

CANDACE FLEMING ON THE WRITING OF *THE ENIGMA GIRLS*: HOW TEN TEENAGERS BROKE CIPHERS, KEPT SECRETS, AND HELPED WIN WORLD WAR II



Terrell Young & Barbara Ward

AUTHOR CANDACE FLEMING had no intention of writing a book when she first visited Bletchley Park in England. That is until she was at the end of the Bletchley Park experience. “You come back into the main museum part of the visitor center, and on the wall is this huge graphic about how many dinners were served per day, how the population changed from 1939 to 1945, how it grew. Then they broke down how many men versus women were there.” She stopped in her tracks and thought, “Wow! Fully 90% of the people working at Bletchley Park were women. But I have to say, I just walked through an entire park and went through various buildings, and there was little mention of women even though women were the backbone of Bletchley.”

As she continued to read the posted information, Fleming realized that most women were between the ages of 14 and 19 when they first arrived to work as Bombe operators, messengers, interceptors, message encryptors, cryptographers, translators, and indexers. “They were coming in as teenagers,” she realized. She thought about her nieces and other teenagers she knew. “This was something I needed to think about. I know when I must write a book when I stand there and a great pressing question for me—*Huh? Really?*—bothers me. I

discovered several women whose stories had not been told. It was a story I wanted to explore,” she says.

After reading hundreds of these young women’s stories, Fleming struggled to decide whose stories to tell and whose to leave out. Her decision was based on the following criteria: “I

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wanted to include women from different socioeconomic backgrounds. I also wanted women who came at different times of Bletchley’s development, and I wanted one young woman to represent each job done at Bletchley Park.” Because these women no longer live, Fleming used their memoirs or depositions given to individuals collecting Bletchley Park histories decades after the war. She needed enough information to tell a full story for each young woman she chose out of the many possibilities.

Writing about the teenagers who were involved in breaking the German, Italian and Japanese radio codes instead of writing about the more famous Alan Turing, Alfred “Dilly” Knox, or Tommy Flowers was an easy decision for Fleming. “I thought my readers would be interested in teenagers’ work during the war,” she explains. “Teenagers know they can do amazing things. Here’s the story that showed these teens, all of them, ripped from their ordinary, everyday lives, and they’re thrust

into a situation unlike anything they had experienced before.” One major challenge for the girls was being pressed to silence through the Official Secrets Act. “You think about the fact that they were not allowed to tell their parents where they were going,” Fleming says with a note of incredulity in her voice, “Their parents cannot call, and their parents cannot even write to them at their real address. Parents have to write to them at a Post Office Box, and the girls have to write with that same return address.” Fleming says she thought tween and teen readers would connect with the story, drawn in by the fact that “there were teenagers from the past, real life, living and breathing teens, who made a huge difference—an estimated reduction in the length of the war by at least two years and saving thousands of lives.

Even though WWII ended in 1945, Fleming considers the book relevant to 21st-century readers. “Young people really can change the world. They are the future of the world. Young people should never be underestimated. People make changes, make differences, and make sacrifices. They’ve done it, and they continue to do it. Just because they’re not lauded for it doesn’t mean it’s not being done every day. What I like about the *Enigma Girls*, perhaps the most, is that it is a feel-good story. You get to the end, and say, ‘Yes, people can make a difference. Yes, people are extraordinary. Yes, people rise to challenges, and they work hard, and do things that they don’t maybe even want to.’ For instance, Diana Payne [one of the *Enigma girls*] “detested her job. She found it hard and horrible,” Fleming explains. “And she went for three years every single day, and she did it well because she knew it was important, even if no one told her it was important.” It’s important, according to Fleming, for her readers to ask themselves if they would make such a sacrifice if our country faced something similar to what Britain faced in 1939.

Bringing history to life

Fleming identifies herself as a storyteller who wants to bring history to life for her teen and tween readers. Her goal is for those readers to have the same experience they would have while reading a novel. She looks for true stories that she can tell with “a dramatic arc and some emotional heat,” she explains. Two tools that she uses in her writing are dialog and sensory details. “The dialog comes from quotes from serious source material, so I can tell readers where that dialog came from,” according to Fleming. “I use sensory details that also have to come from sources. I create scenes but never compress

time because that would put things out of order. Then it would become fiction because I’ve made things up.”

