



## **Nonfiction finalist remarks, Karen Blumenthal**

Thank you very much!

I can't tell you how deeply honored I am to see *Bootleg* recognized in this way and included in the company of these outstanding books. As you all know, young adult nonfiction is hard to find in bookstores and even harder to locate with an online subject search. I am incredibly grateful to Jennifer Hubert Swan and the YALSA Nonfiction Award committee for recognizing *Bootleg* and helping introduce it to a bigger audience, and also to all of you who share nonfiction with your students and readers. Quite simply, these books wouldn't exist without your support—so thank you very much!

This project was very much a labor of love, a pie-in-the-sky idea that there was a worthwhile story to tell young people about prohibition and drinking. The initial editors who saw the proposal weren't so sure. "It's a great book—for someone else," one said. Another thought the idea was just hilarious. Others just shook their heads.

Now, I know that that prohibition is a pretty controversial topic. How could you tell kids not to drink over and over from the time they are in

kindergarten and then let them know that once, America actually banned booze—and it didn't work out very well?

But really, it shouldn't be controversial. This is a subject with a long and fascinating history, and a persistent problem in our society that dates back almost to America's earliest years. It resulted in two changes to our Constitution, including the only amendment ever to be repealed.

We know that kids begin to confront decisions about drinking as early as junior high, and certainly in high school. It's also clear that all the preaching that young people hear isn't very effective. Many young adults drink—a lot. Among the first talks that kids get on college campuses today is how to recognize alcohol poisoning and get help for classmates who have had too much.

More sermonizing isn't the answer. But could *understanding* the history make a difference, especially for readers who soon will be making their own crucial drinking decisions? Wouldn't some perspective help? Isn't that one of the true powers of nonfiction, to deliver real stories and real consequences--bad and good--so that readers can make their own *informed* conclusions?

Beyond the drinking matter, the prohibition experiment resonates with many of the political issues we wrestle with today--not just the war on drugs and arguments over legalizing marijuana, but also school prayer and efforts here in Texas to control what science and history kids will learn in school.

I was struck by what I came to call the "bookends" of the story: How the work of Frances Willard and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union resembled that of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers a century later. Or how the social problem of drunkenness at the turn of the last century mirrors the social problem of homelessness today. Prohibitionists said they were protecting our children from the dangers of alcohol, and repeal advocates said they were protecting our children from the dangers of a lawless society. Then there were two people who chose violence to make their point: Carrie Nation used rocks and her hatchet to close down bars, and two decades later, a 20-something named Al Capone used a machine gun to keep them open.

As a writer of nonfiction for young people, I have a mantra for staying on track, and it's this: Nonfiction provides context for a complicated world. One of the real values in sharing these real stories, with all their contradictions and irony, with all their surprising twists and unexpected outcomes, is helping young people grasp that the real world isn't black and white, but many shades of messy. In real life, the girl doesn't always end up with the sexy vampire.

Throughout all this was the compelling role of young people themselves. Children like Leroy Ostransky illicitly helped their moms make bathtub gin and their grandpas make beer; teens ran rum from Canada and other young men brought in moonshine from the backwoods in the south, later using

their driving skills as early Nascar drivers. And there were so many hypocrites—whiskey in the White House, bootleggers in Congress, judges and police who looked the other way, rabbis and priests selling wine out the back door.

How could you pass up such a story—or see it as nothing more than a resource for reports? My inner geek wants to pass out bumper stickers that say, "My Constitution isn't dry at all!"

Finally, there is an underlying story about government. My daughters were particularly fond of that Margaret Mead quote that goes, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

But what isn't said is that sometimes that small group of committed citizens gives us nearly 14 years without beer or wine. In the bigger frame (even in the midst of our current circus-like political campaigns), the story of prohibition is a vivid reminder of the resilience of our democracy--and its capacity to right itself when we go in the wrong direction. With the right to speak up and vote, each of us has the opportunity to make our mark—and those who choose to passively observe get to live with the consequences.

This book wouldn't have happened without many brave and brilliant people.

I was lucky to be introduced to Ken Wright, who became my agent and totally embraced the idea. At Roaring Brook, my editor Deirdre Langeland, totally understood and supported this project, almost taking it to the

delivery room; Andrea Cascardi, stepped into during Deirdre's maternity leave to move it into production; Jay Colvin, did a beautiful job with the design, even when I couldn't stop sending more images, and Jill Freshney, who kept us on track, all under the leadership of Simon Boughton. I can't thank them enough.

And then there's my family, which has been amazingly supportive of this passion. If you will, indulge me one more story. When I first started on this project five years ago, I had just left a 20-year career at The Wall Street Journal. That move, in itself, was a big hit to the family budget. I didn't expect to earn very much doing this project, but when the contract came in, the amount was even less than not much--and I don't mean "not much" in the Mitt Romney way.

I started to get cold feet. This was a big project that would take a long time to compete. Maybe, I told my husband Scott McCartney, I should ditch this idea of writing for young people and just get a new job. Maybe this wasn't a good thing for us.

Scott didn't blink. "You believe in this book and you really want to do it," he said. "So you should do it. We'll figure out how to make it work."

There are really no words to properly say thanks for that—but thank you, Scott, for a lifetime partnership and a very special Happy Birthday today! And thanks very much to all of you!

