

# *diy* **MFA** *Traci Sorell and Carole Boston Weatherford*

## **375: Bringing Omitted BIPOC History to Light through Middle Grade Picture Books**

**Gabriela Pereira:** Hello, and welcome, word nerds, to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are over at [diymfa.com/375](http://diymfa.com/375) because it's episode 375. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on Apple, Google, Stitcher Radio, Spotify, all the places where you might listen to a podcast, and please leave us a review. This helps other word nerds out there, discover the show as well.

Today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Traci Sorell and Carole Boston Weatherford.

Traci is the author of the critically acclaimed book, *We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga*. She is an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation and lives in Northeastern Oklahoma, where her tribe is located. Today we're talking about her picture book, *Classified: The Secret Career of Mary Golda Ross, Cherokee Aerospace Engineer*, which is illustrated by Natasha Donovan.

Carole, is the author of numerous award-winning books including the Newbery Honor Book *Henry Brown Mails Himself to Freedom*, which is illustrated by Michele Wood, and *R-E-S-P-E-C-T: Aretha Franklin, the Queen of Soul* (illustrated by Frank Morrison).

Today we're going to be discussing her picture book *Unspeakable: The Tulsa Race Massacre* (Illustrated by Floyd Cooper). When she's not visiting museums or traveling, Carole is mining the past for family stories, fading traditions, and forgotten struggles. She lives in North Carolina. Welcome, ladies. It is so great to have you here today.

**Carole Boston Weatherford:** Thank you.

**Traci Sorell:** Wado. Thank you.

**GP:** I always like to start by asking about the story behind the story. My hunch is there's probably a story behind both of your books, *Unspeakable* and *Classified*. Can you tell us, what inspired you to write this book in the first place? Traci, why don't you start us off?

**TS:** Actually, the impetus for writing it came from my editor, Carol Hinz. We had been communicating on social media. We had not worked together previously, talking about nonfiction, and she was talking about women in STEM, and women that weren't being talked about, et cetera. I certainly, knew about Mary Golda Ross. She said, what do you think about writing a book about her?

My first thought was no [laughs] because I don't have a math and science background. Mary's a very gifted mathematician and later becomes an aerospace engineer, which wasn't even a field you could study in school. She had gone to extra classes at UCLA and stuff. That part was really intimidating to me.



But in looking at her, what I realized was, for all the attention and inclusion in women in STEM books that she'd gotten being hailed as a hidden figure, because she did help put man on the moon. They would mention she was Cherokee, but no one really looked at why her life went the trajectory it did, why she developed the gifts the way she did, et cetera, was all because of the Cherokee family and community she came from.

I wanted to show her in her full humanity and that's really what made me feel like I could access and write this book. When Carol mentioned, it was like, well, really nothing shows that what she did came from that background and identity.

**GP:** I love it. What about you, Carole? What inspired you to write *Unspeakable*?

**CBW:** Two things inspired me or I should say two people inspired me to write *Unspeakable*. The first person was the late illustrator, Tom Feelings. Tom Feelings, at the time that he died, had been in the midst of a book project, somewhat like his book, *The Middle Passage*, but this book was to have been about lynching. He showed me, during my last visit with him, some preliminary sketches from that proposed book.

A few years later, my mother found out through Family Law that there had been a lynching in our family. We don't have all the details, but, generally, people don't make that type of thing up. I did write about that. I wrote a poem. It might be more of an adult poem, and certainly, the event is more personal to me than the Tulsa Race Massacre. I thought that lynching still needed to be addressed in a children's book, but I wanted to find a particular incident that people could identify more universally with.

Then, of course, the repeated incidents of police brutality kept happening. Some of them involving young males who were quite young, as young as 12. I thought to myself, I really need to do this. It just dawned on me that the Tulsa Race Massacre was the event. I had heard about the massacre, not when I was a child, I was not taught about it in school, but I found out about it as an adult.

Of course, Tulsa, was famous for Black Wall Street, which was the Black business district in the Greenwood community, predominantly Black Greenwood community of Tulsa, Oklahoma. In 1921, it was the wealthiest black community in all of the nation. The picture book, *Unspeakable* is a Testament to the people who built Black Wall Street, who built the Greenwood community, who perished in and those who survived what was the worst incident of racial violence in our nation's history.

What I did not have in mind at the time that I was writing the manuscript was that the 100th anniversary of the massacre was coming up. That was just coincidental. But I wanted to give voice to the people who, as I said, built that community, those who perished and those who survived the massacre because their story was not told.

