

CBC Interview of Tonya Bolden about *Pathfinders* (4.20.22)

1. What about the topic of this book most excited you as you were researching/writing it?

While I was researching/writing *Pathfinders* what most excited me was the chance to introduce young people to some not-so-well-known black people who accomplished things most people—including adults—don't think of black people doing in the past. (When I was working on my profile of NASA mathematician Katherine Johnson she wasn't the household name that she is today.)

I imagine a lot of young people might think black filmmaking began with Spike Lee, but in *Pathfinders* readers meet Oscar Micheaux (1884-1951), a native of Metropolis, Illinois, who made his first film, *The Homesteader*, in 1919 and continued making films for years. (His 1931 film *The Exile*, the story of a homesteader in South Dakota, was the first full-length talkie by a black filmmaker.)

2. What is one thing you learned in the process of writing this book that you did not know before?

When I decided to include concert singer Sissieretta Jones (1868–1933) I knew that she had performed at the White House (for President Benjamin Harrison). I also knew that she had performed before European royalty (Germany's Emperor Wilhelm II, for example). But I didn't know that there was a time when she did *very* well financially. At one point she grossed about \$8000 a year. As I say in the book, this was at time when many Americans earned about \$400 a year. (Sadly, she had a reversal of fortune. When she died she was far from wealthy.)

3. Discuss the format of your book and why you felt that was the best way to share your topic or story.

Each profile begins with a full-page image of the subject or of an item related to him or her. After the opening image, comes the narrative—a tight focus on the person’s life and achievement. Around the narrative there are other relevant images as well as sidebars that provide context. Take Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander (1898-1989), the first black American to earn a doctorate in economics (in 1921 from the University of Pennsylvania) and the first black woman to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania Law School (1927). Her entry includes a sidebar that lets readers know that fewer than a thousand Americans earned a doctorate the year she earned her PhD. Also, that two other black women earned doctorates that year: Georgiana Rose Simpson (in German philology from the University of Chicago) and Eva Beatrice Dykes (in English philology from Radcliffe College).

Having visuals and bits of information sprinkled around the narrative makes the book lively and makes the reading and absorbing of information fun.

4. What is one thing you hope young readers take away from this book after reading it?

I hope that after reading *Pathfinders* readers will be filled to the brim and overflowing with the idea that SO MUCH IS POSSIBLE! I hope that readers will be inspired to model the grit, guts, and goal-setting shown by James McCune Smith (1813-1865), for example. Here was someone born into slavery in New York City and who as a teen dreamed of being a

physician. As a young man he didn't give up on his dream when American medical schools denied him admission because of his race. Oh, no. James McCune Smith went across the Atlantic Ocean, to the University of Glasgow in Scotland. There, he earned a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and, in 1837, a medical degree! Or take Maggie Lena Walker (1864-1934) born to a poor single mother. She grew up to found a bank in Richmond, Virginia, in the early 1900s.

As I say at the readers in the preface, I hope that the lives of the women and men in the book inspire them “to dream, reach, soar—become a Pathfinder yourself!”

5. Talk about your research process in creating this book.

With all my books my research process is rather messy, chaotic. I don't do all the research and then write. I do enough research to get me started—find the moment where I want to begin the story. For example, with the magician and ventriloquist Richard Potter (1783-1835) once I came upon some of his magic tricks, I knew I wanted to start with a sampling of his abracadabra (frying pancakes in a top hat, for example) and then back into his youth and bring his story forward.

My research includes reading biographies and reference books along with magazine and newspaper articles. For Oscar Micheaux, I watched some of his films. Beholding visuals of the subject and images of related people, places, and things (not all of which ended up in the book) was another part of the research. Gazing at images helps me to put myself in a subject's shoes, to time travel so to speak.

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