



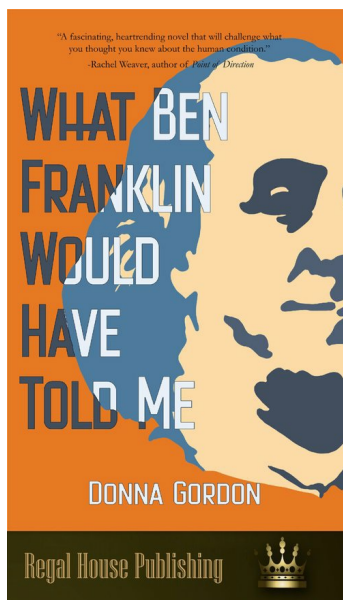
Boston Authors Club

June - July 2022 Newsletter

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Featured Interview With Donna Gordon



Donna Gordon will celebrate the launch of her debut novel, *What Ben Franklin Would Have Told Me*, at a Harvard Book Store event on June 8th, 2022.

In addition to writing novels, short stories and essays, Donna is a widely exhibited visual artist, painter, and printmaker. To learn more about her creative portfolio, visit her website at www.donnasgordon.com

In this interview, Donna talks about the inspiration for her novel, the challenges of bringing it to completion and publication, and how she balances and integrates her visual art and writing.

Q: Congratulations on this debut novel! Could you share what inspired your storyline and the characters in *What Ben Franklin Would Have Told Me*

A: Two seemingly disparate experiences came together to fuel the writing of the novel: While volunteering at Camp Sunshine in Maine (a camp for children with life-threatening illnesses and their families), I met a boy who had Progeria, a premature aging disease. I had done a documentary photography project with Amnesty International, "Putting Faces on the Unimaginable: Portraits and Interviews with Former Prisoners of Conscience," for which I photographed and interviewed 15 people on Amnesty's speakers' list. People who had been tortured and imprisoned for so-called crimes against the government. I met a man and a woman from Argentina who had been among the Disappeared. The photos with captions had been exhibited at Harvard's Fogg Museum, Tufts' Wessell Library, and Boston's French Library. It wasn't a completely conscious decision to connect Lee and Tomás. I started with the boy, Lee, who has Progeria, and then created Tomás as his caretaker. They were both struggling with issues of time—accelerated time for Lee and lost time for Tomás. I started to see more connections. Soon the idea of Ben Franklin came into the story, and then the structure of a journey. I added Patrick, Lee's Vietnamese pot-bellied pig, for comic relief. Most powerful were my feelings of being a mother, and what it might have felt like for Lee's mother, Cass, who had lived with and managed her son's disease from the beginning.

Q: What have been the biggest challenges on your journey from concept to completing the manuscript and finding a publisher?

A: Because the Dirty War and the military dictatorship under Jorge Videla in Argentina took place between 1976 and 1983, I needed to move my story back in time. There were a lot of things I already knew from my interviews with survivors, but there were many more facts I didn't know. There wasn't nearly as much known about Progeria back then as there is today. I had to become a skilled researcher. I was able to travel to Washington, DC and Philadelphia to see things first-hand, but needed to resurrect other locations using secondary sources and the internet. I double-checked the logo font (Engravers Old English) on the facade of the Washington Post building, calculated locations and driving distances using Google Maps, and got a friend to help me translate English into Spanish. Knowing the correct altitude a plane flew from Newark, NJ to Washington, DC at 9 a.m. on an overcast day needed to be accurate. A world started to build.

Early on, I knew how the book would end and I wrote towards that. But I didn't always know how I would get there. I re-wrote the novel from beginning to end several times. Language, and the editing process, are important to me.

In terms of getting the book published, I had several near misses with agents. I had been a Stegner Fellow, PEN Discovery, Ploughshares Discovery and others, so my book manuscript generally got a read and response. But the rejections didn't provide any consensus. The novel had been a finalist or semi-finalist for five small press contests. I heard about Regal House from a friend, and decided to query them. I heard back from the publisher, Jaynie Royal, quickly -- and she wanted to take it on. At the 11th hour, an agent who had read my prize-winning story, "Primates," in *New Letters*, and who had requested my novel, wrote to tell me she wanted to work with me, but first I needed to make her changes. There was no guarantee she would take me on, or find a publisher. I decided to go with Regal. It's been a very good cooperative experience.

