

The BiblioFiles: Candace Fleming

Premiere date: February 1, 2014

DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

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DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is Candace Fleming, who, in addition to writing picture and chapter books, also writes historical biographies. Today we'll be talking about these biographies, which include *Ben Franklin's Almanac: Being a True Account of the Good Gentleman's Life*; *Our Eleanor: A Scrapbook Look at Eleanor Roosevelt's Remarkable Life*; *The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary*; *The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P.T. Barnum*; and *Amelia Lost: The Life and Disappearance of Amelia Earhart*.

These biographies are packed with information, quotes, images, letters, engravings, and photographs. They flow at just the right pace for readers, without overstating the good parts, shying away from the bad parts, or glossing over the ugly parts of these remarkable people's lives. Woven into the biographies is information about the politics, social landscapes, controversies, and conflicts of the time period, creating a richer context that enables the reader to better understand these historical figures. Each biography is an informative, emotional, and uplifting history lesson crafted by a truly talented researcher and author.

Fleming's biographies are multiple award winners that repeatedly appear on "best of" lists for national publications, organizations, and libraries. *Amelia Lost* won The Golden Kite Award for Nonfiction in 2012, and *The Great and Only Barnum* was one of the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults in 2010 and a finalist for The Excellence in Young Adult Nonfiction Award. Her new biography, *The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia*, will be released in fall 2014. She joins us from Chicago, Illinois. Candace Fleming, welcome to the BiblioFiles.

CANDACE FLEMING: Thanks, I'm happy to be here.

DR. DANA: Take us through a typical research experience for one of your biographies, perhaps using the P.T. Barnum biography as an example if that helps narrow it a little.

CANDACE FLEMING: Yeah, I would say they're never typical. Every one, every hunt-- I always think of it as a search, and I love the research-- every one is a bit different. And they're all so personal. And what I mean by that is that they really do-- research really does stem from the researcher. So while I will begin research with asking what I always call those essential questions, those things that we all have to know about a particular person's life-- when were they born, when did they die, where did they go to school, what were their major accomplishments-- you cover that ground.

But for me, biography is always about the smaller things, those other questions, what I refer to as my own curiosity questions. What do I really want to know about PT Barnum? What am I burning to know about him? So I ask things like what was their favorite color, what was their favorite food, what did they carry in their pockets, when was their first kiss, what was their childhood like, did they have pets as children, did they have pets as adults, who are their best friends. I know these sound like the simple questions, but in many ways I'm-- well, in many ways, in all ways-- I'm writing for a younger audience.

And so what I'm trying to find are those experiences that they can already connect to. So I'll start there, and depending on what I find, I will ask more and more questions. And so it grows like a spider web, over time, slowly. And I'm always open because I never know what it is that I might uncover or discover. And I'm always surprised by what I do find. I always think research is going to take me one direction, and invariably it takes me another direction.

With PT Barnum, my favorite question-- at least the answers that I got were my favorite answers-- was the question I asked, who were his friends. Who did he hang out with as a child, but even as an adult. And what I discovered was that PT Barnum truly had some unusual friends. One of his friends was Madame Josephine Clofullia, who was indeed a real life, true bearded lady. And they went to each other's homes, and she loaned him money when he needed it, and he considered her one of the most educated, most eloquent, most mannerly, and genteel women he'd ever met, and had no problem stepping out with her, stepping about with her. I'm sure he probably looked at it as a little promotion for the museum. But you get a new perspective on who people are from looking at them from different angles.

DR. DANA: So primary sources, did you go travel?

CANDACE FLEMING: Primary sources, always primary sources, or at least, as much as you possibly can. And most of the good stuff-- honestly, those little things, those curiosity questions, all of those-- are answered almost consistently with primary research. So I do go to-- many have some stuff online, sure-- but I really, really prefer going to the actual places. So I'll go to those archives, those libraries, those museums. I'll travel to where those people lived, where they worked, where they died. It's important to me. I get a real sense of who they are.

If you walk through, like the Lincolns, the national site there in Springfield where the Lincoln home is, the whole block is from the late 1850s. It's been renovated. And you get a real sense of it, especially if you go early in the morning when there aren't any tourists, or later in the evening when there are very few people there. And you get a real sense for the time. And it sounds strange, but in many ways, I feel like they seep into my skin a little bit, like I can actually feel them. And that's important for me if I'm going to write about them.

DR. DANA: Did you do any circus tricks?

