

FLY AWAY...HOME?

Arlene Geller

In February 2008, Raúl Castro succeeded his brother Fidel as president of Cuba. For many Cubans who fled the country after Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, the news of the long-awaited end of his almost 50-year reign has stirred memories of how he irrevocably changed their lives. Among those Cubans are the Pedro Pans.

Pedro Pans are a unique group of people. They are the 14,048 Cuban children who fled to the United States between 1960 and 1962 in a political exodus, “the only such event in the Western Hemisphere,” according to Yvonne Conde, author of *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14,048 Cuban Children* (Routledge, 1999) and herself a Pedro Pan. Operation Pedro Pan was so named by a Miami Herald reporter who was reminded of the James M. Barrie novel, *Peter Pan*, about the boy who could fly (Conde 1999, 47). “Aside from the fact that all of us flew out,” said Carlos Eire, award-winning author of *Waiting for Snow in Havana* (Free Press, 2003) and also a Pedro Pan, “there is no connection to the Peter Pan story. We didn’t go to Neverland or remain Lost Boys. On the contrary, we had to become adults instantly, upon arriving in the U.S.”

How did parents decide to send loved ones to a different country to live among strangers, possibly never to see one another again? While the decision-making process must have been excruciating, the reason for such action was crystal clear. Parents made this heartbreaking decision to send away their children—who immediately became refugees in the United States—in an attempt to save them from Castro’s Marxist-Leninist indoctrination.

Dulce,¹ a retired teacher from Santa Monica, California, now 83 years of age, made that difficult decision to send her two daughters as Operation Pedro Pan participants when they were 15 and 16. “I was warned by the owner and principal of the school where my daughters had been all their lives about the danger they and some other students were in. This was due to the fact that they could not accept what was going on in the country nor the ideas the government was trying to put in their minds,” she explained. “She had connections with people who were sending groups of children to the U.S. and offered her help to send our daughters

with them; but my husband and I were not ready to make such a decision.” It was early 1961, according to Dulce.

“Soon the school was taken by Castro and my girls did not go back to it. The owners escaped and some students, too, while others entered the militia. Anguish, terror, and the information provided by somebody about being watched 24 hours a day forced us to make the decision,” Dulce explained. “We had never been separated one day from our daughters.”

“It was not easy to find the person responsible for the operation, because we both were just modest teachers, without political connections. We did not want the branches but the tree, and we found it. We went to Polita Grau,ⁱⁱ who not only gave the visa waiver to my daughters, but also the money orders to pay for the trips, because we did not have anybody who could send us dollars from the U.S. My daughters knew what they wanted; their country had been changed into something they did not want to live in,” she remembered. “We agreed and we together made the decision, hoping that once in the U.S. they would be able to request the visa waiver for us.”

“Our visas arrived, some friends sent us the money orders, and we arrived in Miami on October 1, 1962, but our daughters had been sent to San Antonio, Texas, and we couldn’t see them until the end of the school year, 13 months since the day we saw them walking to the plane in the Havana Airport,” Dulce said. “I do not want to think of those horrible times: without my girls, without my family in Cuba, without the language of this country, with nothing to offer my children and the long wait until the school year was over, but if I had to do it again, I would do it, because I wouldn’t want them to live in Castro’s world. Operation Pedro Pan gave us the opportunity to enjoy freedom in the best country of the world.”

Other Pedro Pan parents are not as fortunate to be able to express themselves directly. Danilo H. Figueredo, author, researcher, and director of the Library and Media Center of Bloomfield College, who left Cuba as a boy with his family, remembers what his father-in-law told him about that life-changing decision regarding the young girl who would grow up to be his wife. “No

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one had heard about Operation Pedro Pan in Cuba. It was years later that the parents realized that a clandestine program existed. What people knew was that individuals were involved in helping to get to the U.S. the children of those disenfranchised by the dictatorship, especially the parents who were at risk for execution by the government.”

“My father-in-law’s decision was influenced by word of mouth and he contacted the British embassy, which promised to help get him to Jamaica,” said Figueredo. Initially, the United States arranged for the British government to allow Cuban children to fly to Jamaica with British visas, and then fly them from Jamaica to the United States. Then, in an unprecedented move, the State Department intervened on behalf of the children and the Justice Department issued visa waivers to the children who needed transport out of Cuba, through Father Bryan Walsh of Catholic Welfare Bureau. A young Irish priest who later became a Monsignor, Father Walsh headed a small childcare and adoption agency, which is today known as Catholic Charities. By giving him this authority, the U.S. government enabled commercial flights to take children directly from Havana to Miami (Gay 2000, 22–25).

“My father-in-law had been a political prisoner and saw atrocities he has refused to talk about even today. Upon his release, he and his wife decided that they wanted to make sure [my future wife] would get to the U.S. because she was the oldest of two and also sophisticated for a child. Also, the Russian swimming team was looking for talented children and [she] was selected. It looked pretty much that she would go to the Soviet Union. So, her parents sent her to the U.S. where then relatives could help the process of reuniting the family. My father-in-law felt that Pedro Pan saved his daughter, which in turn allowed the family to reunite after nine months,” said Figueredo.

Although Castro must have been aware of the migration of children to the United States, Operation Pedro Pan was operated in relative secrecy to protect the Cuban families left behind and to try to prevent Castro from stopping the children from leaving (Gay 2000, 23).

“The children leaving Cuba without parents and my father’s time in jail were the central narrative in our family,” said Javier, a university administrator in the District of Columbia who is now 61. According to Javier, he and two siblings became Pedro Pans. Yet, when he left his life in Havana, he left alone at 14. He feels that his story is different than most since he wound up in Miami by a circuitous route, although, truly, every Pedro Pan’s experience is unique.

According to Javier, Operation Pedro Pan had two aspects: first, obtaining a visa waiver to travel to the United States, then once in the United States, living by assignment in a range of set-

tings with other minors. In fact, this program cannot be discussed without its companion program, the Cuban Children’s Program, which acted as an umbrella and oversaw the actual care of the children once they arrived in the new country. The two distinct programs worked hand-in-hand, thanks to the enormous efforts of two men—Father Walsh and James Baker. Baker had been director of the Ruston Academy, a prestigious American school in Havana (Gay 2000, 20–23; Triay 1998, 53).

“I left Cuba for Venezuela. After a year there, the Jesuits (with whom I was living in a boarding school since I had two uncles who were Jesuits) sent me to Miami to join other Cuban children. In Miami, I was placed in a Pedro Pan house run by the Jesuits: Cuban Boys Residence,” Javier said. “My sister, on the other hand, left with a visa waiver for Miami and went to Puerto Rico, to a boarding school run by nuns. We had an aunt who was a member of that religious order and had been assigned to Puerto Rico.”

OPERATION PEDRO PAN HAD TWO ASPECTS: FIRST, OBTAINING A VISA WAIVER TO TRAVEL TO THE UNITED STATES, THEN ONCE IN THE UNITED STATES, LIVING BY ASSIGNMENT IN A RANGE OF SETTINGS WITH OTHER MINORS.

When the decision was made to send Javier out of Cuba, his brother, some cousins, and many classmates had already left. “The 60–61 academic year in Cuba was complete chaos, particularly in Catholic schools. The school year ended with Bay of Pigs (April 17, 1961), when the Catholic schools were taken over by the government and the public schools were getting ready to mobilize students for a national literacy campaign,” he said. “For me, leaving Cuba was an adventure. Since everybody around me was leaving, it was not exceptional, and I was actually excited and not sad. Also, it was meant to be ‘temporary,’ just waiting for what we thought was the approaching regime change.”

“My parents had heard about Operation Pedro Pan from one of the priests who was the head of the high school seminary and involved in the Operation in Cuba. Actually, the day of Bay of Pigs, in anticipation of the seminary being taken over by the revolution, this priest gave me a bunch of passports and lists of children that, with time, I realized were Pedro Pan children. Fortunately, when that night they came to arrest my father and searched the house, I had hidden the documents well enough that they didn’t find them.”

“In Venezuela, I spent the first two months with a bunch of young Cubans in an apartment, and we were given the equivalent of fifty cents a day to eat, which was worth more at the time,” he continued. “By August, I moved to another high school seminary and had become a ward of the Jesuits. I never again lived with my family. I saw one of my brothers and my sister in Puerto Rico almost two years after I had left Cuba, during Christmas 1962. I saw my parents again in September 1966, when I had already joined the Jesuits and I visited them in Puerto Rico. They had reunited with my sister in 1965 when they left Cuba.”

“The decision to send me away must have been excruciating.

We were a large extended family—there were ten plus households related to me within a three-block radius of my house. For them, family (and church) was the centrality of their lives. I can't imagine how difficult it must have been. But my parents never regretted it. I have no question whatsoever that they would do it again and that they were very proud that they had made the right decision. Of course, history proved them right in terms of what those who stayed behind had to go through."