The incident was really hidden, swept under the rug by local political leaders and even insurance companies at the time. I wanted to make sure that children learned about what happened in 1921 so that they could connect the dots between that type of racial violence and the type of racial violence that we're still experiencing in the form of police murders.

**GP:** One of the reasons I wanted to have both of you on the show together was to talk about these pockets of forgotten history, or omitted history, or history that's been skirted over. What really fascinates me though, is the idea of making this a picture book. For both of you, choosing to write these stories, they could easily have been middle-grade, or young adults, or even for adults.



I'm curious, how did you embark on the project to convert these topics that, Traci in your case might be something that's very mathematical that little kids may not really get into or understand, and Carole for you, it's a massacre. That's a heavy topic for a picture book. I'm curious, for both of you, was this a picture book to begin with? Did you both envision these as picture books, and how did you go about converting the content or adapting the content to form for very young readers? Carole, why don't you start us off?

**CBW:** I originally envisioned *Unspeakable* as a picture book. I guess I never thought of an older audience because, for the most part, I write picture books. Some of them are older picture books. This would be a middle-grade picture book. It's certainly not a picture book you would share with younger kids, ages four through eight, and certainly not with the pre-school audience.

It's just natural for me to write for this particular audience. A lot of people ask me whether I think that kids are too tender for such topics. The answer is no, I think the children deserve and will demand the truth. I write non-fiction that shows the resilience and the remarkability of African Americans. I believe that this particular story, the true story, embraces all of that. I thought of nothing other than a picture book.

The other reason is that I wanted to collaborate with Floyd Cooper, now, the late Floyd Cooper, whom I knew grew up in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and whom I did not know at the time, but found out in the process of collaborating that his grandfather survived the massacre. I wanted to collaborate with him again, and this was the opportunity to do that. I thought of nothing other than a picture book.

**TS:** As I said, my impetus into telling Mary Golda Ross's story was in visiting with Carol Hinz, and she had talked about doing a picture book. We agreed, similar to Carole's experience where this would be in essence, a middle-grade picture book. The age range for it, they say is seven and up, ideal's 7 to 11. The reason for that being obviously is some of the subject matter, right? It's got math. It's got engineering in it.

It's not that it can't be shared with younger students and things, but it's not written at that earlier entry point that we think of for your Pre-K kindergarten, first-grade audience. The other part is, again, as children who are in later second-grade, let's say third and up, they are looking at values.

They're able to take those things in. They're able to look at larger systems, and to Carol's point, you know by that age, if you haven't been able to articulate it, at least you have a strong feeling of where you're visible and where you're invisible. The whole point in having a picture book was to help young people at that age when there's a lot of invisibility, certainly for Native students, but really for many students and girls, in particular, around careers in STEM.

In telling this story, it provides that portrayal of someone who was not this loud, charismatic, well-known person, right? She was doing her stuff, but she walked in the door in all of her Cherokee-ness. She brought all of that with her, in everything that she did. I think a lot of times, because we keep these stories from people that you don't even realize there's others who have already paved the way.

They have already taken these courses. They've already gone to college. They've already gone down a path career-wise. It's very empowering to know that someone has already done that. It doesn't make it so daunting. It also allows, like I say, for those gaps in curriculum where largely, Native people disappear by 1900. Similarly with the African American community, there's a few pockets of, well, say really Jim Crow Laws civil rights, and that's it.

Where is the inclusion of all these other types of existence that's happened, agency that's happened? Again, people who are living in their communities, bringing their cultural values forward, we have a lot



of that that's missing, and a lot of books that need to be coming from us in our communities to tell those stories. What I love about Mary's story, like I say, is that she lived out her Cherokee values her entire life, that you see that very clearly.

But I never saw that represented in anything that had been written about her. I just wanted young people to, regardless of whatever background they're coming from-- But there are people who are showing up with their full humanity, their cultural identity, their gender identity, all of those things in place, and they are doing this.

Many of them have already done it before you, and you can do that too. That's my hope is that it is an inspiring story that you are not alone in this journey of whatever gifts and abilities you're going to develop and share with the world.

**CBW:** Another thing I'd like to add is the fact that young children have a very strong sense of justice, a more absolute sense of right and wrong than we as adults have. As adults, we dwell in gray areas, but with children, it's either right or wrong. I write, I tackle tough topics in picture books because I trust children to ask the right questions about the injustices, about the oppression that I document.