CANDACE FLEMING: Oh, with Barnum I did. I learned to play the steam calliope. And I walked a tightrope, although it was only a few feet off the ground. And I also rode an elephant.

DR. DANA: Oh, fun.

CANDACE FLEMING: And all were great experiences. Interestingly, I'm working on a little piece right now about Jumbo, the elephant-- an expanded piece for a compilation of stories for Guys Read, actually, from Jon Scieszka-- and this is Guys Read True Stuff. And that elephant ride has really, really helped me. I can see what an elephant looks like from the back when they flap their ears and raise their trunk. And I can actually use that experience, even though I'm writing nonfiction.

DR. DANA: I like the unusual and unexpected information you include in your work. My personal favorite was the only prayer Benjamin Franklin ever composed. Will you read it to us?

CANDACE FLEMING:

"From a cross neighbor, and a sullen wife,
A pointless needle, and a broken knife;
From suretyship, and from an empty purse,
A smoky chimney, and a jolting horse;
From a dull razor, and an aching head,
From a bad conscience, and a buggy bed;
A blow upon the elbow, and the knee,
From each of these, Good Lord,
Deliver me."

DR. DANA: Why did you include this poem?

CANDACE FLEMING: Because I thought it gave us a different view of Benjamin Franklin. I would say, in all of my biographies, my goal is to take these characters that we think we know from history, that we think we know so well that they've become in many ways American legends, and to bring them back to life, to remind readers that they really were human beings. And we tend to see them, especially young readers tend to see them, as worn, and tired, and stuffy old characters. Oh, Ben Franklin again, right?

And we'll cover that same old ground-- Flying a kite, working on the Declaration, going off to France, those stories that you hear again and again, Benjamin Franklin inventing things, bifocals and the harmonica-- those are the stories that we hear again and again. And I think that there's so much more to Benjamin Franklin. And I think the prayer truly indicated, or at least it reflected, a lot about who he was as a man that I didn't have to tell you-- that he was a little vulgar, and a little irreverent, and very funny. Instead let me just show you this one prayer that he attempted to write.

DR. DANA: Sometimes famous historical figures appear to lead charmed lives, but often their achievements are the result of a lot of hard work, sacrifices, and drudgery. I really like how you address this in the Amelia Earhart biography. Could you read the passage that describes what she had to do to keep flying her plane?

CANDACE FLEMING: I can.

DR. DANA: Before you start, I'll mention that George, the man referred to in this passage, was her manager and husband, George Putnam.

CANDACE FLEMING: "Between 1928 and 1937, Amelia was constantly in the limelight. This was essential, since flying was very expensive. In order to fly, she needed to raise money; in order to raise money, she needed to maintain her celebrity.

Amelia put it this way: 'I make a record [flight] and then I lecture on it. That's where the money comes from. Until it's time to make another record.'

George put it another way: 'It is sheer, thumping hard work to be a hero.'

And so Amelia endorsed products such as Kodak film, Stanavo engine oil, Franklin and Hudson automobiles and Lucky Strike cigarettes (even though she didn't smoke).

She had her photograph taken doing exciting things like parachuting, deep-sea diving, and dining with movie stars.

She even went into business for herself, establishing the Amelia Earhart Clothing Company in 1933. Amelia herself designed the clothes, which sold exclusively in Amelia Earhart Shops in such upscale department stores as Macy's and Marshall Field's. 'I have tried to put the freedom that is in flying into my clothes,' she said in an interview. 'Good lines and good materials for women who lead active lives.' Sadly, the fashion industry was too competitive, and Amelia's business lasted only a year.

The best way to maintain celebrity and make money was by lecturing. Back in the days before television, the lecture circuit-- even more so than radio and newsreels-- was the most important way for a popular figure to reach the public. Here was a chance for people in Terre Haute, Indiana and Tacoma, Washington, to actually see and hear their heroes. For one night at least, they could personally connect with the most famous and influential people of their time.

Amelia became a popular speaker on the lecture circuit. In 1933 alone, she delivered thirty-three talks in twenty-five days. In 1934, she appeared on stage 135 times, before audiences estimated at a total of eighty thousand. Between September 30 and November 3, 1935, she crisscrossed her way from Youngstown, Ohio, to Michigan, on to Minnesota, through Nebraska, into Iowa, to Chicago, then down to central Illinois, into Indiana, back up to Michigan, back to Chicago, off to Missouri and Kansas, and back to Indiana, finally finishing in Wilmette, Illinois. 'Life on the lecture tour is a real grind of one-night stands and one hotel after another,' Amelia wrote to her mother. Still, she was earning between \$250 and \$300 for each lecture (about \$3,500 nowadays), a tidy sum back then. Lecturing quickly became her major source of income. 'The Earhart name had become a moneymaker,' said one friend."