Javier returned to Cuba in 1981, for about ten days, 20 years after he had left. "My visit made me realize that Cuba was not home any longer, it was a strange place: I 'knew' the place, I recognized the houses, buildings, etc., but I was not part of it."

Carlos Eire, Yale professor of History and Religious Studies and winner of the 2003 National Book Award for Nonfiction for his beautiful and moving memoir about life before Castro, *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, left Havana at the age of eleven with his 14-year-old brother as part of Operation Pedro Pan.

"My mother said she had heard about Operation Pedro Pan from a neighbor who was sending her children to the U.S. She spoke of her fear of losing us to the work camps, the army, the schooling in Eastern Europe and Russia, or our ending up in prison or dead. She knew my brother and I would not put up with the government's repression," he recalled.

"My mom never spoke of deciding to send us, but I know it was difficult, especially because my father showed less enthusiasm," he said. "And it was also very difficult and dangerous for my father—a judge—to do such a thing. It had to be kept a secret. He could have ended up in prison, accused of treason, or sent to a work camp. Thousands of fathers were sent to work camps, some for periods as long as three to six years."

Eire claimed that when his parents told him about being sent to Miami, it was "the best news I had heard in a long time. I was thrilled with mixed emotions, of course. But I looked forward to a great adventure, thinking it would only be a few months before I could return again to a Castro-free Cuba," he said. "I did have to distance myself from my emotions in order to survive. I learned to live without my parents very rapidly."

Eire said that in April 1962, he was sent to Pedro Pan camp in Homestead for three weeks, separated from his brother on arrival. From April to December 1962, an American Jewish family in Miami took him in, and his brother was taken in by another Jewish family. From December 1962 to September 1963, Eire was sent to a foster home in Miami, near the Orange Bowl, for nine months; the home was run by a childless Cuban couple. "About twelve kids lived in a two-bedroom house in a bad slum, with only one meal a day, and plenty of abuse from the adults, and also from some of the other children, who were not Pedro Pan, but juvenile delinquents," he said. In September of 1963 until November of 1965, he and his brother were taken in by an uncle who had

been sent to central Illinois by the Refugee Center. He described this home as a "wonderful relief," after the juvenile delinquent home—very poor, but very happy. "Then Mother finally arrived in November 1965 and we moved to Chicago, and I lived with her until I left town to attend graduate school in 1973."

While it took three and a half years until he was reunited with his mother, he never saw his father again. "Our father never made it out. He died in 1976, alone, in our house. I never had a chance to talk to him about it. But he did say in a letter, shortly before he died, that the day we left was the most painful in his life 'I felt as if my heart were being ripped out of my chest,'" Eire quoted.

"On arrival in the U.S., I felt an enormous sense of relief, which has never left me. In fact, this sense of relief intensifies with age, because I realize what I escaped from. Life in the U.S. was hard: poverty, discrimination, lots of hard work. But it was infinitely preferable to life in Castro's Cuba," Eire concluded. "Here I could speak freely and be in charge of my own life. I am who I am because of Pedro Pan. I can't think of a single aspect of my personality that has not been affected by the experience."

Author Yvonne Conde was sent to Miami from Havana alone and, as a ten-year-old, she was delighted. "I was embarking on an adventure and getting on a plane. My parents said we would be together very soon, in a month or so." In reality that month stretched to a year. She first lived with family friends until they moved to Houston, then other friends, and finally with her uncle. "The most startling change was the language barrier. I was placed in a school where nobody spoke English except a Mexican girl who would be called occasionally to translate what the teachers wanted," said

Conde. "I changed schools four times that year and managed to learn the language and go on to seventh grade."

While Conde was painfully aware of her separation from her parents, she had no idea until she was living in the United States for over a quarter of a century that she was part of an organized exodus. "More of my adult life than my childhood was affected as Operation Pedro Pan consumed many years of research for me. It is a brotherhood of baby boomers that shares an indelible bond."

Aldo, of La Canada-Flintridge, California, 63, and a government administrator, remembers his parents telling him that their decision to send him out of Cuba was because the Russians had already taken two of his cousins to Moscow. They had heard about Operation Pedro Pan through a friend. Aldo was the only one of his siblings allowed to leave the country, and a brother who was left behind was later drafted into the army.

This was precisely one of the reasons that Cuban parents participated in such a dangerous and traumatic plan: to save their beloved children from being indoctrinated into Communism or being conscripted into Castro's militia. Parents were also fearful of losing their parental custody to the state (Triay 1998, 8–9;

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Conde 1999, 25).

Many rumors circulated at the time but, true or not, they underscored the fears parents had for their children's futures under Castro, especially those of sons. Boys between six and 18 years of age outnumbered girls in Operation Pedro Pan by almost two to one (Gay 2000, 15). A factor in the difficult decision for parents was the belief that their separation from their children would be brief. However, Castro held onto power, and the Cuban missile crisis of 1962 ended commercial flights between Cuba and the United States (Triay 1998, 2, 11; Gay 2000, 24). According to the Operation Pedro Pan Group (www.pedropan.org), close to 90 percent of the children still in nonfamily care were reunited with their parents by June of 1966. That still leaves ten percent who never saw their parents again.

"My parents were depressed since it was six years until we were reunited, but they were very proud of their decision," said Aldo. "To me as a 16-year-old from Cienfuegos, Cuba, it was another adventure. I first lived at Camp Matecumbe, later at Kendall and Opa-locka, and finally in Helena, Montana. The people of Helena and Anaconda, Montana were great to me."

Aldo felt that Operation Pedro Pan was a great success. "I'm proud to be a Cuban-American," he said. "Operation Pedro Pan was a great experience and made me a very independent person and very responsible. I will always be very grateful to the United States for allowing us to come to the best country in the world."

Zenaida, of Florida, was 16 when she was sent alone to the United States. She lived with foster parents until she was reunited with her family two years later. Although she concedes that it must have been very difficult for her parents to send her, it made her stronger. "I hope that I would have the same courage as they did," she said. Her brother, Rodrigo, two years older than his sister, left Havana on his own and went to live with his father's business associates. He was in college and didn't see his parents for four years. Zenaida concluded, "Now that I am grown up and have children of my own, I realized it must have been very, very hard for my parents to let us go. Hundreds of people were received with open arms by people they never knew."

Oscar, of Redondo Beach, California, is 57 and retired from his position with an aerospace and defense company. He was ten years old when he left Havana on August 25, 1961, with his older brother who was eleven.

When his parents told him that he was being sent to Miami he was excited and looking forward to an adventure, like many other Pedro Pans. "I was not surprised since many of the kids from the neighborhood had been quietly leaving," he said. "We knew they went to the USA but it was not a topic discussed openly."

The actual leaving was harder. "As a 10 year old traveling alone on an airplane for the first time there was apprehension mixed with excitement," Oscar said. "Once at the airport seeing my parents through the glass wall of the infamous *pecera* (fishbowl), a

very somber mood set in."

The Cuban government was determined to make the emigration experience as miserable as possible. According to Eire in *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, the authorities built a glass enclosure around the departure gate where those leaving were searched and documents carefully reviewed, a process that took hours.

Oscar spent two weeks in Kendall, one of the camps, and then was part of a group of seven boys and one girl, all younger than 12, who were sent to St. Joseph's Orphanage for Children in Green Bay, Wisconsin. A year later, his parents and younger siblings joined him in Lawrence, Massachusetts. "It was a difficult adjustment," said Oscar. "It was a far cry from our home in Cuba. The beginnings were tough but, with hard work, we were able to get ahead and live very comfortably."

"I came from a very loving family and was politically astute at the time to understand why my parents were sending my brother and myself out of the country," said Oscar. It wasn't until later in life that I realized the enormity of their courage and love in

making what was a very difficult decision and truly I appreciate the selflessness of their decision and appreciate the great gift they gave me—freedom!"

"I believe Operation Pedro Pan made me more self-reliant, confident, and independent. I had to grow up faster. It exposed me to different people and customs, which broadened me as a person even if I didn't realize it at that time. It taught me to treat people as individuals, not stereotypes," he added.

"I am extremely grateful to my parents, Monsignor Walsh, the good folks of Green Bay and to the hundreds of nameless others whose efforts made Pedro Pan possible. Without their dedication, courage and personal sacrifices my life would be completely different. I thank God for this great country, which opened its arms to a child and comforted him in his time of need," he said. Oscar actively keeps the Pedro Pans of California connected through his web site, Cuban Kids from the 60s Exodus at www.cubankids1960.com.

Misha, of Maryland, is a Parent Outreach Liaison for a public school district. She shared that when her oldest child was 14 and was about to embark on a trip to Spain for a month, she thought she finally understood what her parents must have gone through when they made the difficult decision to send her from Havana to Miami through Operation Pedro Pan. "I called my mother... and she said, 'You still have no idea because if you need or want you can get on the next plane. When we sent you, we couldn't do the same and the uncertainties were innumerable. We didn't know where or with whom you would end up. We put our trust in God.'"