When a child hears this story, this true story, a child might say, "Well, white people allow that to happen. Why did they do that? Why were black people treated so cruelly, so unfairly? Why was there a color-barrier in the town to begin with?"

Children know the right questions to ask, and we as adults, sometimes don't want to get into that with kids. I don't have a problem, but there may be some adults, parents, or teachers who don't want to get into that, but we need to be prepared to answer even if we have to take a breath first and say, "Let me look it up, let's look at it a little more closely and figure it out together."

**GP:** One of the things that really jumped out at me with both of your books, it appears in different ways, is that the way of bringing these stories to life, of opening up the door for different questions, you do it in different ways in the stories. I wanted to dig into each of the separate books a little bit, a little more in terms of the craft. Carole, when you wrote *Unspeakable*, there are many different ways you could have approached the story.

You could have given us a spotlight on a single person, a single family. It's a much broader, sort of more sweeping view of the story. One of the things that jumped out at me, was the repeated, once upon a time, kind of easing us into the narrative until we get to the conflict itself in the middle of the book. Can you talk a little bit about how you crafted the thought process in putting together the story? Because there are so many different ways you could have told it, but you chose a very distinct way in the way you presented the content, the material.

**CBW:** Well, in terms of the, a once upon a time, I think I was drawn to that perhaps at first because of the alliteration between time and Tulsa. But I was drawn to it for another reason. I knew that the story itself, the incident itself, would be shocking. Therefore, I wanted to put young readers on a familiar footing, and because kids are familiar with fairy tales, I knew that once upon a time would do that.

I also wanted to evoke nostalgia and hit imply early on that once upon a time this community that created Black Wall Street existed, and here I'm going to recreate it for you, and then I'm going to show you what happened to it. That's why I used once upon a time. I was able to repeat it. I was able to structure the first half or first two-thirds of the narrative by using that recurring phrase, once upon a time, to show, not only the past glory, but also the ordinariness, the everydayness of that community.



That was why. That was how I wrote the first draft, and that was how it ended up. That's normally not the case for me when I'm trying to structure a text. Normally, I write the first draft, and then the final draft looks nothing like the first draft. Well, that was not the case with this manuscript. I arrived at the once upon a time early on. I've never written anything else, you know, once upon a time-ish before. [laughs]. I think the muses were with me that day.

**GP:** It's interesting also with the once upon a time, it also feels like it telescopes in. We start with this broad, once upon a time near Tulsa, and then it slowly zooms in closer. Then pretty soon we're looking at Miss Mabel's Little Rose Beauty Salon. We get very specific details. It's almost cinematic, in that sense, that we get these large sweeping panoramic vistas to the small details.

**CBW:** Thank you. That's exactly the effect that I was aiming for. That's the visual effect that I knew Floyd Cooper would bring to the project, again, starting out with this Panorama of Tulsa, and then closing in on that shot, that moment in the elevator that sparked the violence.

**GP:** Exactly.

**CBW:** Yeah, that's exactly what I was striving for, and that's exactly what Floyd was able to pick up on.

**GP:** Yeah. It starts so expansive, and then we get to this very constricted moment in the elevator. I love that idea. His illustrations captured that so beautifully.

**CBW:** His illustrations always were cinematic. Again, that's why I wanted to collaborate with him on this project that was, I think, a heart project for him and his master work, and perhaps his Magnum Opus.

**GP:** Absolutely. Traci, your approach was very different. In this case, we're following a specific person throughout her life, and how she got to where she got. So, very different quality, a lot less of the big sweeping panoramas, more specific very character-driven, as it were.

Can you talk a little bit about how you chose to structure your story? Because again, there could have been any number of directions we could have seen, very early childhood. We could have seen all sorts of aspects of her life, but you chose very specific through-line to follow for her story. Can you talk a little bit about the choices you made?

**TS:** Sure. One of the things that I do early on in the process, when I'm looking at a story, as much as I'm researching or thinking about it or daydreaming, whatever those early stages are, I'm also thinking about how I'm going to structure it. When Carol and I were talking about this, I said, are there picture book bios whose structuring you really like? She had sent me a list of them.

I enjoy reading them too. I went through my list, I went through her list, and she had a picture book called *The Tree Lady*. I loved the use of questions in the book and the way they kind of set up a question about something, and then, what was the answer? What kind of dilemma did the person find themselves in, and then how did they figure that out?

