



Boston Authors Club

February 2018 News & Events

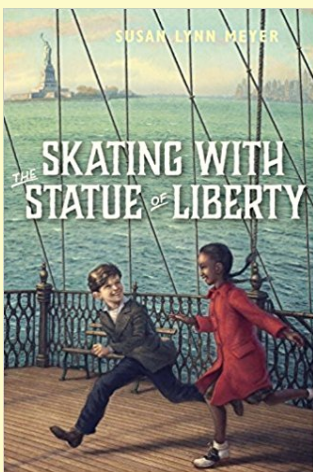
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BAC Featured Author Interview



Susan Lynn Meyer's Skating with the Statue of Liberty

(Delacorte Books) was honored as a Young Reader Finalist by the Boston Authors Club. In this interview, Susan talks about how this work related to her award-winning Black Radishes, the challenges of writing fiction based on sometimes painful family memories, and strategies for balancing being a professor at Wellesley College and an active author.



Q: *Skating With the Statue of Liberty* continues the story of *Black Radishes*, following a Jewish family that has escaped from Nazi-occupied France as they land in New York to face the challenges of adjusting to life in a new country. Did you start *Black Radishes* planning to write a sequel, or did part two of the story emerge more gradually?

Meyer: No, I didn't start planning to write a sequel. In fact, the ending of *Black Radishes* leaves the fate of one of the three Jewish boys, Marcel, ambiguous, but things don't look good for him. I did that deliberately after a lot of thought because it just seemed too fortunate and too improbable to have all three boys survive. And Marcel was in fact inspired by a dear friend of my father's who did not survive the war. Yet because *Black Radishes* is a book for children, and because it ends early in the war (early 1942), I did not specify what happened to Marcel. But when my editor and I started thinking about a sequel, I realized gradually that I would need to reveal more about what becomes of Marcel. That was one of the struggles for me in writing *Skating With the Statue of Liberty*—dealing with Gustave's worry and grief over his friend in a not too overwhelming way for child readers. Also, even though the novel follows Gustave's experiences in America and Marcel is off stage as it were in France, I needed to find a way to incorporate hints about what is happening to Marcel. So I also needed to think myself very carefully about what is happening to him—and after much consideration and investigation of what could have happened, historically, I decided to make it deviate significantly from what happened to the real boy, Georges (or Jo-Jo) Lieber, on whom

Marcel is based.

Q: Both books incorporate episodes from your father's childhood experiences. Were there particular challenges in weaving family history into fictional works?

Meyer: Very much so. One thing I thought about was maintaining my father's privacy. I didn't know how he would react to seeing a book that incorporated aspects of his life. So I deliberately changed some things and added fictional characters. But the touchstones of my father's real experience are there in the books—for example, his parents (and aunts and uncles) did bury their valuables behind the house, as they do in *Black Radishes*. They then made sure the children knew where they were buried in case the adults were taken by the Nazis and the children were left alone. Can you imagine what that must have felt like to the children?

Sadly, my father didn't live to read *Skating With the Statue of Liberty*. And when I was writing *Black Radishes*, though my father was voracious reader, it took him a long time to face reading my book. He didn't read it in draft or when it was accepted for publication. He finally read a bound advance copy shortly before the novel was published. He had a hard time doing it, he told me. At times it was too upsetting, and he had to put it down for a while. But I am so happy about the way he reacted. He said that there was one moment in the novel when he thought, "I didn't tell Susan about that. How did she know that?" That made me really feel that I had been able to imagine my way into what his experience must have been like. My father, Jean-Pierre Meyer, was a great intellectual—a mathematician at Johns Hopkins University who was tremendously learned in a variety of fields. There are six of us kids, and, though he was a very loving father, he had very high standards and he never praised us lightly. For example, when my older brother and I were in 7th and 8th grades, our school gave out awards for the highest achieving students in various areas, and we both received several awards. I said that night that I heard a kid grumbling, "The Meyers are getting all the awards." His response was, "Well, not all!"—which made me feel as if he was saying that, in his opinion, we *should* have won them all! But after reading *Black Radishes*, he told me, "It's a great book." For him to say that meant a tremendous amount to me.

Q: Do you have a favorite episode in Skating With the Statue of Liberty?

Meyer: I particularly like the episode where Gustave is with the French Boy Scouts and has to perform tasks to become a member of the troop and earn his totem name, *Méhari Pondéré*. That name, which means Serious Camel, was really my father's totem name, and he did have to earn it by doing various tasks, including drinking water mixed with dirt. When I mulled that over, I came to realize the larger implications of the boy having his finger nicked and bleeding into the American earth (he becomes part of America), and swallowing American soil—America becomes part of him. In my novel, it became a scene about coming to terms with a new national identity.

Q: The reason for book's title only becomes clear towards the end of the book. Did you write that chapter and incident and then decide it was an appropriate title, or was that scene in your mind from the beginning?

Meyer: The incident was in my head for a long time, but not from the beginning. This was an extremely hard book for me to write. It took a number of years and was written three times with quite different plots. I think it was especially hard for me to write for several reasons. I expect a second novel is often hard to write, because writers worry (or at least I did) over whether they can do it again. Then my father was very ill and dying as I was writing. And it was emotionally fraught too because this novel has rather more of my own invention in it than the first one, so I felt ambivalent, especially at that time in my life and my father's, about not sticking only with the facts. So no—the skating incident at the end only came about with the third draft and the title was quite late in coming! But I do like it. I like that my titles are odd and quirky and evoke questions in the reader.

