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GUEST PROFILE

An Interview with Candace Fleming

by Amy Halloran

If you are not a fan of children's literature, your first encounter with children's author Candace Fleming's work might have been in a cereal box. Small paperback copies of *Muncha, Muncha, Muncha* were included in certain breakfast cereals a few years ago, introducing readers and eaters to Fleming's musical sense of language and her great sense of humor. But Fleming's work has been impressing the worlds of kids, librarians and parents for over a decade. Her breakout picture book was also her first: *Madame LaGrande and Her So High, to the Sky, Uproarious Pompadour*, the fictional story of a French woman whose desire for novelty and fashion raises her hair to dangerous heights. A master's degree in history fuels much of her writing, which is studded with small moments in time brought to large life. Fleming's latest chapter book, *The Fabled Fourth Graders of Aesop Elementary School*, came out in August of this year, and also has a strong thread of hilarity stitching up the storyline. Candace Fleming teaches writing on occasion in various settings and lives in the Chicago area.



MWLM: Please tell us all the writing and writing-related work, including teaching, that you do or have done. And how did, and does, this work fit into your family life?

CF: "I've published 19 books to date – picture books, chapter books, young adult nonfiction – and I have six more books scheduled for publication in the next five years. Besides writing, I visit about 30 schools a year, and I speak at dozens of conferences. I confess I do much more traveling than I used to. Early on in my career, my sons were little. Leaving them was difficult, so I stayed home. I don't think this was a bad thing. I got lots of writing done. After all, when your kids are little, your writing time is very limited. I learned to write in 20-minute increments at the kitchen table. I did this for years. Curiously, I still like to work at that table, but my writing time is longer now."

MWLM: I read that you were the one who begged for "just one more" story every night at bedtime with your kids. Could you describe more how you came to write for children?

CF: "I've always loved children's books. In college, I took a children's literature class and rediscovered all those childhood favorites – *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, *Caps for Sale*. That's when I decided I wanted to write for kids. But it took another 10 years to fulfill that dream. Honestly, I wasn't a very good writer, and I didn't understand picture books on their deeper level. It took years of reading, especially to my own children, before I discovered the bones and music of picture books. Once I understood that, I was off and reading. Hmm...you know, you could credit my sons with my writing career. If I hadn't been reading to them, I probably would never have become a writer."

MWLM: What human tools do you use in your writing process? Have you used critique groups? Do you have writing mentors?

CF: “Human tools? I have a few trusted writers that I share my work with. Of course, I never share a first draft, or a third draft, or even a 10th draft. I don’t share my work with them until the story is as polished as it can be.”

MWLM: Your career in children’s books really came alive while your kids were growing up – not that they are all done needing you now, but can you talk a little bit about the explosions in your writing and publishing life, and how you merged those passions? Do you have any advice for writer moms on how to nurture their writing and their kids?

CF: “Since my two greatest passions are my kids and my work, it was easy to blend the two. I read aloud to my kids – my books, as well as others. I asked for their opinions. I spoke about writing at their schools. I talked about writing with them at the dinner table. I taught them to use their eyes and ears the same way I do – always looking, always listening for something in the world that can be turned into a story. Often, they’d tell me about an unusual event that happened during their day. ‘Do you want to use it in one of your stories?’ they’d ask. Sometimes I did, and sometimes I didn’t. But writing, as you can tell, certainly brought us together. Not surprisingly, both my sons are terrific writers.”

MWLM: Does the energy you put into teaching feed your work?

CF: “Yes, I love teaching almost as much as I love writing. I want my students to love writing, too. I want them to feel as exhilarated about the process as I do. The more enthusiastic they are, the more enthusiastic I am. I always return from teaching feeling creatively charged. All that energy breeds, you know?”

MWLM: I’ve been a student of yours, and am impressed by your understanding of the picture book format and your ability to convey that understanding to others. For example, I love how you describe the page turn in a picture book as a punctuation mark of sorts. Was a teacher or text instrumental to your grasp of the picture book?

CF: “I really can’t think of any books that may have been models for my historical fiction. If I handle fiction and history fluidly, I think it must be because I have an affinity for American history. I think of it as one, long, never-ending story, an exciting tale of heroes and villains. I’m always curious about the human being behind historical events. It’s that curiosity that helps me create fiction characters that fit into the past.”

MWLM: I especially love the picture books of yours that have historical moments at the center, such as *Madame LaGrande and Her So High, To the Sky, Uproarious Pompadour; Gabriella’s Song* and *A Big Cheese for the White House*. These books do not feel formulaic, but I wonder if there were books that helped you find a method of handling history and fiction so fluidly. How do you develop a fictional character who fits into the past and allows you to create a snapshot of history?