Some of that, obviously, you see in this book, I did employ some of that. I also looked at, as I said before, Mary is seen as one of those hidden figures in the space race. But I thought, yeah, but Mary's identity, not just as a woman, but as a Cherokee woman is very hidden. I really wanted to-- again, we have many values that we're raised with, but there were four key ones that I saw very clearly as I was putting down her life where you could see, like, she was like the poster child [laughs] for letting this out. I also, in my books always want to, if possible use my language, you know, have the Cherokee language featured.



Carol was open to having that in the back. All of the Cherokee values that are featured again, we have [laughs] many, many more than that, but they're in the syllabus. They're also in the audio book. Again, just that representation of wanting to ensure the reader understands she was who she was as that young Cherokee girl in Park Hill all the way through her life.

That's not just something I came up with as the quote that is featured in the very beginning of the book that reads, "Do the best you can and search out available knowledge and build on it. I started out with a firm foundation in mathematics and qualities that came down to me for my Indian heritage, Mary Golda Ross", April, 2008. That's just a few months before she would've celebrated her 100th birthday, but it's about three weeks before she passes away.

It's from a newspaper interview with our tribal newspaper, the Cherokee Phoenix. Once I read that line, it was like the structure of the book was set because I had had that thought in my mind. But again, I don't want to ever put myself in the character's place in fiction or in a real-life person's place. You know what I mean? Otherwise, I'm misrepresenting what they have lived. I wouldn't want someone to do that to me, right?

**GP:** Right.

**TS:** She confirmed exactly what to me had been very evident in everything I read about her, and in her own papers at Northeastern State. When I saw that quote, I said, "Yes, this is the structure we're using for the book."

**GP:** To follow up on that, one of the things that you have mentioned earlier in our conversation is the fact that STEM was not your strongest suit. While we see her life in STEM, we're not seeing actual mathematical equations and things in the story itself. Can you talk a little bit about how those two influences her heritage and the values she adhered to, and then also the passion for STEM, how those two things intertwine in Mary's life and how that comes across in the story?

**TS:** Well, because again, I wanted to keep the narrative flowing, I did not want to dwell on her pages of equations that she had written out in beautiful handwriting, [laughs] these notebooks, so we chose to put that more in the art. If you look at the art and you see these equations, you see different things, those are from Mary's handbooks.

I had had some Native engineers at NASA go through, I sent them pictures because I had photographed all these things that are basically her papers and effects that are at her undergrad alma mater, Northeastern State University here in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. I had them go through. I'm like, tell me what I'm looking at here, because I'm not an aerospace engineer and you all are, so what am I looking at here because it would help the illustrator if we can put these things in the pictures?

When you see the slide rule, when you see the equations, when you see all these things, those are what Mary used. I have picture of her books, of her slide rule. I held it in my hand, all of those things I had over, I don't know, 600 photos that I gave to the illustrator so she could create the art from that because I couldn't see weaving all of that stuff in.

That's why also, if you look at the book in the timeline, there are more of those details about things just because a picture book needs to be lyrical. Even if it's for a little older age group, it still needs to flow. Like I say, the part that was not known about her being her Cherokee values and identity, like I say, we chose to keep the more science, math part of it to bring that stronger in the illustrations.



**GP:** I love how you flipped the script. The thing that she was maybe known for more was the STEM stuff. And her heritage was maybe the piece that was more hidden in her history and in her life. You flipped it around and put her heritage front and center. The STEM stuff is still there, but it's much more, I don't want to say hidden, but it's woven in around her heritage as opposed to being front and center. I love how you did that.

**TS:** Well, in part, because what you can easily find about her anywhere you look, is all of that STEM, all of that math. I was like, but there's this whole other huge-- What is the umbrella of her is this Cherokee identity, right? Then this is another part and parcel of her that's manifested out into the world that way, but you can easily find that. What people have done, in my mind, as a disservice to her is not saying where she comes from.

She didn't set to be an aerospace engineer. She went to college. She was the only woman in her math classes, and got a lot of flack from male students. It didn't bother her because she had come from a family in a community that boys and girls were educated equally, and that was the expectation.

There was never a sense of, she should not be developing her mind and her gifts and abilities, and serving others with that. She gets out, and she goes and teaches math. Then she wants to do other things. She goes to Washington, DC. She works for the bureau. They send her out to a boarding school in the Southwest, but this whole time she's taking graduate courses in astronomy and more in math.