Would Misha have done the same thing if she were in her parents' shoes? "I have asked myself the same question so many times and I admire my parents for being so brave! I hope that my love for my children would let me do the same," Misha said. "I left at age 13, alone, after my parents explained, in the presence of my

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psychologist uncle, about what Spain went through during their civil war, especially what happened to young girls. My parents believed the invasion would not fail and that we were to be apart for six months, tops. I felt that anyone could do or bear anything for six months.” Misha lived with friends for ten days when she first arrived in the United States in January of 1961, and then was sent to Reno, Nevada.

“My brother, Miki, who has always been very close to me, wanted to be with me so he left Cuba on March 31 and was sent to Reno. My oldest brother, Villo, 14, came next and he lived with another kind foster family,” said Misha. “Then, my mother and two younger brothers, Pepe, 10, and Javi, 9, went to live with my oldest brother’s family. Lastly, my father went into an embassy for political asylum until he was allowed to leave Cuba. When he got to Miami, he had to go to the Opa-locka ‘detention’ center where they checked people out.”

“Our first foster home was not very good, however, God put us with another family with seven kids, and every day was a blessing. We missed our parents to no end but our foster family’s kindness and love gave us just what we needed then,” she said.

Misha sees Operation Pedro Pan as heaven-sent for Cuban children. “I am very thankful to Catholic Charities and the US government for giving us a chance to be free,” she said. “Yes, we were away from our parents but that was very different from being taken away by the Cuban government to be sent where there was no hope of freedom. Thank heavens we had Operation Pedro Pan to save us.”

Manuel, a land surveyor from Boynton Beach, Florida, left Havana at 14 in the company of two brothers and a sister and, although scared, thought of his flight to Miami as an adventure. He lived in a camp in South Miami and wasn’t reunited with his parents for 16 months. “Thanks to the Catholic Welfare Bureau and the U.S. government, I went to good schools and had food and a roof over my head,” he said. “Operation Pedro Pan helped me grow up. I was lucky.”

“I admired my parents’ sacrifice,” he said. “As a child, I only knew that my father was jailed 80 days on mere suspicion with no due process. While their decision was very difficult to make, I would do anything to save my two sons from a future Castro anywhere.”

“I have a Web site, www.CampMatecumbeVeterans.com, and I have published a monthly newsletter since July of 1999 to help Pedro Pan kids find each other. I feel that all 14,048 of us are brothers and sisters in misfortune and opportunity,” said Manuel.

Melquiades Martinez, who grew up in Sagua la Grande, Cuba, was one of those veterans of Camp Matecumbe, an overcrowded way station for unaccompanied teenage immigrants from Cuba. He left his family, alone, at 15 years old for Miami as part of Operation Pedro Pan. His parents made this painful decision after a 16-year-old boy from his city was killed by a firing squad, and Melquiades was threatened by the militia for wearing a cloth medallion, a sign of his Catholic faith.

When he arrived in Miami, Melquiades was taken immediately to Camp Matecumbe. To help him get through this time, he clung to his father’s promise of “I’ll see you in three months.” Little did he know that this separation would turn into four years.

“My family and schooling in Cuba had instilled in me a deep belief and faith in God, and my faith became a tremendous source

of strength when I felt helpless and lost,” he said. After 40 days at this camp, he was sent to Camp St. John for approximately a month, where he was with other boys from Sagua la Grande. Instead of 400 children, there were 70. “We were not as isolated and alienated as we had been at Camp Matecumbe. We were like a brotherhood and we banded together.” When Camp St. John closed, Martinez was sent to live with an American family, where his name Melquiades was agreeably shortened to Mel. “The sons of the foster family were great to me and I called the parents, *Tía* (Aunt) and *Tío* (Uncle),” he said.

Although he initially had difficulty in school because of the language barrier, he was determined to overcome this and he did. With characteristic perseverance, he learned English, finished high school, college, and law school, and he went on to become mayor of Orange County, Florida, and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in George W. Bush’s first administration. He is currently a U.S. Senator from Florida.

Author of a recently published memoir, *A Sense of Belonging* (Crown Forum, 2008), Senator Mel Martinez summed up the interviewed Pedro Pans’ tremendous gratitude for the safety and freedom this country has given them when he said, “I am a testament to the fact that in America if you work hard, play by the rules, and have an abiding faith in God, all things are possible.”

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Web Sites

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- Cuban Kids from the 60s Exodus: www.cubankids1960.com.
- Operation Pedro Pan Group: www.pedropan.org.

Notes

- ⁱ Only first names are used for some interviewees to protect their identities.
- ⁱⁱ Polita Grau, who served as First Lady of Cuba when her uncle was president in the 1930s and, in the early 1960s, was one of the main organizers of Operation Peter Pan. In 1965, she was arrested and jailed on charges of conspiring with the CIA to kill President Fidel Castro, and she was freed in 1978.

Arlene Geller is a writer and editor living in Pennsylvania. 📍

Books That Describe Oppression

Patricia Goldblatt

The Master and Margarita by Mikhail Bulgakov (1967, reprinted in 1996), which describes the early years of the Soviet Union, and *Those Who Save Us* by Jenna Blum (2004), the story of a German mother and daughter's relationship, appear to have little in common. Stylistically, the former leaps from traditional narrative to realistic and surrealist genres, even providing some autobiographical details; the second is carefully structured between flashbacks and contemporary times to unravel the mystery of a child's paternity. While *The Master and Margarita* has numerous strange and magical appearances of characters, *Those Who Save Us* has carefully delineated protagonists who make the reader empa-

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thize and care for their plight. The time span of Bulgakov's novel occurs over four days, while Blum's extends over 54 years. However, at the core of both works are examples of abusive governments and people who suffer for their behavior. In both, the tales are *true* and amazingly credible. Themes of moral ambiguity and the framing of these stories lead to questions of how art interprets and can showcase reality. Therefore, not only the stories themselves, but also how they are told, educate readers about abuse and the power of art.

Soviet Dystopia: *The Master and Margarita*

The Master and Margarita begins with a meeting between Bezdomny, a poet, and Berlioz, an editor for MASSLIT, an equivalent of the Soviet Union's writers' union. Their discussion is interrupted by the abrupt arrival of the mysterious Woland, referred to as "the foreigner" or "stranger" (most likely from Germany since there is no "W" in Russian). In supporting the official party line, Berlioz informs the poet that his poems concerning religion must be made less real, for "the important thing was not the kind of man Jesus was... but rather, that Jesus... had never existed on earth... and all the stories were fabrications, myths..."(5). They de-

bate theology and philosophy, with Berlioz emphasizing that the majority of citizens in Russia do "not believe the fairytales about God"(7). Eventually, the poet lands in a mental institution where he relates events that include descriptions of the editor's severed head and a black magic show. In the asylum, Bezdomny encounters another dejected writer, The Master, who has burnt his opus. In 1930, Bulgakov also destroyed two versions of this book.

Three plots are entwined in a mad dash that locates the characters in real named streets and locations such as Patriarch's Pond and Apartment 50 on Sadovaya Street in Moscow, where people had been known to disappear during Stalin's reign. The author depicts Jesus's crucifixion on Bald Mountain in Yershalaim (Jerusalem), where even Jesus's Hebrew name, Yeshua Ha-Nostri, is used. Flights into imagination are depicted by talking animals, magical creams, and flying broomsticks. In this narrative, although Jesus is believed to be mentally ill at first, political instability and fear that he will stir up the populace encourage Pilate to listen to the high priest Kaifa in order to "protect the people" (28). Through *The Master*, the author gives us a morally confused Pilate, a man who loves his dog, has migraine headaches, and is tormented by his fatal decision regarding Jesus.

To complicate storylines further, Bulgakov adds a romantic tryst between The Master and a married woman named Margarita who is modelled after Bulgakov's third wife, Elena Sergeevna, and perhaps suggests the artist's muse. At one point, Margarita changes into a witch and hosts a satanic ball attended by notorious scoundrels of all time. As well, there are many confusing acts of hypnotism, disappearance, forgery, and bribery. Eventually, the reader learns that the chapters depicting the final meeting between Jesus and Pilate represent the lost manuscript written by The Master.

As a writer of "truthful lies," Bulgakov could not be published during his lifetime because his writing was deemed critical of Stalin's policy. *The Master and Margarita* was an underground, self-published *samizdat*, serialized and passed hand to hand. Its discovery could have been punishable by death, as the government strongly enforced censorship and maintained relentless control of the party image and acceptable concepts of culture. Although Bulgakov's depictions are multifaceted, with evidence of good and bad in all characters, even the hint of controversy would not have been tolerated. Bulgakov's frustration at being considered anti-government resulted in his inability to work even as a theatre director. He requested permission to emigrate. Stalin's friendly call on April 18, 1930 (Milne, 1995), enquiring into Bulgakov's

reasons for wanting to leave Russia ended any hope that he might depart the country.

