

Talking with Tonya Bolden


The acclaimed nonfiction author talks about finding ourselves and our stories in history.

By Terrell A. Young and Barbara A. Ward

Tonya Bolden is the author of nearly 20 books for children and young adults, including *Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl*, which won a Coretta Scott King Author Honor Award, and *33 Things Every Girl Should Know about Women's History*, an American Library Association Best Book for Young Adults. Readers of Bolden's Orbis Pictus Award-winning *M. L. K.: Journey of a King* might expect that the author was intrigued by history as a child, and no doubt wandered the streets of her birthplace, New York City, in search of famous landmarks. In actuality, nothing could be further from the truth. We recently had a chance to talk with her about the inspirations behind her work.

TAY & BAW: Please describe your childhood.

BOLDEN: Like most writers, I loved books. I was always reading and writing, but I hated history. It was usually presented in such an uninteresting way. I didn't see myself or my people in history. My uncle Odell, who was a history freak, used to take me someplace in Harlem, point to these brownstones, and tell me that was Langston Hughes' brownstone or tell me about Phillis Wheatley, and I would just think, "I don't care." My sister often laughs and says, "If he could see you now."



"I mean no disrespect by calling him M. L. It's about recognizing that I grew up regarding 'the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.' as more statue than man: someone I revered but to whom I couldn't relate, and so I did not truly appreciate." —from *M. L. K.*

TAY & BAW: How supportive were your parents of your love for books?

BOLDEN: I grew up in a home where books were revered. I remember wanting a leather jacket during the sixties, and the rule was that I had to save up half of the cost of the jacket. My father would never have had that same response had I wanted books. When I came home with a long list of books that I wanted to order, my parents never said, "No," or "You don't need that many books."

TAY & BAW: Could you tell us about your education?

BOLDEN: I was always good at school, which is not a boast, but to say that I had the kind of brain that fits with school. I grew up working-class. I didn't have to wonder when the next meal was coming, so it wasn't surprising that I did well in school. My parents were big on education because it was something

they didn't have. My South Carolinian mother went to school until the sixth grade, and my North Carolinian father, until the ninth grade. Education was the only thing they could give me. They didn't have money or connections, and they felt the best way to make opportunities possible was education. To quote Malcolm X, they believed that education would be the passport to the future.

TAY & BAW: Where do your book ideas come from?

BOLDEN: Many of my books were not my ideas. I'm not always a great idea person. My book *Cause* was a gift to the once-young me, who was taught that Reconstruction was a terrible time when blacks were allowed some political opportunities and basically messed up. I did *The Champ* because I wanted to work with R. Gregory Christie

again, and he wanted to do a book on Muhammad Ali. I wasn't all that into Ali until I began doing the research, especially watching videos of his early fights. That's when I said, "Oh, he was no mere boxer. He was an artist!"

TAY & BAW: *Many of the books you've written seem to have almost "called" you to write them. Can you describe how that happens?*

BOLDEN: My editor at Abrams approached me about writing *George Washington Carver*. The *Saturday Night Live* skit that Eddie Murphy did years ago really mocked Carver and that stayed on my brain. I was never comfortable with the idea of writing him off as an Uncle Tom. *Maritcha* had been on my mind since the 1990s, when I first heard about her memoir at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. She represented who I would have wanted to be had I been in New York during the 1840s to 1860s: plucky, determined, and a teacher. *Wake Up Our Souls* came about when my editor at Abrams realized that the Smithsonian was having a traveling exhibit of black American masters and saw it as an opportunity to do a book on black artists.

TAY & BAW: *Can you tell us more about your research process?*

BOLDEN: I find my way through the research. I just start reading and immersing myself in the time period.

TAY & BAW: *There have been many books written about Martin Luther King Jr. What prompted you to write this one?*

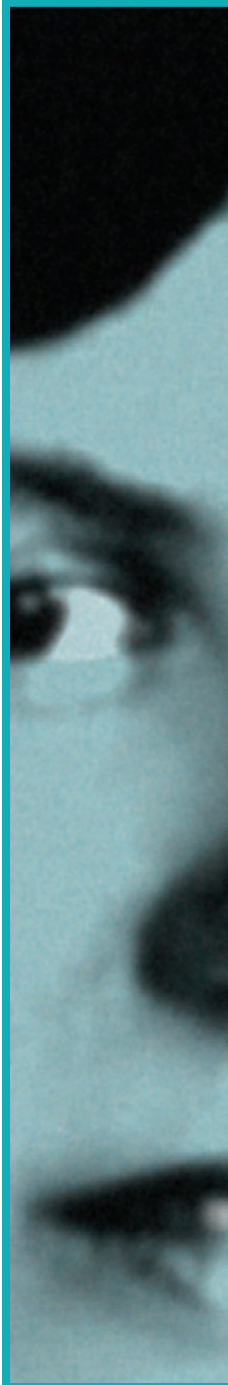
BOLDEN: Actually, it began with my editor at Abrams asking if I was interested in doing a book on King. I chose to write the book as I did because a few years ago a high-school teacher told me that many of her students regarded M. L. K. as something of a chump. There was also my own longing for someone to call us in this present era, as King called that Memphis crowd on April 3, 1968, to "make America what it ought to be."