The war comes. They are wanting people to help. Her father, you know, her Cherokee father, Cherokee mother encourage her to apply. Other friends, encouraged her to apply. She gets on out there and helps correct plane defects so that pilots aren't dying. It evolves from there. She's literally just doing calculations, but she never planned to do any of those things.

Then she goes on and studies, and she's the only woman on this top secret team. But like I say, those things you can easily read about. Those are easily found in any article, or any anthology about women in STEM about her.

What people don't have an understanding or a knowledge about is all of the decisions, all the things she's making stem from that young girl, Cherokee girl, who grew up in Park Hill, Oklahoma, and the support and the grounding she had as a Cherokee person, launched her into the world to do these things. I felt a strong affinity with her in telling the story from that perspective, because that's not what you're going to find anywhere else.

**GP:** Carole, I want to circle back to talk a little bit more about a sense of place in your story. I'm paging through *Unspeakable* as we're talking. One of the things that jumped out at me is even though it says Tulsa Race Massacre, right in the subtitle, we don't actually see the massacre part until very close to the end. You said earlier, it's almost like a love story to Greenwood and to this community that existed.

The focus really is on that piece until we get to the moment in the elevator, and then the violence that comes after. Can you talk a little bit about that choice to shine a spotlight on the community and really emphasize that community aspect? You end with the community element as well with the unveiling of the monument and people coming together, there is that element of the focus being on the community.

Yes, the violence is there. It's not skirted over, by any means, but it's not as prominent as one would imagine it could have been. Can you talk about that dance between telling the truth to the kids, but also having that positive element and that community aspect as the grounding force?



**CBW:** Sure. That was a conscious choice to focus on the community as it once was, as opposed to giving the spotlight to the violence. It was a choice that I think was an appropriate one, and perhaps the only choice, for the audience, the young audience that I was writing for. The approach that I took, well, I could have gone two ways.

I could have focused on say, one family and their experience of the Race Massacre, or I could have focused on the globally experience of the African American community in Greenwood and how they fared during the massacre. I chose the latter approach. In doing that, the Greenwood community is really the main character of the book because you don't hear any names otherwise, besides Reverend AC Jackson, I think that's the only name that I mentioned.

That's the only person whose name I mentioned in the text. That is a doctor who was one of the most prominent black surgeons in the nation. He was killed, happened to have been killed in the massacre. I viewed the community, the place as the main character. I love recreating various historical Mila. I did that in *Becoming Billie Holiday*.

I've done it in several other historical books, but never so focused as in this book on a community as the main character. In order to have young readers experience the loss, or be able to measure the loss that the Tulsa Race Massacre caused, they had to first become part of that community. Casting the community as a character, enabled them to do that.

It drew them in. It showed them, first of all, five black people found their way out to Tulsa, how and why they found their way out to Tulsa, because of violence, seeking better opportunities, as exodus in the late 19th Century.

That's what got them there. Then they reached then-known as Magic City, and the wealth from the oil boom trickled down to the African American community. They weren't necessarily getting rich off of oil, but they were getting rich because there was money there and people were spending it, and the people who were making money off the oil boom needed services.

They needed furriers. They needed people who could clean houses. They needed various services. They needed people who were skilled at various trades. African Americans shared in the wealth that the oil boom was creating and built this community called Greenwood, which then I show how it was built, what existed there, an ice cream parlor, several movie theaters, libraries, hospital, schools that rivaled those in the white community.

They just weren't separate, but unequal. Some say the schools were better than the schools that white children attended. I showed that even though the color barrier existed, even though the society was segregated then, black people had attained a certain level of achievement in Tulsa that was probably best exemplified by the fact that there was six private airplanes in the community.

**GP:** Wow.

**CBW:** I always tell kids, I don't even know anybody who owns a private plane today. You have to look at celebrities, or Corporate Execs, or Richard Branson, somebody like that to know a real-life person who owns a private airplane. But yes, there were six families who owned private airplanes, that at a time when most families didn't even own cars.

I wanted to show that wealth, but also, to show that everybody wasn't rich, that some people did work as maids. They had Thursdays off, and they got their hair done at, as you said it, at Miss Mabel's Beauty Salon, and that marriage proposals took place at Williams Confectionery. All of those



little place names that I sprinkled in and the numbers of how many stores, there were 200 stores in that business district, that all created the character that was the Greenwood community, which stars as the main character in the book.

