



Embracing Our Flawed Heroes

Thank you one and all for the honor of choosing Janis Joplin Rise Up Singing as a YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction Award winner. I am so proud to be in the company of such powerful finalists and I think we all recognize that without your love of books and your passion for bringing strong nonfiction to young adults, the message and stories of others who go before us might remain forever untold.

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The first time I heard Janis Joplin’s amazing voice ring out the lyrics to “Piece of my Heart” her power absolutely blew me away. Listening to her was like dancing inside the greatest love, or standing in the midst of the saddest heartbreak. It was hearing the most incredible soul call out to me.

With her words and astounding music, Janis Joplin woke me and many other disconnected teens from a world in which we might never fit. But here was Janis. Instead of losing herself in silence and fear, she used her remarkable voice. She made those of us outside the mainstream recognize the world could be a better place. She challenged us to be unique, to stand up and sing or speak out, or just plain live our lives. She gave us the courage to love immensely and to dream hugely. She would slam our hearts with songs of heartbreak then follow up with lyrics like, “You got to try just a little bit harder.” She was calling to us. She became our shaman woman, our rock queen. We took heed when she warned, “Don’t compromise yourself. You’re all you’ve got.” She was our hero. Sure, we knew she was a flawed hero, but she was ours.



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I wrote *Janis Joplin Rise Up Singing* to allow another generation a glimpse into the world of this outsider who called teens like me to follow our art and dreams, and to stand up as individuals even if our choices didn't fit with the popular crowd.

Janis's story, like the stories of many tragic heroes, has a necessary place in the world of young adult literature.

Who better to awaken self-critical young adults from the belief that their lives are the only imperfect and messy lives?

Janis's story and stories like hers can open doors of hope for young readers who are often hyper-critical about themselves and their world. We can all learn from Janis what it felt like to be bullied when she stood out in high school with her frizzy hair and loud laugh. There's a huge message of hope in the way Janis awkwardly stood up against all odds, discovered her voice and rose to such heights.

She wasn't afraid to speak up for school desegregation, in her tiny community, despite having pennies pitched at her for her outspokenness. She explored art in a world that seemed to want conformity. She sought a more enlightened world through the message of the Beats, through drawing and painting and finally through music. Young readers, and *we*, can find soulfulness through her search. And we can use what we learn to make soulfulness in the life we choose, through the literature we write, the lives we study, and the art we create.

While Janis's is a story of an iconic rocker who would become the voice of a generation of rockers, it's also the tale of an insecure and terribly human young woman, who questioned her celebrity and talent and turned to drugs to numb it all. In that end, she



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became our tragic tale of risks taken and life lost. But it's an honest tale and one that shouldn't be ignored.

Teens, especially, deserve to hear the stories of historic figures like Janis because these stories can offer insight into the struggles and complexity of life.

Rather than give young readers the idea that our world's heroes never make mistakes, stories like Janis's help them see they have it in themselves to rise up and become heroes in their own stories. Flaws and all.

It took a virtual concert crew to bring this biography to readers. Over the five years of research and writing, my husband Jeff and our four young adults -- Amanda, Nick, Joe and Stevi -- learned to love all things Janis. My editor, Susan Van Metre welcomed the promise it held from my agent Barry Goldblatt. Susan was already in love with Janis's music. I owe her a lifetime of gratitude for knowing the heart of this book and insisting I stay with it. Susan Homer kept me true to the historical context and story while Brett Wright proved an organizational genius. I'm so, *so* grateful for the amazing designer Maria Middleton who captured the spirit of '60s music and art with her collage-trimmed pages. Marketing director Jason Wells and publicist Mary Ann Zissimos, as well as a host of others behind the scenes, made sure this book's presence was felt in such a big way.

Janis's story would be so much less without the enduring friendship shared by her band mates, especially Sam Andrew, who brought their memories out for this biography.

One especially close friend of Janis's, Myra Friedman, also became my good friend. I came to love our Sunday afternoon phone conversations that continued even



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after my work was finished. Myra, who I *adored*, died in October. She so loved the idea of bringing Janis's life to a new generation. I sincerely hope she and Janis are out there somewhere celebrating. This book is theirs too, and I thank all for their roles.

I also have to thank Janis for the music and attitude that fueled this journey and kept her alive in me. Toward the end of my time working on her story, Janis came to me in dreams. That first time, she showed up in my kitchen, she sat herself down at my table and laughed that trademark laugh. She drawled, "I hear you gave me a do-over." She asked if it ended the same way.

I was sorry, but it did. I think that may not have been the full truth though.

A biographer's role is to capture a complete life. Our job is to tell the story of those who have gone before us, to capture the essence, the humanity, and the joys and tragedies of our heroes – flaws and all. In observing reader responses to this story, and in listening to Janis's music again and again and again, I realize Janis isn't quite done yet.

An artist's work continues as long as it is viewed, or read, or played. So, while my heart breaks that the life of this amazing rock star was cut short, I know that, as long as we pass her story on to others and as long as her voice rings out, Janis will continue to rise up singing.