The identity of the most provocative character in the novel—the arch illusionist, the stranger Woland—has been a topic of debate for generations. Some suggest that he is, in fact, Stalin, “the engineer of human souls” (see Wikipedia). Others conjecture that Woland is a stand-in for Satan, as he does not cast a shadow. Others have noted the influence of Goethe’s *Faust* on *The Master and Margarita*, as the book inhabits a cosmic space that reflects the reality-imagination dichotomy (McNeath, 2007). Woland is a trickster, vanishing and reappearing, creating and destroying, capable of hypnosis and transformations, accompanied by an entourage that includes vampires and an enormous cat named Behemoth who plays chess and drinks vodka. Also appearing are Korovyev, whose attire recalls the devil who appears to Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov*, and Azazello, named for one of the Fallen Angels responsible for making swords and jewellery.

While depicting those capable of mesmerizing and mischief, Bulgakov also elucidates the greedy proletariat, ready to believe in the sudden appearance of money, ersatz jewels, and clothes that descend from the ceiling during Woland’s performance at the Variety Theatre. Easily controlled, minor characters reveal their petty, self-interested desires. And like the emperor in Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Emperor’s New Clothes*, the gullible bourgeois find themselves naked in the street, chasing their own avarice after Woland’s performance. The use of parody and ridicule in this satire acts as a moral lesson that impugns both the perpetrators and willing victims in a totalitarian society.

In a confusing whirl of time, characters, locations, stories, and realities, it is sometimes difficult to separate story from truth, for the ideas extend beyond the page to more pervasive theories that speak to how repressive societies function—how stories control, promote, and idealize the rule of the regime they extol. Deeper examination reveals that all stories in *The Master and Margarita* are united by the same theme, even entwining the writer’s personal history with the novel he writes. Through aspirational slogans and depictions in art, the populace is duped into believing in a utopian world sponsored and edited by the government in power, reminding the reader of the editors who criticize, condemn, and censor Bezdomny’s poems and The Master’s manuscript.

We have seen the official images: the endorsed posters of smiling blond, vigorous peasants ready to march into fields; musclebound automatons preparing for battle; cosmonauts and factory workers who project a dream that sacrifices people for ideas. Presented as faceless, idealized stereotypes, humans are transformed into ideas rather than flesh and blood individuals who cry out in pain or mourn the loss of comrades. Yet this is the kind of art required to construct and maintain an ideology that inspires patriotism and discourages or destroys free thinking.

In contrast to this idealized official depiction, Bulgakov never idealizes, sentimentalizes, or hints at nostalgia for the past. His storytelling adopts a dispassionate tone; although depicting mayhem, he does not resort to numerous adjectives, purple prose, or exaggeration to make a point. Rather, there is the semblance of normalcy, almost understatement, written in ordinary idioms and language that further conveys the foible and vice of those who manipulate their audiences by carefully controlling the produc-

tion of acceptable art. The uncluttered style is juxtaposed against the tall tales told. The frustration of The Master, Bezdomny, and Bulgakov himself, along with the preaching of Jesus, are examples of how government puppets, such as editors and carefully placed officials, limit and shape freedom in restrictive societies, silencing the voices of creative souls. Repercussions for those who speak out are dire, for their texts are silenced and their ability to transform thought into art or speech is not tolerated.

In many ways, *The Master and Margarita* recalls Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in which strange, imaginary events of, say, sending a father’s corpse in a gift-wrapped box exist next to real historical depictions of horrendous slaughter by the United Fruit Company or civil wars. The reader reads García Márquez and Bulgakov with awe, wondering how the real could be more improbable than fantasy, actually relishing the ridiculous over the real as comic relief to tales of extreme brutality and madness.

As a writer of
“truthful lies,” Bulgakov
could not be published
during his lifetime
because his writing was
deemed critical
of Stalin’s policy.

At the conclusion of the *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov balances realism and imagination, unites his plot strands, and provides resolution for the reader. Woland and his entourage are visited by the disciple Matthew, or Levi Matvei, tax collector from the Biblical past. Reviled by Matvei as “Spirit of Evil and Sovereign of the Shadows,” Woland responds, “What would your good do if evil did not exist, and what would the earth look like if all the shadows disappeared?” (305). Sent by Jesus, Matvei is unable to bestow enlightenment on Pilate but has come to give him peace. Amid bullets, Woland disappears into the darkness. The Master and Margarita, although poisoned by Azazello, fly off and are able to tend a small garden together; the apartment building of the editor who had condemned and censored The Master’s opus burns down. At least in Bulgakov’s art, there is satisfaction.

However, while he gives his characters happy endings, Bulgakov offers more realistic postscripts, as the Russian government continues to maintain control of the narrative of events. Not surprisingly, an effort to catch the mysterious Woland and the criminals who have dazzled and corrupted Moscow sparks an investigation. The *unbiased* newspaper report states,

Investigation spokesmen and experienced psychiatrists established that the criminal gang members ... were hypnotists with unprecedented powers, capable of appearing not where they actually were, but in illusory, displaced locations. In addition, they could easily convince who-

ever came in contact with them that certain objects or people were present in places where really they were not, conversely, they could remove from sight those objects or people that actually were in sight... (328)

They might have been describing the Communist Secret Police or NKVD, Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs. The official statement concludes, "In the light of such explanations, everything became absolutely clear..." (328). Forged signatures, talking cats, hidden foreign currency, and transformation are officially filed and are thus explained to the citizenry. Much like a madcap Restoration Comedy, one of the satires likewise banned by the English in the seventeenth century for their frank depic-

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tion of contemporary life, *The Master and Margarita* comes to a close. Yet, in illustrating how artists/writers are tricked, incarcerated, or deemed incompetent; documents created or planted; creative individuals diagnosed as mad, or suddenly vanished; audiences made gullible and compliant, the book extends a cautionary tale that informs, educates, and warns against the manipulation practiced by totalitarian regimes.

Those Who Save Us: The Story, The Setting, and The Victims

Jenna Blum, author of *Those Who Save Us*, is the daughter of a German mother and Jewish father; she, too, investigates her own personal history to examine the impact of war on ordinary citizens. The main protagonist in the novel is Anna, a German woman who survives World War II as mistress of an *Obersturmführer*. The reader's sympathies are immediately skewed: Anna might be construed as a collaborator who supported the war effort

to destroy the Jews in Germany by her illicit affair with a perpetrator of heinous crimes, but she also behaves in an understandable manner based on her maternal desire to survive for the sake of her daughter, Trudy. In addition to the universal bond between parent and child, Anna smuggles bread to the inmates of the Buchenwald concentration camp, also in an attempt to keep them alive. She does not take up arms or support the slogans of the Nazis. Rather, she hides a Jewish doctor in her house. He fathers Trudy. Immediately, the reader is cast into a realm of moral ambiguity that juxtaposes the needs of an individual against those of a greater good: to oppose genocide.

Like Bulgakov, Blum particularizes her locales: from the streets of Weimar to the forests surrounding the concentration camp to recreating New Heidelberg, a fictionalized town in Minnesota that is representative of Blum's home in Minneapolis. Her knowledge of Jewish victims, their feelings of shame and silence, are seen in the portrayal of the physically beautiful, strong, and self-sufficient Anna who stores stories of love and abuse tightly within her being.

Elements of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* pervade the novel as Anna must endure a cruel father, a dead mother, an absent boyfriend, an intimidating guardian who is a baker, and a psychotic lover. Although stereotypical in a design that reflects the structure of a tall tale, *Those Who Save Us* carefully tempers each character with details that humanize them. For example, Mathilde Staudt is the baker, die Dicke (Fatty), who takes in the pregnant 17-year-old and helps her raise Trudy. Staudt is a righteous Gentile, a gloomy and caustic personage who opens her kitchen to refugees, stuffing pistols into flour sacks for political prisoners, yet providing baked goods to the Gestapo and rarely revealing a softer side. At one point, she confides to Anna her regret that she never had a child and that her husband loved men.

The psychopathic *Obersturmführer* is portrayed with too-tiny feet that cause him to trip. To celebrate Anna's birthday, he organizes a lavish picnic with champagne, ham, currant jelly, sardines, pickles, and bread. He has even "thoughtfully" packed a phonograph to serenade Anna with Brahms's *Second Concerto*. Anna's revulsion at her compliance with the *Obersturmführer's* demands makes her treat her body roughly; she washes herself inside and out with lye and pumice stone and considers sewing her genitals together. Although occasionally losing herself in restorative daydreams, she is well aware of her reality as mistress.