Of course, Floyd was able to bring it to life through his illustrations. I think that that character development that takes place in the first part of the book, then it builds empathy in the readers so that by the time the Race Massacre takes place, the readers are able to feel how the community might have felt at that time to have lost their homes. 8,000 people were left without homes, and many left the city. It was important to me to recreate that community, and to develop the character that the community represented in *Unspeakable*.

**GP:** Yeah. It's interesting, you mentioned also the illustrations. In a way, the illustrations personalize it and the text keeps it more like the community is the central character. But, for instance, there's a family of four, it's a mother, father, and then two girls. They look maybe four and seven years old. They appear on the cover, we see them on the cover. Then we kind of see bits and pieces of that story carried through.

We see the car arriving in the first spread. Then we see them unpacking their car, and then we see a snippet here and there of them in Greenwood, in the district. Then, we see that piece carried through, but it's not their story. They're just one of the anchors. There's a couple of other recurring characters that I've noticed, when they're fighting, there's one particular black man who appears multiple times.

It seems to be very much a central figure in terms of the illustrations. But again, they're not named, they're not actual characters. They're representations of the greater community that make it feel personal because we feel like we know them by seeing their pictures again and again on the pages.

**CBW:** Exactly, and that is part of Floyd's genius to have done that because those people, as you said, are representative of the entire community, but they become symbols in the books.

**GP:** Yes.

**CBW:** They become symbols. The cover itself, as you said, features that family. Listeners, if you look at the cover, the composition is absolutely perfect. There's one girl, the youngest girl has one eye closed and one eye opened, while her father and mother's arms embrace and try to shield her. The family's all touching, although maybe one girl's hand is just touching a little bit, but they're all touching.

It creates a circle, but the central part of that image is the little girl's, the youngest girl's eye that was open. I think that eye is telling us, "Believe what you see, believe this story that is about to unfold. It really happened. Don't believe in anybody who says it didn't happen or who tries to diminish the effect of this event on Greenwood."

**GP:** Yeah. Even though they aren't named characters, it personalizes the story in a way that I think for young readers, they would feel connected to. It didn't just happen to adults, often some war in trenches, or something. This happened, and it included kids their own age, who—

**CBW:** Exactly.

**GP:** —also had to run away. That I think makes it feel even more visceral for the readers.

**CBW:** Yeah, and that's one of the reasons that I think that a topic like this is suitable for kids because the Race Massacre impacted kids, who had to run, some of whom died and many of whom had to flee with their families.



**GP:** Yeah. One thing that has come up again and again, in this conversation with both of you is the importance of the location. It's no accident that we had both of you on together, and both of your books have Oklahoma as a central setting for the story. I'd love to hear both of you talk about, obviously we've already touched on how Tulsa relates to the setting, but Traci, can you talk a little bit about how Oklahoma as a place has helped shape the story on your side?

**TS:** Well, if you think about long before it was Oklahoma, it was the home of Wichita, and Osage, and cattle people. Then we had many forced removals of tribes across the country. Now, there are 39 tribes that are here within what are the boundaries of the state of Oklahoma. But again, they were moved in before Oklahoma was formed in 1907.

It's a relatively new state when you look at the list of states, and when they came into the structure that is The United States. My ancestors came here during the forced removal of the Cherokee Nation in the winter of 1838 into the spring of 1839. We had to reform our government.

As Carole's story effects were that some of those people that were in Greenwood that had property, were black Cherokee folks, as well as black Muskogee folks. The Muskogee Nation, was another Southeastern tribe that was forcibly removed. Our folks came here and just before statehood in 1907, the federal government had a process called allotment. Cherokee, and Muskogee, and other Nations had communal land base that the tribe oversaw.

Families lived in different places, had different areas where they had their crops, animals, et cetera, but no one owned their own specific plot of land. The thought process toward assimilation was, well, let's break that up and give people individual assignments. Part of in that removal, some of the people that were removed were also enslaved Africans that were owned by Cherokee, Muskogee, Choctaw, Chickasaw peoples. Those folks in the treaty after the civil war in 1866 were made to be citizens of the tribes.

But after that, in the allotment period, they got plots of land. Some of those people living in what we call Greenwood later, are folks that are Freedmen descendants, having received those allotments, even some probably 20 years before, but also people who were Cherokee and Creek and also African descendants. What you find in that reality is, like I say, pre-Oklahoma is a very dynamic society that again, people don't know about historically.