DR. DANA: This lifts the curtain, a bit, on Amelia's glamorous and daring image. Did you actively seek to find information like this, or was this something you unexpectedly discovered and felt compelled to include.

CANDACE FLEMING: I kept running into it. It wasn't side of Amelia Earhart that I had expected to uncover, which is one of those beautiful things about research. It takes you to those places you never think you're going to go. Amelia Earhart was really the most astonishing bunch of research that I had done because she took me all kinds of places I didn't expect to go. I had heard so many times, from so many people, that old-- it's really become sort of a myth-- that George Putnam, her husband, had forced her to do things. And it didn't take long for me to realize that Amelia Earhart was not a woman who anyone forced to make her do anything they she didn't want to do.

But as I kept doing research, I kept discovering just how really out there she really was. How she really was a self-promoter because she needed to fly. She needed that money. So I think we do that, with those legends, those people that we've sort of mythologized in American history. We take out all the flaws or anything that might not be as shiny as that heroine image. And I think it's a shame because I think what happens is, we lose the humanity of that person.

DR. DANA: We've been talking about your writing, but the books are highly visual, too. Is it difficult to research and select images for your book?

CANDACE FLEMING: Oh, it's a terrible thing. I collect a lot of them. As you're doing the research, you find things. I also get ideas once in a while and think, Oh I'd love to have a photograph of that, and will convince someone to scan a document so I can include it, or take a photograph of an artifact so that I can include it. But I do cull through probably thousands, thousands of images to settle on those ones that I think are most illustrative of each person's life and the times that they lived.

DR. DANA: My favorite photo is Eleanor Roosevelt rubbing noses with a--

CANDACE FLEMING: Oh, isn't that the loveliest photograph?

DR. DANA: Is it a tribeswoman in New Zealand?

CANDACE FLEMING: It is a tribeswoman in New Zealand.

DR. DANA: Just fantastic.

CANDACE FLEMING: A beautiful photograph. My favorite photograph is, believe it or not, Eleanor Roosevelt shooting a gun. Because it's just ironic. Because she was such a pacifist, and hated war, and really detested guns. But there she is with that gun, firing at the FBI range, simply because that was the alternative to being followed around by Secret Service. She promised to learn to shoot a gun, which she didn't really, but she promised. She tried.

DR. DANA: And apparently was a very bad shot.

CANDACE FLEMING: Very bad shot. Yep. She gave it up and kept her gun in her underwear drawer, which I love, too. It's those things that I just love when you do the research. That's the stuff that I'm always looking for, because I really think that's what brings them back to life. It's

those little things. History really is found in little moments, at least, I think. So really it's found in little every day moments-- dinner table conversations, and family recipes, and anecdotes like keeping your gun in your underwear drawer. That's really where history is found.

DR. DANA: No one's life is perfect, and in some cases there is a fair amount of pain and tragedy. Despite the fact that these biographies are written for children, you don't shy away from delving into difficult, embarrassing, or tragic subjects. I'm wondering if you could read a passage from the Lincoln biography that demonstrates this. And just to give a little background, Willie, the subject of this passage, is Abraham and Mary's third son.

CANDACE FLEMING: "Willie's health did not improve. Day after day, he grew 'weaker and more shadow-like' as his body was ravaged by high fever, vomiting, exhaustion, and delirium. It is believed he had caught typhoid fever due to the unsanitary conditions in Washington, D.C. A week later, Tad fell sick, too.

After sitting up with his ailing children night after night, Abraham could hardly keep up with his work. He stumbled through his days sick with worry. Mary refused to leave her sons' sides. For hours at a time, she bathed their hot faces with cool water, spooned broth between their chapped lips, and sang them lullabies. 'All that human skill could do was done for our sainted boys,' she later wrote.

On February 20, eleven-year-old Willie Lincoln died. Overwhelmed with sorrow, Abraham appeared in his office, where John Nicolay was lying on the couch. 'Well, Nicolay,' he said, 'my boy is gone-- he is actually gone!' Then he burst into tears.

Meanwhile, Mary was wild with grief. As Elizabeth Keckly recalled, 'The pale face of her dead boy threw her into convulsions.' She screamed. She wailed. She sobbed hysterically. 'Please Ma,' Tad cried weakly from his sick bed, 'don't cry so, please!' But Mary couldn't control herself. She took to her bed, where, between these spasms, she lay stunned.