Q: In addition to being a novelist, you are a painter and printmaker, and the author of many published short stories and essays. How do you balance different types of creative work?

A: I didn't expect to be making visual art with the same focus I bring to fiction writing. As a writing fellow at the Vermont Studio Center in December 2017, I was surrounded by visual artists who were drawing from a live model every day. I attended some of the sessions. Soon something opened in me that hadn't been fluent since high school, when I had attended Saturday life drawing classes at the Art Students League in New York City.

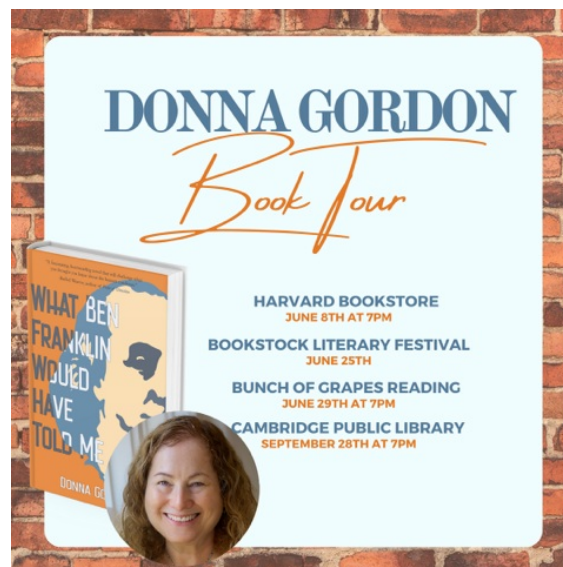
I start a painting and drawing much the same way as I begin a story—hopefully with good bones. I'm represented by Galatea Fine Art, SOWA, Boston. My member solo show, "Double Vision," a series of lithographs, will be at Concord Art Association June 16 - July 17.

Q: Are you already thinking about or working on a second novel? If so, can you tell us something about it?

A: I'm completing *Lesser Saints*, a short story collection—though everyone says short story collections don't sell. And I'm revising another novel, *Cave Paintings*. We will see where that goes!

Interview by Mary J Cronin

Summer Book Talks



President's Note: Summer Musings

If you're like me, you have fond childhood memories of summer. The time seemed to stretch out endlessly. You could go outside after dinner and play until it got dark. Days were blissfully unscheduled. And there were many, many trips to the local public library.

Nowadays I'm all too well aware that summer doesn't last endlessly; it actually goes by way too fast. I will go outside after dinner to do some weeding or take the dog out for a walk or maybe go for a twilight spin around the pond I live on in my kayak. My days aren't as packed out as they are during the academic year but I wouldn't say they are unscheduled. But the one thing that seems a constant from my memories of childhood summers are the many trips to the library, because summer is for reading. The very best summer days are the ones I spend on my screen porch deep into a book.



I wish you all many days of indulgent summer reading. In the next edition of our BAC Newsletter, look for the announcement of our 2021 Julia Ward Howe prize winners. We are very much hoping to have an in-person ceremony back at the Boston Public Library in the fall, but this will depend on the Covid situation.

Stay well, enjoy your summer and all of the reading you can fit in!

Julie Dobrow
BAC President

Yesteryear: A Literary Inventor and Novel Novelist



Helen Winslow's book, *Literary Boston of Today (1903)*, isn't explicitly about the members of the Boston Authors Club but many of the authors she writes about were BAC stalwarts.

Today's author, Adeline Dutton Train Whitney, aka A.D.T. Whitney (pictured at right) wasn't part of the Club. Nonetheless, I found Winslow's sketch of Whitney---"Mrs. Whitney occupies the peculiar position of belonging to literary Boston, while not being of it."---intriguing and itself a bit peculiar. What might it mean to belong to but not be of literary Boston? Aside, of course, from not being a member of the Boston Authors Club.

To find out, I went looking for more information about Whitney and her literary status. I found her in *Our Famous Women*, a collection of stories about women authors written by other women authors, published in 1884 by A. D. Worthington. According to its title page, this book is "full of romantic story, lively humor, thrilling experiences, tender pathos, and brilliant wit, with numerous anecdotes, incidents, and personal reminiscences." And so it is.

