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Q & A with Emma Bland Smith

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jan 23, 2023

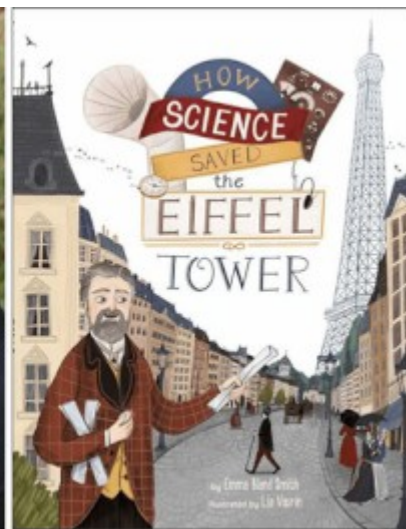
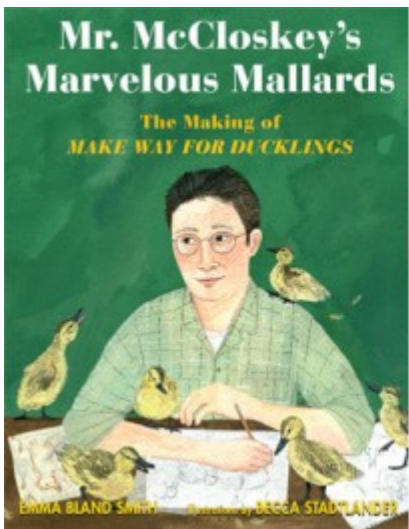
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As a child, Emma Bland Smith fell in love with Robert McCloskey's books. This affection has continued as a librarian in the San Francisco Public Library, and in her latest picture book biography, Mr. McCloskey's

Marvelous Mallards: The Making of 'Make Way for Ducklings,' illustrated by Becca Stadtlander. The book is both a behind-the-scenes story of McCloskey's beloved Caldecott-winning book, and a love letter to one of Smith's favorite authors and stories. Smith is also the author of the Maddy McGuire, CEO chapter book series, and other picture book biographies including The Gardener of Alcatraz and How Science Saved the Eiffel Tower. PW spoke with Smith about how she discovers the stories she writes, the ways her library work and writing are intertwined, and how she hopes her books instill the value of perseverance, like many of the subjects in her books and the Mallard family in her favorite childhood book.

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long-term careers for me. And, then it just hit me... I should be a librarian! So, I went back to school to get my library degree. I decided that I wanted a job that I could see myself doing for the rest of my life—one that reflected my values, and where I could be surrounded by books and people who love books, and I could help people. That's a big part of librarianship. I feel like it was a calling. I still do.

When did you first become a writer? How did you begin to write for children?

I've always wanted to be a writer. And, when I finished college and then graduate school, I moved to New York, and I worked in women's magazines for four years. This gave me a little taste of working in the world of letters and writing. A few years later, I moved back home to San Francisco, and I did some freelance writing. I got pieces published in magazines but I wanted to write things that were more personal and inspired by my own experiences. Then, when I went to library school part-time, I had my two kids, and I was reading all of these amazing books to them and taking classes on youth literature; I rediscovered and fell in love with children's books. I also started trying to write picture books and early readers, and began submitting them to publishers. It took about six years of writing, and hundreds of manuscripts, until I found my agent, Essie White at the Storm Literary Agency. Since I've been working with her, we've sold nine nonfiction picture books and two fiction chapter book series. My first book, *Journey*, came out in 2016. While I write both fiction and nonfiction, nonfiction picture books have turned out to be my niche.

In what ways do your writing and library work converge and/or influence each other?

There are a few ways. First, I do a lot of work in the various libraries' children's rooms, and it's great to see first-hand what interests children, and which books are coming in. Then, there's my research librarian background. I do love a good research puzzle! For instance, if someone asks me to try to figure something out at the library, and as long as I have the time, I will do it. Finding answers to questions is definitely an important part of working at the library and researching my children's books. It's so exciting to have something that you're looking for, and need to find a primary source for it, or you need to find just the right quotation that will work for your book. My editor Carolyn Yoder at Astra Books for Young Readers taught me the importance of this. You might go through old magazines or online sources, and discover all kinds of things. It can be so satisfying when you finally find what you're looking for.

On top of this, I think my two jobs are very complementary. Being a writer entails a lot of thinking, researching, and writing which can be very solitary. This works for me because by nature I tend to be an introvert, and I'm happy just to be at home or go on walks by myself. But being a librarian pulls me out of that and into the world with people. I think this interaction is so important because it actually makes me a better writer. This all improves my mood and my entire outlook on life. I'm more refreshed and I can come up with new ideas and dive into my writing again.

How did you come up with the ideas for your recent biographies?

I'm always on the lookout for story ideas about people who are interesting, who may have some drama in their lives, or things that lend themselves to great narratives. Because that's the structure of many narrative nonfiction picture book biographies; that's how my three recent books came to be. I got the idea to write *How Science Saved the Eiffel Tower* when I was in Paris a

I am a substitute librarian or what they call a "temporary exempt as needed librarian." This means that I move around and work at whichever library branch that needs me on any particular day. I'm the reference librarian, working most of the time at the reference desk and helping patrons find books and use the computers. I especially love working in the children's section; it's my favorite place. It's a fun and interesting job. I've been there for eight years.

How and why did you decide to become a librarian?