She has often told herself that she is not badly off, really. Men of power have had mistresses since time out of mind, and it doesn't matter that none of the gaunt women who visit the bakery will look directly at Anna. At least she and Trudy are safe in a warm place with access to food, and she is earning her keep in ways both legal and illicit while at this very moment others are dead, dying, surviving, having their eyeballs lanced and toenails pulled by the Gestapo, labouring with heavy machinery that crushes their fingers to nubs, standing naked in the rain, their children wrenched shrieking from their arms, being shorn, shot, tumbling into pits... (275-276)

The brutality of an oppressive regime persists in the sadism of the *Obersturmführer*. He finds it humorous to introduce a gun into

his foreplay. He tells Anna she is his cure, his purity, his redemption. Anna has little choice but to comply with his demands; non-compliance would signal death for her and her child. In addition to his unsavory sexual appetite for Anna, he manipulates Trudy through gifts of food and red shoes. He teaches her marching songs and instructs her to lift her feet high in goose step. Angry at her crying, Saint Nikolaus, an epithet for the *Obersturmführer* used by Anna with Trudy, “clouts the girl across the face” (333), and Anna is certain he has snapped Trudy’s neck. Further enraged, he grabs Anna by her hair and brandishes his pistol. As glass is breaking, Anna recalls a line quoted to her by her doctor-lover from a poem by Yeats, “Things fall apart.” She wonders, “What is to become of us?” (336). At the center of her existence is the desire to sustain life at all costs.

Anna might be construed as a collaborator who supported the war effort to destroy the Jews in Germany by her illicit affair with a perpetrator of heinous crimes, but she also behaves in an understandable manner based on her maternal desire to survive for the sake of her daughter, Trudy.

Told in alternating voices that span more than a half century later, the book offers a retrospective of the Holocaust. The reader moves between a mother and her daughter in a variety of times and places in their lifetimes, ending in 1997. Anna and Trudy are caught in a relationship of silence, resentment, and inability to connect with one another and others. Although she does not perish, Anna endures a death-in-life situation, openly denigrated as a traitor by the women of Weimar and later in New Heidelberg, where her story of collaboration is known. Ironically, her work as a baker recalls and reinforces her days of shame and safety. Anna reflects on that love-hate continuum when she reveals her wartime collaboration to her husband Jack, an American soldier who has saved her,

She should have known this would happen even with him; she should have known better than to tell him the truth. She can never tell him what she started to say: that we come to love those who save us. For Anna does

believe this is true, the word that stuck in her throat was not save but *shame*. (445, book’s italics)

Ambiguity resides in a multiplicity of symbols: the bakery, replete with the warm delicious smells that connote safety while others are starving and where, at the same time, Anna must endure the menacing abuse of the *Obersturmführer*; the gift of red shoes that delight the little girl but that also remind the reader of Hans Christian Andersen’s tale in which those shoes connote death and pain for a girl who must lose her feet so she can empathize with sinners.

The title *Those Who Save Us* is ambiguous as well. Although Anna and Trudy have been physically saved, Anna has lost her self, her soul, to the *Obersturmführer*, representative of the sadistic party in power. She is dehumanized, left empty, unable to love, or feel, condemned to damnation and eternal suffering. Yes, she has saved Trudy, but Trudy, too, has saved Anna, forcing her to obey her instincts as a parent who must preserve the life of her only child. Reminiscent perhaps of William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*, *Those Who Save Us* illuminates the terrible decisions parents make regarding their children’s futures in times of unimaginable peril.

In documenting the impact of Hitler’s National Socialist German Workers’ Party (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* – NSDAP), usually known as the Nazi party, Blum gives us the testimonies of survivors as interviewed by Trudy for her colleague’s University Remembrance Project: those Germans who supported the party and actively engaged in acts against humanity; those who were bystanders and wordlessly witnessed crimes; and those who, themselves, succumbed to the abuse of their countrymen.

Stories are well known of survivors who maintained their silence, many experiencing guilt at their own survival when loved ones disappeared, others terrified to relive their past torment and abuse. Anna’s refusal to reveal her past fits with those legacies of pain and shame. Yet, some survivors of war are willing or able to share dispassionately the events they endured. And still others are steadfastly compelled to revisit and contribute to the world’s knowing of those terrible days: each with a profound reason for their decision. In *Those Who Save Us*, interviews provide details so that others will not forget. These memories include children who witnessed the death of their mothers; eyes that are blinded for seeing what the Gestapo deemed they should not; the round-ups of victims; blackmails and betrayals for cash rewards and diamonds; depictions of quaking, naked people at the edge of a pit, awaiting the end of their lives.

Rose-Grete Fischer, the German woman formerly of Lubben who was blinded by the Gestapo, recounts for Trudy,

So I was walking through the woods with the berries and the bread for my mother, and all of a sudden I heard *pop-pop-pop-pop-pop*, just like ... like firecrackers. But it was not firecrackers, it was gunshots. And I was so young and so stupid, I followed the sound to a clearing, and there I saw them. The Jews and the *Einsatzgruppen*. The Jews had been made to undress and were standing at the edge of a pit. The *Einsatzgruppen* were shooting them in groups of four or five... (226)

Rose-Grete recognizes an individual she knows, a former

schoolmate named Rebecca, by her gesture of twirling her beautiful dark, curly hair.

The straightforward recall, the innocence of thinking she heard firecrackers and the knowledge that comes to the reader as it did to Rose-Grete, is terrifying in its simplicity of language as she

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relives it ("So I was walking..."). Rose-Grete confides that she had never seen anyone naked, that she wanted to hide her face, but she is mesmerized and watches the Jews pray, holding hands, begging, and crying: "women and babies along with men. Nobody was spared" (226). In contrast to her human response, when Rose-Grete makes eye contact and offers her berries to Rebecca, a Gestapo officer takes control of the situation:

What are you doing here, Little girl? Don't you know you're not supposed to be here? Or are you on a mission of mercy, a little Jew-loving *Rotkäppchen*, Red Riding Hood bringing food to Jews? (228)

Having observed what she should not, Rose-Grete must be censored: a child's reaction reprimanded and punished, a measure taken to warn others that what the party does cannot be judged or shared with others. Normal behavior is blunted and replaced by official dogma. Unfortunate Rose-Grete becomes a living icon, informing the citizens of Lubben that they must not challenge, or even see. She is forever maimed in a way that will always mark her crime. As in Stalin's Russia, people disappear or are brutally silenced, facts are altered and lies told to ensure that the party holding the power continues to do so unchallenged.

Trudy uncovers her past through interviews of the survivors. It is not surprising that her particular quest to elucidate her mother's story and understand the meaning of an enigmatic locket leads her into researching the times and country of her own and her mother's past. A serendipitous coincidence provides Trudy with clues that will humanize her mother, rounding off her hard, impenetrable edges. Trudy is finally able to sympathize with her mother's silence. As readers, we also then understand further Anna's insistence that, "The past is dead. The past is dead, and

better it remain so" (86).

Anna could be the poster image of the Nazi party. She is the physically perfect Aryan model, a stereotypical role model, the German mother whose world appears to be focused on her child and her kitchen, a policy reinforced by the stress on "Kinder" (children) and "Küche" (kitchen) in Nazi propaganda. Ironically, this slogan is twisted for Anna, who has no choice but to bake and cook if she and Trudy are to endure.

For women bearing four or more babies, the Cross of Honor of the German Mother was awarded, a symbol of the regime that glorified the compliant female whose role it was to stay in the home and bear children for the Reich (Weisstein, 1968). To prevent women from entering realms of business, they were banned from obtaining higher education in medicine, law, and the civil service. From Anna's earliest days, her father treated her as a domestic, someone to clean, sew, cook, run his bath, and carry out his errands. He understood her future as wife and mother, even using her as a pawn to rise in the party. She is dehumanized, an object for barter: "Anna opens her eyes and stares at Gerhard. Can he be serious? Will he never see her as anything but child or chattel?" (67)

The Role of the Writer and the Artist

The officially endorsed and promoted portrayal of "blood and soil" in Nazi Germany, celebrated nostalgic values of racial purity, militarism, and obedience. Writers, musicians, and artists such as Paul Klee, Otto Dix, Ludwig Kirschner, and hundreds of others, and entire movements such as Surrealism, Impressionism, and Bauhaus were forbidden under Hitler's dictatorship. One well-known visual artist was Käthe Kollwitz, whose woodcuts presented the reality of war on individuals; her own life experience of losing a child to battle underpinned her woodcuts. In spite of the government's condemnation, Kollwitz's work, like Bulgakov's, circulated throughout the underground, a rallying point for dissidents and free thinkers opposed to the repressive government.