Four days later, Willie earned the sad honor of being the only child ever to have a funeral at the White House. Mourners-- many of them the same people who had been present just two weeks earlier at Mary's grand ball-- packed the East Room. Dr. Phineas Gurley read from the Scriptures. A prayer was said and a hymn was sung. Then the funeral procession wound its way to the Georgetown Cemetery with Abraham and Robert sharing the first carriage. Absent were Tad, who was slowly beginning to recover, and Mary, who was too grief-stricken to attend. 'He was too good for this earth,' said Lincoln as the little casket was placed in the tomb. 'I know he is much better off in heaven, but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die.'"

DR. DANA: What's your philosophy on tackling subjects like this?

CANDACE FLEMING: I think it's important. No life is without sorrow, without grief. And kids know that. Young readers know that. I think it's important to show the obstacles, the tragedies, the flaws of the people that I'm writing about so that kids know that life does go on, that people overcome terrible blows in their lives, that they overcome their own prejudices, that they overcome their own flaws to become better people.

I think oftentimes-- especially when I was a kid, you would get a biography of someone and you would read how heroic they were, and you would think to themselves, oh, they must have been born that way. That's why they could do such great things. And kids know that they have flaws and that they have strengths and weaknesses. I would think to myself, oh, I'm just a flawed person. I can't possibly do anything great. And so, when I show lives full of their warts, and their bumps, and their difficulties, I hope that kids understand that these are people that overcame all of that, that they weren't born special and different. They were born just like you and I, and they still managed to do incredible things.

DR. DANA: Your new biography, *The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia*, will be released in fall 2014. Please tell us about it.

CANDACE FLEMING: This book, it's not American history, so for me it's different. And I have the sense that it's characters that not a lot of people know much about, or they think they do. And I really began this project because every time I went to middle school-- and I went to a lot of them, especially with the Lincolns and Amelia, I visited a lot of middle-schoolers-- and invariably-- and it was so strange, and maybe serendipitous-- that I would invariably have a girl-- 8th grade girl, 7th grade girl-- afterwards would come up to me and say, do you know anything about Anastasia Romanov.

And I do, because, like Benjamin Franklin, theirs has always been a story that's intrigued me. And you know I've read a lot of things that have come out about them, and watched a lot of documentaries, and it's been awhile since I've delved into it. But I thought I knew some things. And I think they asked because so many of them had seen-- there was a Disney cartoon about Anastasia, which I haven't seen. But from what I understand, it doesn't come close to the truth.

And I really believe kids like truth. I think they really seek truth. And I really believe that they understood, after watching that movie-- it intrigued them enough-- that they realized that there was more to that story. And they are curious.

So I began this project thinking I was going to write a fairly quick, fairly short story about a girl who lived a very short-- sadly, a very short life-- 16 years. But that, of course, didn't work out. Because as I delved into the research, I discovered there was so much more to the story-- that I needed to tell so much more about her parents; and that I needed to tell you so much more about Russia; and that I needed to tell you so much more about the revolution; and that I needed to tell you so much more about the Russian, the average Russian worker and peasant. And it's grown into a very large book.

DR. DANA: What would you say to someone who says reading a biography is boring?

CANDACE FLEMING: I might agree with them. I've read some really boring biographies that read a little bit like encyclopedia entries. My response, then, would be to give them a few. The stuff that's coming out now for kids, for young readers, nonfiction, has really become tremendous. Biographies are really, really spectacular now, require a high level of scholarship, and they're well written.

Their narrative, they read like they should, which are stories that just happen to be true. And the best ones are actually thought provoking, so they connect that life to events that are going on now. It's amazing how the themes go around in history, how we think we've settled some issue just to have it come back 50 years later, or 100 years later. So I would say, try again.

But I don't blame young readers because I think in many ways we've approached history, oh, it's so dull, it's dead, it's boring. We focus on events, and dates, and events, as opposed to the human element in history. And let's face it, history is about people. It's not about dates. But for very long, that's how we've taught it. And for very long, that's how we've written it, but not recently, not within probably the last 15 years. Russell Freedman destroyed that truly bad, just those truly bad biographies.

DR. DANA: Candace Fleming, thank you so much for coming on the BiblioFiles today.

CANDACE FLEMING: It was my pleasure. Thank you so much for asking me.

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