Fleming is always aware that how she writes about historical events and figures is extremely important. “I write the truth fully with my readers in mind. I know I have to provide context, and I know that I have to provide sensitivity. Likewise, some details are inappropriate depending on the age group I’m writing for. I look for alternative details that are just as honest and truthful but may not be as shocking. All I can do is write the best, most honest, and truthful nonfiction I can,” she says. She cares a great deal about what her readers discover about history and themselves in the pages of her books. “It is my job to take the facts and provide meaning and connection. Meaning and connection, not just so that they can understand a story that happened in the past, but that that story can illuminate how they’re living in the present.”

Committed to showcasing the multiple sides or perspectives in history, Fleming worries that all “too often, history is written as a moral lesson.” She recognizes that historical events can be uplifting and inspiring. “I also think my job is not to shrug off history’s ugly parts. As Americans, we need to stop doing this. History is our gift, but it’s also our burden.” In the case of the *Enigma Girls*, it’s important to look at World War II from both sides, she says. “Yes, the Americans came in and did amazing things, and the Brits managed to hang on. But people did die. Lots of people did die. Like Patricia recognizes when she says to herself that probably that German on the other end of that enigma machine is likely a kid that got pulled into this just like me. It’s really easy to look at things as black and white, but it’s the gray areas that I like to explore with readers.”

The challenges of nonfiction writing

Writing nonfiction *is* a literary process. “People often think nonfiction is easier to write because you already know the story. I contend it’s harder because you have a story you want to tell, but you still have to stay within a fence,” she says. “It is just as much of an imaginary process as writing fiction. It’s just that I can’t make anything up, but I still have to imagine it in the same way that I would a fiction story, and I still have to imagine people back to life. So it is an imaginative process.”

Her job in writing history is not to tell readers how or what to think. “I will introduce them to the topics, and give them the information,” she says. “But I also don’t tell readers how to think; that is not my job. We can trust readers. I don’t

have to connect the dots. We can trust readers to come up with the right ideas, to wrestle with the morality of it, to wrestle with whatever aspects of the story they have to wrestle with. And I think we can trust them to come up with the right answers.” She says, “I always love that Edward Gore quote, ‘If a book is only about what it seems to be about, then the author has somehow failed.’” She wants her nonfiction to be about more than a particular piece of history. Although some worry about exposing young readers too much, Fleming reminds us that they already have the facts available on their phones “but those facts have no context, connection, and meaning” unlike good long-form nonfiction.

The Enigma Girls includes vivid descriptions that make readers feel as though they are working and living in Bletchley Park. Fleming always considers the experiences her readers have while reading her books. “When we read a fictional novel, we fill in the gaps with our imagination. That’s exactly what I want readers to do when they pick up one of my long-form nonfiction books. I want them to feel that very same fictional novel experience. That’s become my goal over the last ten years.”

Fleming has four paths in her research. “My first path is travel. The second is primary sources where I constantly look for details that bring the story to life. The third is secondary sources to help me understand battles, strategy, in this case, concerning how the enigma works. My fourth path is experts.” Fleming counts herself fortunate to live close enough to have access to the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry, which has a captured enigma machine.” As part of her research, she says, “A curator let me play with it. The Cryptology Club at the University of Illinois was also a great help.”

She needed to visit Bletchley Park a second time, the first time as a tourist and the second time as a researcher. For Fleming, “landscapes speak, and buildings hold memories. They will speak to you if you listen. I hadn’t listened the first time, but I listened the second time.” Several sensory details in *The Enigma Girls* came from her perceptions of how those places

smell, taste, and feel. “I looked way closer and noticed things I hadn’t noticed before: How many steps is it from the grand house to the cottages in the back, which is where Mavis was? How close were Hut 3 and Hut 6 together? I could stand and put out my arms to touch both of them. How did it sound when I walked down that wooden corridor? I took pictures of the weirdest stuff. But I was looking at where trees were, where plants were. What was it like to walk along that lake? How cold

was the water?” Taking the same route to London when the girls took breaks from their work at Bletchley allowed her to travel through the same station they had.