Like canaries in coal mines, artists and writers are the beacons of a society in which divergent perspectives must not only be tolerated, they must be encouraged. The need of citizens to think, reflect, disagree, and contribute to public forums is essential for a democratic society. With no divergent points of view, the party in power does not have to rationalize or defend its position. Destroying the freedom of artistic expression enables lies to pass as truth. Recently Margaret Atwood wrote,

Every budding dictatorship begins by muzzling artists, because they are a mouthy lot, and they don't line up and salute very easily. Of course, you can always get some tame artist to design uniforms and flags and the documentary ... but individual voices must be silenced because there shall be only One Voice... (Atwood, 2008, A17)

Just as the stories and unofficial works remain alive and vibrant to expunge the terror and oppression of militaristic and sadistic regimes, the writings of such authors as Bulgakov and Blum remind the reader of the freedoms and liberties we accept and often take for granted. Works that document and depict the past, novels that entwine fact and fiction, teach us in story and image of our

own histories and those who suffered and succumbed to the terror of totalitarian governments and dictatorships. These stories enter into the imagination, speaking to the question of how art can shape, dramatize, and extend our understanding of our collective past. These stories of ordinary people who have been squashed, silenced, and murdered challenge the so-called official versions licensed by totalitarian governments such as Hitler's and Stalin's. The hope of a free world resides in the opportunities to dissent, raise issues, disagree, and condemn the government, what Mouffe calls "an ineradicability of antagonism" (Mouffe, 2000) so that "the real concrete contexts of facts, the social reality in which people exist" (Freire, 1989, 49) can be known. Such a struggle is akin to a model of radical democracy (Zournazi, 2002/2003). An approach toward transformative practices sets out that there is never only one correct answer and that the messiness of the search for democracy is necessary for people who seek truth and understanding.

Both Bulgakov and Blum understand that we must never forget. Their writing, through humor and grim detail, persuades us that even today we must continue to revisit the past in order to inform and prepare for the future, a future where people are free to think, create, and comment.

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Patricia Goldblatt is a former high school teacher and program officer at the Ontario College of Teachers in Toronto, Canada. Her books and articles have been published internationally. 🌐

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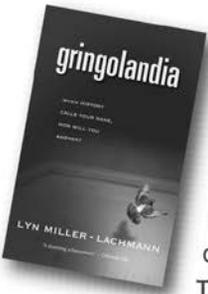
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Interview with Children's Author tonya Bolden

Jane Maher

The idea for this interview came to me during a visit Tonya Bolden paid to my students in the college program at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women in Westchester County, New York. During the summer of 2007 I taught a course on multicultural children's literature, and we read and discussed many of Bolden's books. The students, most of whom were African American and most of whom had children on the "outside" being cared for by relatives or friends, were "blown away" by her books. "Why weren't there books like this when I was growing up?" one of them asked Tonya. This led to a conversation of such seriousness and importance that one of the women later told me she was unable to sleep that night. Another woman said of Tonya, "She listens as carefully as she speaks."

Some of Bolden's most recent awards include the Coretta Scott King Author Honor Book Award, the NAPPA Gold Award, and the American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults Award. In 2008, The National Council of Teachers of English recognized her biography of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. with its Orbis Pictus Award.

The interview took place via e-mail in December 2008.

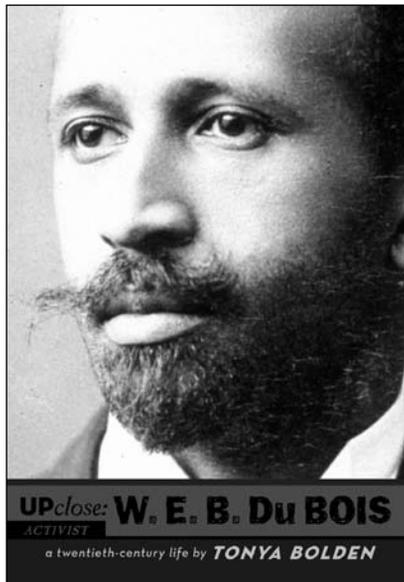
Could you explain how you came to be a full-time writer?

Well, over 20 years ago a friend from college, an editor at *Black Enterprise* magazine, gave me an opportunity to do some book reviewing for her. She recalled that in college I wrote well and that I was pretty disciplined.

Book reviews for *Black Enterprise* led to book reviews for other publications: small articles for IBM's newsletter, study guides for cultural organizations, a few feature articles for various periodicals. This odd lot of assignments led me to take the plunge in 1987 to leave my "real" job—I was working for the writer James Goldman at the time—and to give the writing life a full-time shot.

That decision meant I *could not* be picky. I do not think I ever turned down any writing jobs no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. All the "little" jobs led to an opportunity to work with Vy Higginson on transforming her musical, *Mama, I Want to Sing*, into a YA novel [published by] Scholastic in 1992. I did several other books on assignment before I came up with a book idea of my own.

Because it was the first "my idea," my anthology *Rites of Passage: Stories about Growing Up by Black Writers from Around the World*



(Hyperion, 1994) will always have a special place in my heart. Articles I had been reading and discussions I had been having about multiculturalism sparked the idea. I thought to myself: What about Black multiculturalism? I thought back to my own childhood and how I had thought West Indian and Jamaican were synonymous. I reflected on how little I knew about Africa, and on the differences between my Southern-born cousins and me.

And Not Afraid to Dare: The Stories of Ten African-American Women (Scholastic, 1998) was cooked up over dinner with my editor on *Mama, I Want to Sing*, who had expressed

interest in doing another book with me.

Around the time I was working on *Dare* I was also working on *The Book of African-American Women: 150 Crusaders, Creators and*

**I've stayed open to ideas
of editors, and I keep
heeding my own curiosity.**

Uplifters (Adams, 1996), a book for adults. It was another example of a "not my idea book" but of an editor at Adams Media who wanted to add another title to their "The Book of" series.

My interest in women's matters and my experience with compiling an anthology prompted my agent to recommend me to an editor at Random House who was in search of someone to do the book that became *33 Things Every Girl Should Know: Stories, Songs, Poems, and Smart Talk by 33 Extraordinary Women* (Crown, 1998), which later led to *33 Things Every Girl Should Know About Women's History* (Crown, 2002).

But before that came *Strong Men Keep Coming: The Book of African-American Men* (Wiley, 1999). My books on Black women had made me keenly aware of how little I knew about Black men in America.

Having satisfied that curiosity, I then asked myself: What about Black children? What would my life have been like had I been a child in eighteenth- or nineteenth-century America? Where are the tributes to the children who survived outrageous misfortunes, who made something of themselves against the odds, who grew up to be women and men of mark?

This curiosity resulted in *Tell All the Children Our Story* (Abrams, 2001), which along with narrative contains more than 100 visuals—paintings, photographs, ephemera—as well as sidebars of tragic and triumphant childhood memories of both unknown and famous men and women.

Tell All the Children came out in November 2001. That December came a picture book *Rock of Ages: A Tribute to the Black Church* (Knopf). And then came others, including *Portraits of African-American Heroes* (Dutton, 2003), *Wake Up Our Souls: A Celebration of Black American Artists* (Abrams, 2004), *The Champ: The Story of Muhammad Ali* (Knopf, 2004), *Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century Girl* (Abrams, 2005), *Cause: Reconstruction America, 1863–1877* (Knopf, 2005); *Take-Off: American All Girl Bands During World War II* (Knopf, 2007), *MLK: Journey of a King* (Abrams, 2007), and *George Washington Carver* (Abrams, 2008). My most recent biography is of W.E.B. Du Bois in Viking's Up Close series.

And that's the how of it—book by book. I've stayed open to ideas of editors, and I keep heeding my own curiosity.

You make it sound easy.

No, it is not easy, but it is something I want to do. I do not write only for practical reasons. I don't think any writer does. I write because as a child I loved books, the worlds they transported me to, the people they introduced me to. The sight and feel of books, I loved that too, as a child. I write because as a child I loved writing. I loved stories during cold, dark, or rainy hours when I could not be outside playing handball or scullies or zooming around on roller skates. Poetry was my rescue as a teen, especially when I was in the throes of adolescent angst.

I write because I am the beneficiary of the prayers, hopes, and labors of generations, of people I never knew who braved water cannons, police dogs, burning crosses on lawns, so that I might have wider opportunities. How can I not contribute?

I write because my parents, born poor and into the world of Jim Crow, seeded in me a love of reading and for school and for learning and for striving for excellence. There is a lost family picture of a very young me, sitting up in my parents' bed with my mother's glasses askew across my face and a book in my hands, upside down: I was imitating my mother.

And I remember nights when my father sat with me at the kitchen table going over my homework. I remember mostly instances of him helping me with sentences. Say I had to use the words "ball" and "boy" in a sentence. I thought "the boy has a ball" was good enough. My father did not. I simply assumed my father must have been a great student when he was a kid. I did not know at the time that he had not gone beyond the ninth grade. So he would keep after me until I got into the habit of crafting sentences such as, "The little boy has a large yellow and blue ball." I did this, I think, more to get my father off my back than out of that "take pride-in-your-work" . . . "give-it-your-best" he was always talking about. The funny thing is, when the day came that neither father nor mother was looking over my homework, I found myself in the habit of trying to do more than what would have been good enough.