TAY & BAW: *Who is the book's audience?*

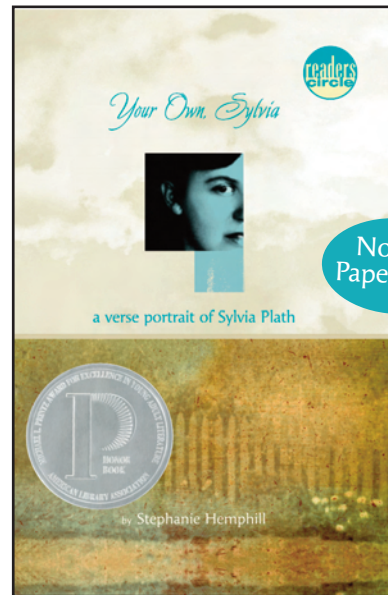
BOLDEN: I wrote with a curious, smart 12-year-old in mind, but I was aware that the book might appeal to much younger and much older readers.

TAY & BAW: *How would you respond to critics who say that M. L. K. is largely irrelevant in today's world?*

BOLDEN: My response would depend on my mood. I might ignore the remark. I might ask how King can be irrelevant when we have yet to experience the "Beloved Community" or see "justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." If you find these things irrelevant, you find King irrelevant. There may also be people who think King is old news because they are



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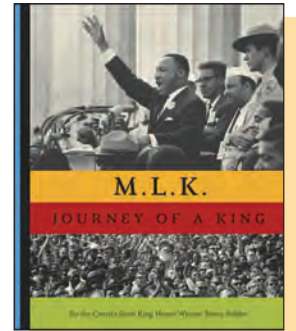
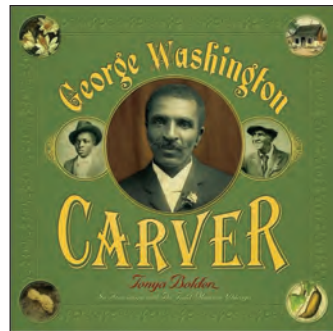
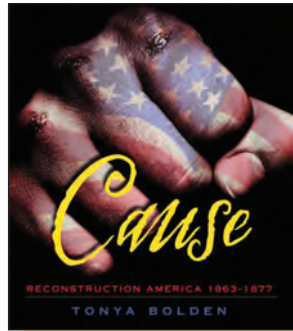
under the impression that he was solely interested in blacks being able to sit wherever they wanted on a bus, blacks being able to vote, and other issues that fall under the umbrella of civil rights. Indeed, he was absolutely pledged to that cause, but he was also pledged to ending economic injustice, militarism, imperialism, materialism, and all the other things antithetical to the “Beloved Community.” It is understandable that many young people are unaware of King’s ultimate dream because many know only a watered-down, simplistic version of the man.

TAY & BAW: *How did you get inside M. L. K.’s head as he lived, wrote, and spoke?*

BOLDEN: I had no budget to retrace his footsteps, but I did have artifacts from the era, from periodicals to photographs. Often just meditating or musing on such things can take me where I need to go, enable me to put myself in other people’s shoes. Empathy comes in handy when you don’t have a big research budget. The real turning point came one day when I was listening to tapes of his sermons and speeches while doing housework. At one point, I was weeping, feeling a mix of emotions, including, “If only . . .” That’s when I moved from head knowledge to heart knowledge.

TAY & BAW: *And then what happened?*

BOLDEN: That’s when the poetry comes. If ever you see something that’s kind



of poetic in the text, then you can say, “That’s when she went to heart knowledge.” It shows in the writing. When I wrote what I call the “prayerful” passage on p.84 that starts “Like all souls tried and tested and cleaving to a sacred commitment, M. L. knew that agonies often follow ecstasies, as valleys follow mountain peaks.” I was trying to figure out how to cover a certain amount of territory without saying, “And then he did this, and then he did that.” I started to feel that the events were really beyond anyone’s plans. He could have had a breakdown from all the pressure, all the hopes, all the ideals, and I wondered what enabled him to go on. I felt in my bones that it had to be something supernatural. I took a risk with the whole book because many people prefer a King who is not so much of a Christian.

TAY & BAW: *What did you learn about M. L. K. that surprised you?*

BOLDEN: I don’t think I was aware of his being fearful at times.

TAY & BAW: *Is that fearfulness something that can help young readers connect with King’s story?*

BOLDEN: I think so. I wanted to take him down from a pedestal to make readers think, “Wow, he was human, and he had fears. He got angry. He’s not too different from me.” I think readers will connect with his being afraid but still going on.

Sampling Bolden

33 Things Every Girl Should Know about Women’s History: From Suffragettes to Skirt Lengths to the E.R.A. Edited by Tonya Bolden. 2002. 240p. Crown, paper, \$12.95 (9780375811227). Gr. 7–12.

Cause: Reconstruction America, 1863–1877. 2005. 144p. Knopf, \$19.95 (9780375827952). Gr. 7–11.

George Washington Carver. 2008. 48p. Abrams, \$18.95 (9780810993662). Gr. 3–7.

M. L. K.: The Journey of a King. 2007. 128p. Abrams, \$19.95 (9780810954762). Gr. 5–9.

Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl. 2005. 48p. Abrams, \$17.95 (9780810950450). Gr. 4–8.

Take-off: American All-Girl Bands during WWII. 2007. 80p. Knopf, \$18.99 (9780375827976). Gr. 5–9.

Tell All the Children Our Story: Memories and Mementos of Being Young and Black in America. 2001. 128p. Abrams, \$24.95 (9780810944961). Gr. 5–12.

W. E. B. Du Bois. 2008. 224p. Viking, \$16.99 (9780670063024). Gr. 7–12.

Wake Up Our Souls: A Celebration of Black American Artists. 2004. 128p. Abrams, \$24.95 (9780810945272). Gr. 5–12. 

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