Writing *The Enigma Girls* had one particular challenge for Fleming, who claims to be “the worst mathematician you ever met.” She recognized that she had to deal with science and math while telling the girls’ story. “I realized that I would need to explain to readers what a code is and how it works, what a cipher is and how it works, something as basic as that before readers could understand what was happening at Bletchley Park. It put the brakes on the project for several months because I tried to write that into the text,” she says. Eventually, she decided to remove those portions from the narrative, placing them in brief expository explanations or bridges—“just enough to get to the next scene.”

Fleming reports she learned many things that surprised her about the people who worked at Bletchley Park. What surprised her the most was how the teenagers followed the rules. Likely, the hardest

rule was that they could never talk about the work they did. “They were teenage girls,” she says. “Yet they couldn’t talk about it with their parents, their friends back home, their roommates, or even the girl who might be working with them on the same task.” They intended to keep those rules for the rest of their lives. As a telling example, she notes that “Gwen, who met her poet husband at Bletchley, was married forever, yet they never talked about what they did at Bletchley Park afterward when they were married. Now, that is truly following the rules!”

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Still, finally, in the late 70s and early 80s after the first accounts came out about what actually happened at Bletchley Park, the girls were astonished to learn they no longer had to keep those secrets. “Mavis Lever’s response was, ‘Wait, I can talk about it now?’ Then she laughed and said, ‘I can finally explain to my grandchildren why I am so good at anagrams and crossword puzzles,’” Fleming says. She was amazed that the teenagers were told to say they were file clerks or secretaries, and that’s exactly what they did. “They never told! I can hardly wrap my mind around that.”

Attitudes about nonfiction and history

So many teens and adults claim never to read nonfiction or find history boring. But Fleming conjectures that the problem lies in what they’re reading. “If they are not reading recently published nonfiction, I think that might be the problem,” she says. “They think they don’t like it when they haven’t given it much of a chance.” Often, she says that her readers tell her that they didn’t think they liked history or nonfiction, but they loved one of her books, making her wish that they would read more long-form nonfiction.

She notes that awards sometimes draw teachers and students to books. “I think it doesn’t help that we don’t get a lot of love at awards time.” Even though there are nonfiction awards, “you do not often see the Newbery Medal recognizing straight-up nonfiction. Long-form nonfiction has been shuttled to the side in terms of awards. Yes, we have the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults. But even the Robert F. Sibert Medal, often recognizes picture books.” She was excited that Nicholas Day and Brett Helquist won last year for *The Mona Lisa Vanishes: A Legendary Painter, a Shocking Heist, and the Birth of a Global Celebrity* (Random House Studio, 2023). But that was a rarity. “For the most part, long-form nonfiction is not getting as much love as it could.”

A preference for long-form narration

Here’s how she responded when asked why her picturebooks typically feature science topics: “I’m going to let you in on this secret,” she says. “I’m not a real fan of picturebook biographies, and I’m not a real fan of picturebook history. I’ve written it, but I do not like it because I think it’s limiting. I never get to tell the whole truth, and it always drives me crazy that there’s more there that I could share. But I’ve had to stick to 32 pages. So occasionally I write it, but I don’t love it.”

Fleming’s fascination with science comes through in her

many picturebooks featuring animals. “What I love about writing animals is what [librarian] Betsy Bird referred to the other day as my ‘animal oeuvre.’ I love that! Here’s the deal. They’re like characters so I can write a biography of narwhals. They are like people so I can follow them. They’re active, they’re characters. They work naturally for me.”

The prolific writer admits that balancing her research, writing, editing, and revision is a challenge. Typically, she writes one book at a time, but sometimes she must temporarily move from one project back to another. “Here’s what I’m doing right now,” she explains. “I have a second pass on my desk for a book called *Death in the Jungle: Murder, Betrayal, and the Lost Dream of Jonestown* that I’ll work on for the next two days,” about the teenagers involved in the People’s Temple. “Some ended up in Jonestown, some did not, some died, some did not.” She noted that she had the opportunity to interview “these amazing people who shared their stories simply because they had something they wanted to say to teenagers.” At the same time, she is working on a book about Bigfoot, part of a Scholastic series called *Is It Real?* Her first title in the series, *Is It Real? The Loch Ness Monster* will be available in March 2025. After researching Bigfoot, she is currently writing that book. At the same time, she is also preparing to write a book about rhino poaching and will travel to South Africa for an entire month. “While there, I will take a forensic wildlife class for a week,” she says. “Then, I’m walking with the anti-poaching canine unit, and I will help release a baby rhino who ended up in a rhino orphanage after a poacher killed his mother.” She will continue that research upon returning from South Africa. “Yes, it’s a lot of different stuff. But once I get down into the nitty-gritty of writing the book, that’s it. I finish the book before I do anything else.”