My parents might at times have denied me money for bubblegum and twin pops or another rollercoaster ride, but whenever I came home with the list of books I wanted to buy at the Arrow

Club book fair, they never, ever denied me.

I write because in a public school in Harlem, in a private school on Manhattan's Upper East Side, and in college, I was fortunate enough to have teachers who were committed to teaching, who knew how to teach, and who had high regard for the English language and quality literature. If any of them had low expectations of me, they kept it to themselves—or maybe they didn't and I was too naïve to notice.

One of the few books that I have from my school days is a collection of poems by Robert Frost. It is a small, now yellowed, rather fragile paperback that cost, back in the 1970s, 95 cents. I have held onto this book, I believe, because of one poem, "Two Tramps in Mud Time." Really, it was a mere three lines of the poem that caught my fancy:

My object in living is to unite
My avocation and my vocation
As my two eyes make one in sight.

there is a lost family
picture of a very young
me, sitting up in my
parents' bed with my
mother's glasses askew
across my face and a book
in my hands, upside down:
I was imitating
my mother.

I made notations next to that poem, and they probably sum up the reasons why I became a writer. At the top of that page, a young Tonya wrote: "He enjoys his work. Opposite that notation, a young Tonya wrote: "Everything is in harmony." On the next page, a young Tonya wrote: "When you love what you do you do it better." Further down on that page, I find that I had learned a new word: "Avocation." Above it, a young Tonya wrote "hobby." At the end of the poem, young Tonya wrote: "your hobby should = your work." I have a memory of being so intrigued by that concept. I can remember whispering, "I want that." And I was fortunate to get that—for my work to be a match with my hobby.

When you spoke to my students at Fordham University and at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, you talked about the value of growing up in New York City, and my students are always so inspired by this. Could you repeat it, please?

The basics: I am a native New Yorker and a beneficiary of many fine teachers at M.E.S. 146 in East Harlem and at the Chapin School on the Upper East Side, and later fine professors at Princeton and Columbia. I think my study of Russian in graduate school at Columbia gave rhythm to my work. The same can be said about growing up in multicultural New York where I encountered so many different voices. I'm told I was a verbal and inquisitive kid. I know I was head over heels about books from day one.

Could you explain how your mother came to learn about the Chapin School? It was this part of the story that made such a deep impression on my students.

My mother learned about the best educational opportunities available from privileged White people for whom she worked. She also did research on how to get her kids into good schools. She may also have gotten some tips from some other Black women in my building complex, and from the mother of the girl who was then my best friend, Lois. They lived upstairs from us. Lois is White, but not privileged. Also, you need to remember that M.E.S 146 was a somewhat progressive school, and this was a time when African Americans were beginning to benefit from the gains that had been made and were still being made by the civil rights movement.

I had long wanted to do Du Bois because through his life you can touch a century of American history.

My mother had done the same thing for my older sister. She ended up at Hunter High School. She is four years older than I, so by the time my turn came, my mother had a good understanding of the “good” schools in the city and the process of how to apply to these schools.

You've done some teaching. Could you talk about what you liked or did not like about it?

The College of New Rochelle's School of New Resources. I taught English at a few of their campuses for a few years. I really loved it. The course I taught the most was TEE (Translating Experience into Essay). Many of my students were my age or older. They were living proof that it's never too late to learn. Some were there because they wanted to move higher in their field; others because they had decided, “It's my turn now.” They had entered the workforce at a young age, raised their children, helped others realize their dreams. Now they were fulfilling a dream deferred or a dream unheard of when they were young. One memorable student was the father of the poet/educator Tony Medina. I didn't know Tony at the time, but when I finally met him, I told him

that I knew where he got some of his talent.

I stopped teaching because I began to get more invitations to do programs out of state. Travel would mean missing some classes, and that would mean scheduling make-ups. Most of my students worked. I couldn't do that to them.

Could you talk about your most recent biography of W.E.B. Du Bois—for example, how were you able to cover such a long and complex life in a way that would be accessible to younger readers? I spent last summer reading David Levering Lewis's two-volume biography of Du Bois, and I was astounded at the length and breadth of Du Bois's life, his brilliance, his controversial actions, his determination, not to mention the complex relationship he had with his wife and daughter—it was almost as if he “gave” himself to his work and ideas and had very little left for his own family.

That book was such a brainbuster precisely because he lived so long and did so much! I knew at the outset, as with all my books, my goal was to not present him in lifeless prose. Not surprisingly, given my intended audience, I also thought it important to spend a little time on his youth. And I knew I couldn't cover every event in his life, so I didn't try. I focused on what I thought best conveyed what this scholar-activist was all about—dreaming a better world—and ever the soul in motion.

I had long wanted to do Du Bois because through his life you can touch a century of American history. I also wanted another book likely to appeal to boys, and hoping to hook a few of them on the idea of becoming professional intellectuals. And then there was my own need. As I say in the foreword, “I have been captivated by the bold, boundless Du Bois for years: now worshipful, now annoyed with him, sometimes merely perplexed. Always astonished.”

Again, you are making it sound easy.

Du Bois was a handful. He was arrogant. He tended to get somewhat mythical in his autobiographical writings. And then there was the sad fact that his family got very little of him. I include such things in the book, because it was such a reality of his life and because I wanted readers to know that yes, he was amazing, brilliant and all that, but not perfect. That said, Du Bois may not have given them a lot of emotional support, but he did provide for his family in terms of decent places to live and in terms of his daughter attending good schools.

Du Bois, like many other people, reminds us that greatness often comes at a price. Sometimes the great person pays it; sometimes the people around him pay it. Sometimes it's both. That's how it was in Du Bois's case. Although I have “issues” with him and don't agree with all his thoughts, I admire the man. He dreamed big, he worked hard, he stood his ground.

I remember you once explained to my students that you use photographs and illustrations to complement your writing. You did this particularly well in your biography of Martin Luther King, Jr. Could you explain the process you follow, your thoughts as you chose, for example, the picture of MLK and his wife looking serious, maybe even troubled, as they sat

at their kitchen table together having coffee, with the simple caption, "Like most couples, M.L. and Coretta had their ups and downs."

With *MLK*, I sought ways to work in the fact that the road King walked was no cakewalk. What he did wore him down at times and strained his marriage. That photo seemed a perfect way to convey this without getting into his and Coretta's business.

I have also written biographies and know how difficult and time-consuming it is, first, to find the information, then to decide which information to use. I am astounded by your productivity without sacrificing quality. Each of your books is informative yet nuanced, accurate, and interesting. Could you describe a typical research process—how long it takes, where you find information, how much reading you do.

I can't think of a typical scenario. I think you surrender to the subject and follow its lead. For example, for *MLK* the most powerful research experience I had was listening to his sermons and other addresses. With *The Champ*, the turning point was watching Ali's fights, especially the early ones. That's when I fell in love with him. That's when I thought, he is no mere boxer, he is an artist! For *Take-Off*, it was listening to swing and reading many, many 1930s–1940s *Down Beat* magazines. For *Cause*, I read issue after issue of *Harper's Weekly* from the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Clearly I find information and inspiration from a variety of sources—print (from books to periodicals), video, audio, photographs. Also people. For example, while working on my book on the New Deal I've had quite a few conversations with people who lived through the Great Depression, including my father.

As for how much reading I do, I have no idea. But I do know that I have not read a book for pleasure in quite a long time. It's hard for me to estimate how long research takes. I don't time myself. A day's work on a book may include research only or writing only or it may include both. Or it may just be thinking about the subject while I do housework or stand on line at the post office.

You once told me that the research you did for Cause had a deep impact on you because of the brutal way African Americans were treated after Reconstruction. Could you talk about research and writing that period?

I cried a lot, especially during the writing and rewriting of the book's title chapter. For every one example I present there of the savaging of a man or woman, I probably read ten. I was reminded of something a mentor told me. It's that every time she taught *The Autobiography of Frederick Douglass*, she thought to herself, "We do well."

Yes, Black America has problems, and some issues to work on and work out, but when you know the history—when you consider what we have survived, the pain and agony endured by many thousands gone . . . We do well.

Cause is definitely one of those books that was truly a gift to the once young me. I still remember learning of Reconstruction in secondary school. I think the textbook had about one paragraph on it. The gist: It was a terrible time when some Blacks got political power and the results were disastrous because they misused

the power or were utterly incompetent. I remember how ashamed I felt. When I learned as an adult how wrong this interpretation of Reconstruction was, I was determined to one day do my part to help set the record straight.

Someone once remarked that I seem angry in that book. Pained? Yes. Passionate? Yes. Pleading for a righteous America? Yes. Angry? That I do not see.

Who do you imagine your reader is as you are writing?

A smart, curious young person. I do not assume that my reader has a vast amount of knowledge, but I do assume that the six- or ten- or thirteen-year-old has a mind and can handle a few challenges.