One of the things I talk about in classified is that, the timeline is that Mary Golda Ross's mother donates some of her assigned allotted land to have a schoolhouse built so that all the kids, which ends up being her own children, of course, Mary's cousins, and others who live around them, because families were usually allotted land together, they can all attend primary school together. Then when Mary goes to high school, or gets out of the primary school age, she moves into Tahlequah and lives with her grandparents. Then later, like I say, goes off to what had previously been the Cherokee female seminary, which was a school-- Our Cherokee Nation has set up the first free public schools west of the Mississippi once we were relocated here.

We had to start over and build everything from scratch, but education was part of that. That later purchased by the state of Oklahoma, becomes a state teacher's college, which Mary attended. There's all of these aspects of Oklahoma history when students, classes, families are reading these books that they can do a deeper dive into and learn even more.

It's not just this one person or this one community that these things happen to at this one time. There's this whole history that goes on and predates how you get to Mary's life living out the way it did or Greenwood being the target of such racial hatred and violence. I took a class last fall on Black



Wall Street. We studied again that whole history, which I knew obviously, on the Native Nation side more, but really looking at what was the history of lynching?

What was the history of policing? What was the history of the formation of Tulsa in oil and gas, and all these different things? There's a lot, I feel like that while the books are set for the seven-and-up range, that you can work with students who are in upper-middle school and high school to take that learning deeper.

It's a wonderful entry point to kick that off and to look at these larger issues on a systemic way, but then also how it impacts regular everyday folks, because to Carole's point, the majority of us are regular everyday folks. We are not people who have planes, but why did some people have planes in that neighborhood? Why were people able to congregate some wealth there? Well, some of that was because they were already landowners.

There were people previously who had land, other people who came in and were able to buy their own businesses, and set up shop, and provide services for others. Like I say, it's a very dynamic state. Like I say, it later becomes a state, but there's so much history here, and unfortunately, so much of it that is never taught here.

I feel like I don't want young Cherokee people, Native people, black people in Oklahoma to not know that they come from remarkable folks, and remarkable things have happened here any longer, because that's just not the narrative that I ever got growing up here.

**GP:** One of the things that's come up again and again, on both of your answers is this idea of getting people to think a little bit more deeply about the history. Carole earlier in the interview, you talked about how you wanted to open the door for questions, for people to be asking questions. I will now turn a question to both of you. Maybe Carole, you can start us off with your answer. The question is, what questions would you hope that your readers would ask once they've read this book?

**CBW:** I don't know if they'll ask this question, but I really want them to think it's probably not the question that they'll come up with initially, but how can we ensure that this never happens again? How can we stop this kind of violence?

I think the answer is certainly beyond children other than to, on the level of a child, it goes back to the golden rule, to treat others as we'd like to be treated ourselves, to understand that we're all one human race, and that we all have equal rights to life, liberty in the pursuit of happiness. It's not a pie that gets divided up, and one person gets the crumbs, and the other person gets nothing, and you have your piece. No, it's not like that.

It's learning how to be kind to people, and having empathy. I think that when stories like these are told, it helps to cultivate empathy in kids and helps kids to see beyond themselves and beyond their own condition, and look back at the past to reflect. But also, as I said, to connect the dots between what happened then, and what persists today in terms of prejudice and in terms of hate violence.

I would like the kids to ask, how can we stop? And if nothing else, to vow that they won't participate in anything like that, whether it's bullying someone in class or buying into learned prejudices that many kids inherit and are taught in the home. That's the question, how can we ensure that something like this does not happen in the future?

**GP:** Absolutely. Traci, what about you?



**TS:** My gut tails with what Carole was saying in that, who else don't I know about? That's what I want kids to think about. Well, who else has done things that I haven't heard about? Or of those people that I do know about, let's say that are maybe similar to them or not necessarily, what's missing in the depictions that I've already read, what's already been shared out in the world?

Because again, everyone sits down when they're writing a story, a screenplay, et cetera. They may be taking a slice of life, whatever, but they're taking a piece and presenting that forward, that isn't necessarily a prism, right, that is one slice. What you find is everyone is much more dynamic, of course, than that small slice that you get to see.

I would hope that they would question what is being involved here, because you do start to realize in a very systematic way, as you look at things that there are a lot of people that are not represented in curriculum, in books that are available, in other forms of media, TV, film, et cetera. Why are those portrayals, why are those stories not more available outside of the community?

There's a lot of work to be done on that because our young people are not majority white in this country. Even younger adults, in their 20s are not majority white. Our future is already here. We are doing a very poor job in giving them tools for that future. It doesn't matter what community they come from.

