, and act things out. They all laugh at me. But I tell them that as a writer you get to pretend, you get to use your imagination, and you get to put it down on a piece of paper. It's fun to write with students to see where they go—those amazing, creative young minds.

**TEACHINGBOOKS:** Please talk about the letters you receive from readers.

**CANDACE FLEMING:** They're so glowing and lovely, and I always feel honored to receive them. Sometimes they're just plain funny, too, like when they draw a picture of me. I always have some letters up on my bulletin board, and I regularly switch them out with new ones.

Some of the best letters I ever got were about a school's bathrooms decorated based on children's books. The kids vote on the books themselves, and they had a *Muncha! Muncha! Muncha!*-themed bathroom. They sent me pictures of it. What an honor.

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For more information about Candace Fleming and her books, go to <http://teachingbooks.net/>. Questions regarding this program should be directed to [info@teachingbooks.net](mailto:info@teachingbooks.net).

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