Q: Life in New York for Gustave and his family is still taking shape at the end of Skating With the Statue of Liberty, and there are many unanswered questions about friends and family left behind in war-time France. Are you considering a third book to make this a trilogy?

Meyer: I'm thinking about it. My editor had suggested writing a third book. But I needed a break from the emotional challenge of writing something so closely connected with my family, so I have been writing a different novel—and I just finished a fairly polished draft last week! I don't want to say too much about it yet, but it is set in Boston and at Wellesley College (where I teach) in the years 1913-14.

Q: In addition to writing and speaking about your books, you are a professor at Wellesley College. What are your strategies for balancing the demands of these two careers and carving out the time needed to research and write new books?

Meyer: Yes! Well, it is hard. But my connection with the students also gives me energy and is really rewarding. For the most part, I am only able to write fiction intensively during the January break and during the summer months. I can do historical research in bits and pieces, though. (I love doing it, so I often am researching something, with the help of my reference librarian friends.) Sometimes if I have really good momentum on a major project I can keep actually writing fiction a bit in snatches of time here and there during the academic terms. Most of my time during the term is absorbed by my students and my work at the college, though. But as you can see from what I have told you about the new novel, the job can give me ideas that work their way into my fiction!



Forthcoming Books and Events Featuring BAC Authors

Sy Montgomery, sends new year greetings and best wishes to the BAC and reports on 3 new books to be published this year:

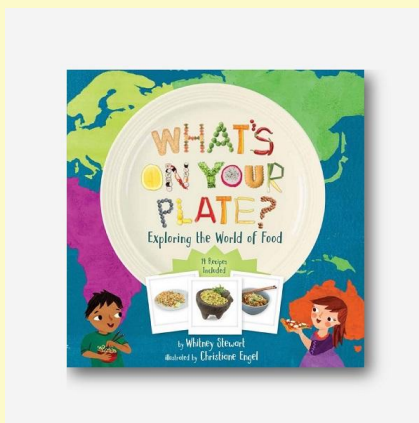
The Hyena Scientist is part of the Scientists in the Field Series that Sy founded for young readers in grades 4-8 with photographer Nic Bishop, with photos by Nic. From Houghton Mifflin in May

How to be a Good Creature: A Memoir in 13 Animals. From Houghton Mifflin in September



Inky's Amazing Escape: How a Very Smart Octopus Found His Way Home. A picture book with art by Amy Schimmler, from Simon and Schuster in October.

[For more details, visit Sy's webpage](#)



Whitney Stewart has three new children's books slated for publication for spring 2018: **What's On Your Plate: Exploring the World of Food** (for ages 5 - 9yrs, Sterling, release date March 2018)

Mindful Me: Mindfulness and Meditation for Kids (for ages 9 -12yrs, Albert Whitman) and **Mindful Me Activities Book** (Albert Whitman)

See more at www.whitneystewart.com

Paula Bonnell Poetry Readings

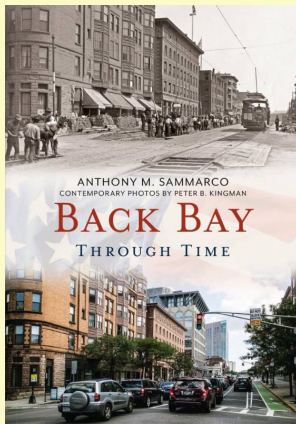
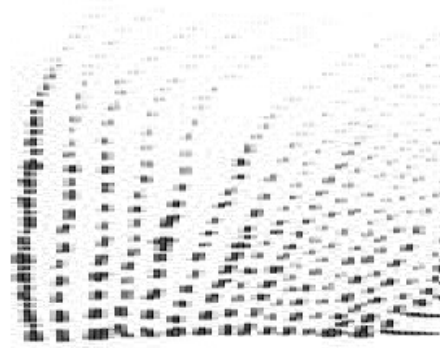
Paula Bonnell will be reading from her work at three upcoming poetry events:

On Tuesday, February 6 at a New England Poetry Club event from 7pm to 9pm at Harvard University Yenching Library, 2

Divinity Street, Cambridge. This event is free and open to the public

On Tuesday Feb. 20 at a session of the First and Last Word Poetry series in the Arts at the Armory Cafe, 191 Highland Ave., Somerville - Reading begins at 7 pm \$4 admission, doors open at 6:30 pm
On Thursday, March 22 from 7pm to 9pm at Roslindale House, 120 Poplar Street, with Nausheen Eusef and an open mic following the two featured readers. Free parking behind the building.

[More details at: www.paulabonnell.net](http://www.paulabonnell.net)



Anthony M. Sammarco has three upcoming books to be published in 2018:

Back Bay Through Time (Fonthill, London) due March 2018

S.S. Pierce: A Boston Tradition (Fonthill, London) due November 2018

Brighton & Allston Through Time (Fonthill, London) due November 2018

The BAC newsletter is published the first week of every month. Please send news about your activities, speaking, and new books (along with related pictures) to bostonauthorsclub@gmail.com by February 25 for publication in the March 2018 newsletter.

REMINDER Renew Your BAC Membership for 2018

The BAC is planning more programs and more book award categories for 2018. We need your support!

Full membership dues are \$50 annually and Associate memberships are \$25 annually for the calendar year. You can join and renew online by [clicking here](#). If you would rather pay by check, please make your check out to Boston Authors Club and mail it to the following address:

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