They can be white, you're in a very poor place if you are not well-versed in who your peers are, who these other communities are, and how you will be navigating the future together, if you're only seeing one larger viewpoint, because that's not even our reality now.

**GP:** Yeah. Like you said, the two questions tie together, because when we have a deeper knowledge of who our peers are and who else is out there, what the other experiences are that we may not know about that, breeds empathy, which hopefully, with empathy allows people to be kind, and to stand up to bullies, and to avoid allowing such violence to happen again in the future.

I think those two pieces go hand-in-hand in growing together and moving toward the future, which, as you said so well Traci, is already here. I feel like we could keep talking about these wonderful books for another couple of hours, but I want to respect both of your time. I know you both have lots of writing to do. I'd love to hear really briefly what's next for you. What else would you like to share with our listeners that's coming up? Carole, can you start us off?

**CBW:** Yeah. I have two titles coming out this fall, *The Faith of Elijah Cummings: The North Star of Equal Justice*, and *Madam Speaker: Nancy Pelosi Calls the House to Order*. Both are picture book biographies.

**GP:** I love it. What about you, Traci?

**TS:** I've got two fiction picture books next year so I'm shifting gears. The first one's out on February 8th, called *Powwow Day*, and that's illustrated by Chickasaw Nation citizen, Madelyn Goodnight from Charlesbridge. Then from co-cular at Penguin Random House, I have *Being Home*, which is illustrated by Caldecott medalist, Michaela Goade. That'll be at later in the year, I'm not sure quite when. I'm super excited about both of those.

**GP:** I am excited to keep my eyes out for all of those titles. This is really, really great. It is an absolute pleasure having both of you here today. I always end with the same question. I wanted to give it a little bit of a different spin based on something that Traci said early on in this interview, this idea of showing up in, the character of Mary Golda Ross showing up in her full humanity.

It made me think, as writers, both of you showed up in your full humanity on the page with each of these books. It really felt like you were all in, in terms of your heart and how you presented the



stories and being true to the stories. I'm curious, what's your number one tip for writers, in particular, a number one tip to help them show up with their full humanity on the page?

**TS:** I think you have to be honest with yourself. Do a self-assessment before I start a project with, what is it that I know about myself and what do I know about whatever subject I'm writing about? Again, it doesn't matter if it's fiction or nonfiction. And then, where are the gaps? Where are my gaps in craft? Where are my gaps in knowledge? What I need to know in terms of maybe people, the setting, the chain of events.

Then I have to look at, I'm I the person to be sharing this story? Are some of those gaps going to be too large to overcome, or does it need to be put aside and looked at later, when I have maybe less gaps in craft or less gaps in my knowledge base, more self-assurance in terms of what I can bring to the page? Because I do feel like if you don't have that sense of responsibility and self-reflection, it can be very difficult to get things on the page that don't do harm.

We see a lot of books that-- I can speak for the books representing Native people. I see a lot of books that are more generic in tone, they're written for a non-Native audience. Sometimes that happens from Native writers too. I want to say, who at the core is being reflected here most closely to the story, and make sure that those folks see themselves there, as much as anyone else. It starts with me, really examining myself.

There's some things that, okay, this is not the season for that. It may never be the season, but it's really an honest assessment. Sometimes that happens when I start in on a story and then other people are like, no, no, no. [laughs] You have to be open to that. I feel like the writing process or really any creative process is one of being daring, but also being extremely humble at the same time. They both exist on the same side of the coin. You have to acknowledge that, and the work gets better because of that.

**GP:** Yes, Carol, what about you?

**CBW:** I certainly agree with what Traci has said, and I would add right about what you care about after you've decided whether the story is indeed yours to tell, but you should really care deeply about your subject matter. For one thing, you never know how long you're going to have to live with it in terms of research, and in terms of revision.

It could be a matter of months. It could be several years. It could be a lifetime, in the case of some projects. You'd better care about the subject an awful lot. The more you're able to convey how much you care about the subject, the more your readers will care about the subject. I love it.

**TS:** So true.

**GP:** It has been an absolute delight speaking with both of you today. Thank you for sharing your wisdom and your insight. It's just been lovely.

**CBW:** Thank you, Gabriela.

**TS:** Wado, Gabriela, and Wado, Carole for all you've shared. It's always a pleasure to spend time with you. I appreciate you bringing us together, Gabriela.

**GP:** All right, word nerds, thanks so much for listening. Keep writing, and keep being awesome.