There are fascinating circularities in the authorship of the stories. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe writes the chapter about Whitney, recounting that as a child Whitney was an avid reader of the collected works of Maria Mitchell. Mitchell, in turn, is the subject of a *Famous Women* chapter by Julia Ward Howe. Whitney, for her part, writes about Lucy Larcom (who writes about Clara Barton), while Rose Terry Cooke contributes a chapter about Harriet Beecher Stowe. Harriet Prescott Spofford and Rose Terry Cooke each write about the other. I fully expected that the table of contents would end with something on the order of: "How many people were on the train to Boston?"

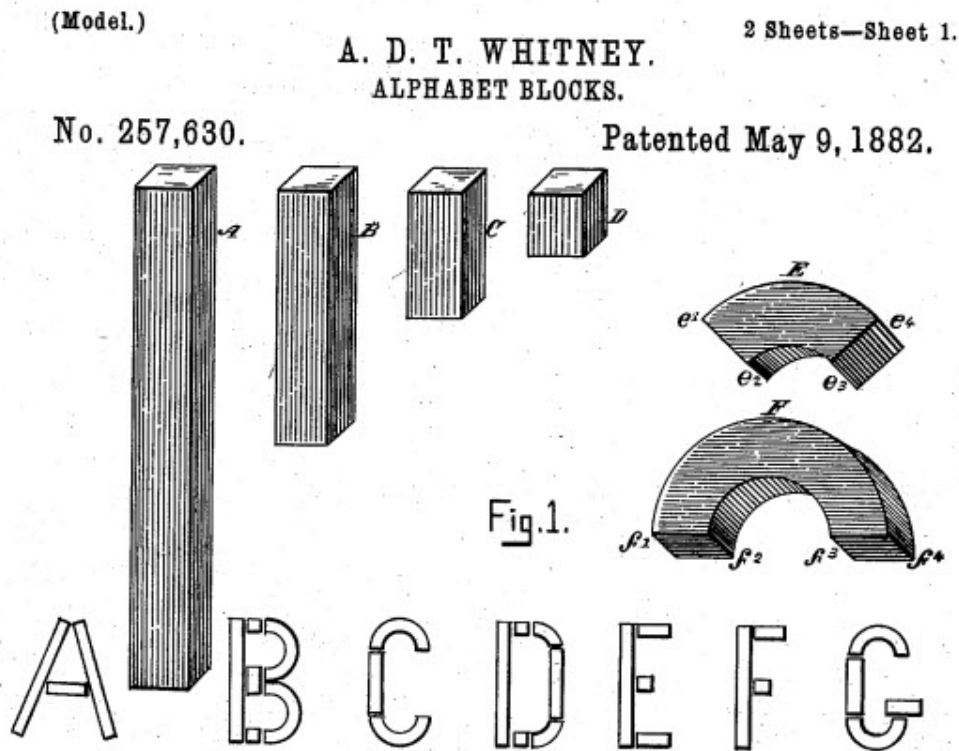
In a more traditional biographical mode, Whitney was born in Boston and attended George B. Emerson's school from 1837 to 1841. She married Mr. Seth D. Whitney in 1843, and the couple settled in Milton. While she contributed short pieces to various periodicals in her early years, Whitney didn't start writing novels until 1859. According to *The Encyclopedia Americana*, "Her writings, which are chiefly for young people, are wholesome in tone and entertaining in style....". Perhaps another reason that she was "not of literary Boston"?

Literary critics are of different minds as to Whitney's best work. In *Literary Boston*, Helen Winslow effuses: "(*Faith Gartney's Girlhood*) was one of the first books---unless "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is excepted---that had a phenomenal sale... The critics didn't know quite what to do with it... so they gave up trying to criticize it, and heaped unstinted praise on it." Other critics feel that her first book, *Boys at Chequasset*, was her best. The author of Whitney's Wikipedia page opts for *The Other Girls*.

A less well-known work by Whitney is the US patent she was issued on May 9, 1882: US 257,630 entitled **Alphabet Blocks**. As you can see in the illustration below from the patent's title page, what Whitney invented was six blocks that can be used to build all the letters of the alphabet. If you look carefully at the face of an LED clock, you'll notice that the display of each number is constructed from a small number of line segments. This technique is called a segmented display. Carl Kinsley is credited as having invented it based on the patent he was issued on January 26, 1915, US 1,126,641 for a method of electric signaling. My view would be that Whitney beat him to the patent office by several decades...except for the electricity.

Maybe having an engineering bent disqualified one from being fully part of literary Boston back in the early days of the BAC? Yesteryear readers with counterexamples are cordially invited to share them .

By Scott Guthery



authors!
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