Yes, Black America has problems, and some issues to work on and work out, but when you know the history—when you consider what we have survived, the pain and agony endured by many thousands gone. . . We do well.

Often an editor and I debate about whether the readers will know a word or phrase. I often reply, "Some will." I think we need to allow young people to show what they know.

In December 2008, I did a program for a group of seventh graders from New York City public schools. During the Q&A, I was asked what my next book would be about. I said that it is a biography of the first Black person to earn a Ph.D. from Harvard. Then I asked, "Does any one know who that person is?" Silence. Then one young man raised his hand: "W.E.B. Du Bois?" Again, I always believe that some of my readers will have some prior knowledge that might amaze many an adult.

As for those who might not have the reference or know a word or phrase, I insist on believing that many of these young readers are quite capable of asking a question of a teacher or other adult and/or of looking the thing up or of working it out from context. I insist on giving readers opportunities to grow, to stretch.

How much contact do you have with teachers and librarians? Do they give you input for your writing? Do they have useful observations or comments about your books?

I've met so many fabulous teachers and librarians in the course of doing presentations and signings. Better still, some of them have

become friends. As for your other questions, Do you know any teachers and librarians who *don't* have something to say? They never take that teaching/learning cap off—and that is something I admire about them; they always want to teach, to inform, to get the word out about something valuable, even vital to our lives.

Of the many observations I've gotten, one that stands out came during the Q&A session for a program in New Jersey last year. To be honest, I can't remember if it was a group of teachers or librarians or mixed, but one woman told me that what she most appreciates about my work is the humanity. I almost cried.

There was also something a teacher said to me, when I was starting *MLK*, that informed the writing and the goal of that book. She said that many of her students saw King as something of a chump.

At first, I was shocked; then, I thought about it. If you grow up in a society that exalts greed and materialism, that confuses meekness with weakness, that celebrates violence—it can be difficult to revere someone who wasn't about money and power but instead about things of the spirit.

My aim was to present a very human King, someone who as a child was ready to hate all White people, someone who learned and prayed his way into *agape*, someone who got disgusted, fearful. That teacher's comment was part of what fueled all this. My hope is that if readers can connect with him as a flesh-and-blood person, then perhaps they will at least listen to his message: that soul-cry for the Beloved Community.

So yes, dialoguing with teachers and librarians contributes to my work. And, oh, yes, I've had them take me to task. I got an

email from one asking why, in *The Champ*, I didn't go into more detail on Ali's illness. She felt it was important for children to know more about that. That book originally had content notes, similar to those in *Rock of Ages*, and I had more information on Ali's ailment, but the book was running long, and to keep it a 32-pager the notes had to go.

That said, I have also had heartbreaks: teachers doing paperwork during a presentation. I was less concerned about the insult to me. I was feeling for the children, thinking, what lousy role modeling. I've also been in schools where it was clear that a teacher didn't really care about the children. I remember telling a group of teachers: You don't have to like the children, but you have to love them; otherwise don't be a teacher. It's too sacred a charge.

However, by and large I've met so many wonderful teachers and librarians, men and women who go the extra mile, including paying for materials out of their own pockets. I recall one librarian in Brooklyn who had a stash of combs, hair clips, tissues, and such. She used them, she told me, to make the children feel more comfortable. She may never be recognized for that act of humanity, but it may very well make all the difference for those children.

Jane Maher is a full professor at Nassau Community College, where she teaches composition in the Basic Education Program. She is also an adjunct professor in Fordham University's School of Education, and she teaches college courses at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women. She is the author of several biographies, including *Mina P. Shaughnessy: Her Life and Work*, published by NCTE. 📖



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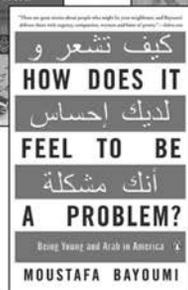
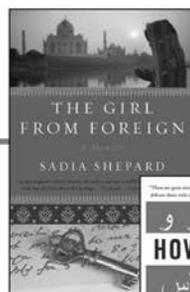
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Bridges on the I-Way: Creating Multicultural Wikis

Frank Alan Bruno

Today, one of the most common places that people find information about multicultural subjects on any search is a wiki entry. The most popular wiki answers are found in Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page), but there are a few other wikis as well. Wikipedia has over seven million articles, including all kinds of several subjects. Wikis take their content from whoever produces them, so information may be spotty or uneven. The entry is only as good as the person who produces it.

The unusual thing about most wikis is that anyone can add content, so it is a constantly expanding set of information about literally tens of thousands of different terms and definitions, created by multiple authors. Wikis have been around since 1994, when Ward Cunningham set up the first one. A wiki is nothing more than a collaborative set of web pages. Wikis are used by all types of organizations, from universities to businesses to libraries. Wiki information comes from a variety of documents and web pages.

A competitor to Wikipedia is Knol: A Unit of Knowledge (<http://knol.google.com/k>), which is sponsored by Google and has specific authors who sign their work rather than taking an anonymous approach. There are 178 entries for multicultural subjects. People even treat wikis like blogs, with many of them having personal wikis. There is even wiki software to work on cell phones such as the BlackBerry or iPhone.

Inventor Ward Cunningham defines the wiki as follows:

The simplest online database that could possibly work. Wiki is a piece of server software that allows users to freely create and edit Web page content using any Web browser. Wiki supports hyperlinks and has a simple text syntax for creating new pages and crosslinks between internal pages on the fly.

Wiki is unusual among group communication mechanisms in that it allows the organization of contributions to be edited in addition to the content itself.

Like many simple concepts, “open editing” has some profound and subtle effects on Wiki usage. Allowing everyday users to create and edit any page in a Web site is exciting in that it encourages democratic use of the Web and promotes content composition by nontechnical users. (<http://wiki.org/wiki.cgi?WhatIsWiki>)

Just for fun I thought I would create a wiki myself in Wikipedia. I like the fact that I can create something I want on any subject, so I wrote an entry to highlight my personal blog. The easiest way to create an entry is to copy the code from another page that you like and then change the written content. It gets a little tricky, though, in that you need to know some basic html markup language or code. Other

than that you just save your edited changes. There is a lot of room for error since no one checks what you write, so you need to use some critical analysis skills, and you should take whatever you read with a grain of salt since it is only as good as the researcher or wikipediaian.

There is a variety of free wiki software out there if you want to set one up for your organization. Most of the wiki software is open source and quite customizable. A few well-known ones are: *TWiki* (<http://twiki.org/>), *DokuWiki* (<http://www.dokuwiki.org/dokuwiki>), *The MoinMoin Wiki Engine* (<http://moinmo.in/>), *PmWiki* (<http://www.pmwiki.org/>), *PBWiki* (<http://pbwiki.com/>), and Wikipedia’s *Media Wiki* (<http://www.mediawiki.org/wiki/MediaWiki>). An exhaustive collection of them can be found at *Wiki Engines* (<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?WikiEngines>). A selective list is found at Wikipedia under *WikiWikiWeb* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WikiWikiWeb>).

There are several wiki search engines that give comprehensive results. These include Wikipedia and Knol as well as *Wikia Search* (<http://search.wikia.com/>), *Wiki Answers* (<http://wiki.answers.com/>), and *Wiki.com* (<http://www.wiki.com/>). A search of the term *multicultural education* in any of them will bring back a mixed set of results that includes information from databases, encyclopedias, and other print and online reference sources. You should be as specific as possible when searching a multicultural topic.

Many teachers set up a wiki page and have their students contribute. It is amazing how the ability of multiple people adding information can produce valuable entries on niche topics that might be overlooked given the huge amount of information on the web. This is why using a variety of search engines is important, for both the focused searcher and the casual browser looking to expand his or her horizons. For example, a sample search of “multicultural education” in Knol netted the following: *Necessary Components of Effective Education for Social Change* (<http://knol.google.com/k/celeste-roberts/necessary-components-of-effective/1h93mraex44ih/2>), *Tagalog vs. Filipino* (<http://knol.google.com/k/frederick-kintanar/tagalog-vs-filipino/bnkpqvt-khrcc/2>), *Literature Review* (<http://knol.google.com/k/derek-spalla/literature-review/1i2l2ktfhdwy/2>), *Counseling Ethnic Minorities* (<http://knol.google.com/k/olabisi-oseivhi/counseling-ethnic-minorities/dcapm34yi4gm/4>), and *The Black Scholar* (<http://knol.google.com/k/roger-jennings/the-black-scholar/2pc1w6stwxox/2>).

I hope this will get you started in publishing your own wiki entries. Wikis can be very valuable to teachers, students, and librarians in sharing information. Give it a try. You might be surprised at how quickly your entry rises to the top of the Google results.

Dr. Frank Alan Bruno is Director of Libraries at Dorchester County Library near Charleston, South Carolina. He is Internet/Electronic Products Subject Editor of *Multicultural Review*. E-mail: bruno@dcl.lib.sc.us. ☺