CF: “I have dozens of projects that never see the light of day. When I visit schools, I always tell kids about my ‘dead story drawer.’ Located in the bottom drawer of my file cabinet, it’s loaded with bad stories, rejected stories, half-baked stories, stories that lead nowhere, stories I can’t quite figure out yet. Most of these are picture books, but there are a few novels in there as well. I’m guessing I start three or four books a year that never make it out of the dead story drawer. Luckily, I work on about 10 projects a year, so the odds are good I’ll sell something. And if I don’t? Well, all that writing is good practice, right?”

MWLM: You have 19 books published. How many projects have you pursued that haven’t made it to the bookstore? How many ideas do you work on at once? Where do your ideas come from? How do you catch them and wrestle them into books?

CF: “My ideas come from everywhere – the books I read, the television shows I watch, the conversations I overhear in the checkout line at the grocery store. My youngest son has accused me of being a spy and an eavesdropper because I’m always watching and listening for things to use in my books. I think being a good writer means, first and foremost, paying attention to the world. But then, to make the story better, you change it. You make things up. My ideas, like everyone else’s, come from two sources – inspiration and imagination.”

MWLM: Is it hard adjusting from shorter writing forms to longer pieces, such as *Ben Franklin’s Almanac: Being a True Account of the Good Gentleman’s Life*, and your new middle grade book, *The Fabled Fourth Graders of Aesop Elementary School*? Do you have any advice for writers trying to work in longer fiction or non-fiction?

CF: “My advice for writers trying to work in longer fiction and non-fiction is to chop the work into easily obtainable goals. When I teach new writers, they often worry about how long the piece has to be – 15 chapters, or 200 pages. I always tell them to keep their focus closer to home. Set a small, workable goal of say, two written pages a day. If you keep to that goal, you’ll have 200 pages in no time!”

MWLM: *Boxes for Katje* begins in a moment in time that you have an intimate link to your mother. Was it harder to write this book than others? Did your mother ask you to consider the subject, or was it a subject you came to on your own?

CF: “When I was growing up, my mother had five or six stories from her childhood that she told all the time. As a kid, I loved hearing all of them, but my favorite was the one about a box she sent to Holland after World War II. Again and again, I’d beg her to tell me this particular tale. But as often happens when we grow up, I forgot all about her box to Holland story. I forgot about them until she came for a visit and my son Michael said, ‘Grandma, tell me a story from your childhood.’ Guess what story she chose to tell? You’re right! The box to Holland story. It was hearing it with new ears – writer’s ears. I knew I had to share that story with young readers. But it wasn’t easy. Because it was a story from her life, I wanted to get it just right. I worried about the elements I fictionalized. Would my mother understand? I worried about its theme. Would my mother think I had trivialized the story’s importance? For more than a year, I dithered over that manuscript, not because it needed lots of work, but because I could practically feel my mother’s breath on my neck. Honestly, I may be 45 years old, but I’m still seeking my mother’s approval. Happily, it all worked out in the end, and my mother adores the book. Phew!”

MWLM: On the topic of mothers: I think all writer moms come to our work with agendas and defenses. There’s the practical and emotional caregiving we must do for our families, and then there might be paid labors to attend to, and then there is the practice of writing. How we tackle these challenges is influenced by the ways our mothers related to the world beyond their family. Did you feel like you had a good example from the way your mom led her life? Or do you feel like you’ve had to make your own way as you tend to all the fires you feed, and that feed you?

CF: “My mother was both a good and bad example. She didn’t work out of the home (it was the 60s, after all), and instead devoted all her energies to her family. She was sort of an uber-mom, a role model that has been impossible for me to emulate. (Heaven knows, I’ve tried!) On the other hand, I never learned from her how to tackle an outside job and keep the home fires burning at the same time. This is something I’ve had to figure out on my own. And I’m still struggling with it. Obviously, family comes first. But how much does a mother have to sacrifice? Is it selfish to ask your kids to go outside and play for an hour so you can finish revising a manuscript? Are you still a good mother if you choose to attend a writer’s conference rather than your son’s baseball game? Even though my sons are older now, I’m still wrestling with these issues, and all the guilt that tends to accompany those issues.”

MWLM: Describe your writing routine, and any writing rituals you are willing to share with the general public.

CF: “I am at my writing desk five hours a day, Monday through Friday. Lots of days, I don’t feel like doing this, but still I force myself into that chair. Sometimes I think I write out of sheer boredom. Oh, and I always play three hands of computer Solitaire before beginning, just to loosen up. I also eat lots of popcorn and sugar-free Twizzlers while writing. I’m a firm believer in good writing needing good snacks.”

Amy Halloran writes children's picture books and adult short stories that embrace the pedestrian and the fantastic. Her work has appeared in *Salon*, *McSweeney's*, *Pindeldyboz*, *Gargoyle*, *Tarpaulin Sky* and the *Mississippi Review*. A teacher as well as a writer, she is a student of her upstate New York city of Troy and its many phases of urban renewal. She likes improvisational storytelling and collaborations, especially those that result in community based writing projects.



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