Clearly, not only is Candace Fleming quite versatile and prolific, but even when she’s on vacation, her fertile brain always seems to be seeking a possible story—much like when she and Eric Rohmann [her husband, who is an author/illustrator] first visited Bletchley Park with friends from Ireland.

Awards for Her Nonfiction Books

Her work frequently receives starred reviews and is named to lists of notables and best books of the year. Moreover, Candace Fleming has received numerous awards for her nonfiction books. Here are a few of the awards she received: For *The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary* (Schwartz & Wade, 2008), she won the Boston-Globe Horn Book Award for Nonfiction and NCTE Orbis Pictus for

Outstanding Nonfiction for Children Honor Award. Fleming was named a YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction Finalist for *The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P. T. Barnum* illustrated by Ray Fenwick (Schwartz & Wade, 2009). Awards for *Amelia Lost: The Life and Disappearance of Amelia Earhart* (Schwartz & Wade, 2011) included the Cybils Award for Middle Grade & Young Adult Nonfiction, Golden Kite Award for Nonfiction, and NCTE Orbis Pictus Honor Award. Her *The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion, and the Fall of Imperial Russia* (Schwartz & Wade, 2014) won the Boston Globe-Hornbook Award for Nonfiction, Cybils Award for Young Adult Nonfiction, Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Young Adults, Golden Kite Award for Nonfiction, and the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award. It was also a Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal Honor Book, and a YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction Finalist. *Giant Squid*, illustrated by her husband Eric Rohmann (Roaring Brook Press, 2016) earned her the Cybils Award for Elementary Nonfiction, and was named an Honor Book for the Charlotte Zolotow Award, NCTE Orbis Pictus, and the Sibert Medal. For *Honeybee: The Busy Life of Apis Mellifera*, illustrated by Eric Rohmann (Neal Porter Books, 2020), she was awarded the Sibert Medal, was a finalist for the Cybils Award for Elementary Nonfiction, and was an Honor Book for both the Cook Prize and the NCTE Orbis Pictus Award. She won the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for *The Rise and Fall of Charles Lindbergh* (Schwartz & Wade, 2020). •

This interview was conducted by Zoom on Sept. 18, 2024, from Provo, Utah, and Moscow, Idaho, and Candace Fleming's home in Chicago, Illinois.

Terrell A. Young is Professor Emeritus of Children's Literature, and a former president of the ILA Children's Literature and Reading Special Interest Group.

Barbara A. Ward taught in the public schools of New Orleans, Louisiana for 25 years, and loves long-form nonfiction.

A SAMPLER OF CANDACE FLEMING'S RECENT NONFICTION

Crash from Outer Space: Unraveling the Mystery of Flying Saucers, Alien Beings, and Roswell (Scholastic 2022).

Cubs in the Tub: The True Story of the Bronx Zoo's First Woman Zookeeper, illustrated by Julie Downing (Neal Porter Books, 2020).

The Curse of the Mummy: Uncovering Tutankhamun's Tomb (Scholastic, 2021).

The Enigma Girls: How Ten Teenagers Broke Ciphers, Kept Secrets, and Helped Win World War II (Scholastic, 2024).

Murder Among Friends: How Leopold and Loeb Tried to Commit the Perfect Crime (Anne Schwartz Books, 2022).

Narwahl: Unicorn of the Arctic, illustrated by Deena So'Oteh (Anne Schwartz Books, 2024).

Polar Bear, illustrated by Eric Rohmann (Neal Porter Books, 2022).

Tide Pool Waits, illustrated by Amy Hevron (Neal Porter Books, 2022).

What Isabella Wanted: Isabella Stewart Builds a Museum, illustrated by Matthew Cordell (Neal Porter Books, 2021).