I'd been bouncing around a little bit doing a lot of freelance writing and some teaching. I was teaching French mostly at a community college, and then at the high school level. Neither of these jobs seemed like they were going to be viable



couple of years ago, and the tour guide told us about how the Eiffel Tower was almost torn down after the World's Fair. My ears perked up, and I thought to myself, "That's fascinating!" So, I looked into it, and it turned into a book. As for *The Gardner of Alcatraz: A True Story*, I was on a field trip to Alcatraz Island with my son's fourth grade class and learned a little about the beautiful gardens there, and that they had been maintained in the 1940s by a few prison inmates. I had wanted to write a book about Alcatraz for a while, but had not found a hook until I learned about one specific inmate gardener who had a fascinating backstory. Then, there's my latest book, about Robert McCloskey. I've always been a fan of his books, and he's an idol of mine.

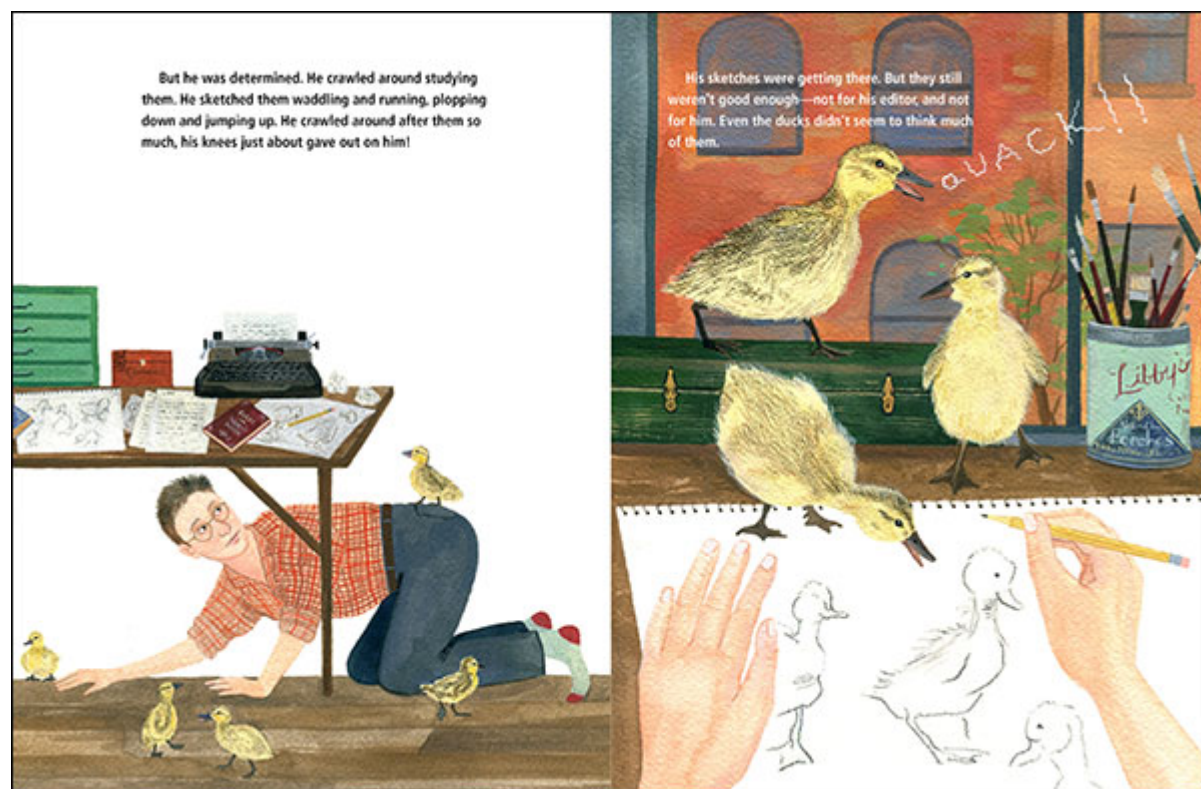


How did you discover the story about McCloskey and his ducklings?

One day, I read an anecdote about McCloskey that in order to draw the ducklings, he went out and bought a whole box of newborn, newly hatched ducklings. Then, when he brought them home, the ducklings wreaked havoc in his New York apartment. I thought that was hilarious and that it might make a good picture book. Of course, I researched to see if the story had already been written, and it hadn't, so I started researching and writing the book. Fortunately, I found a lot of primary sources including personal letters he'd written and speeches he'd made. With these, I was able to add the details of the humor and hilarity of the ducklings running around making a humongous mess. I also discovered my through line for the story: McCloskey's persistence and determination—and perseverance to create the most perfect book that he could. It took him six years from when he thought of the idea to finish writing and illustrating the book.

Are there things that didn't make it into your book?

Yes. The first was that McCloskey gave wine to the ducklings because they moved around so much, and he couldn't get them to be still. It was the only thing he could do to slow them down. So that's one of the funny details that is fun to tell people, but not appropriate for a children's book. The second thing was that McCloskey bought the ducklings from a chef's wholesale market where they'd buy meat, fish, and fowl to serve at their restaurants. And, after illustrating the ducklings, about four or five months later, he tried to sell the ducks *back* to the chef's market. No one would take them, but McCloskey had a friend who owned a farm in the country, so he brought the ducklings there. I decided to leave out this anecdote too, because it didn't serve the book's narrative, or go along with the way most of us know McCloskey.



A spread from *Mr. McCloskey's Marvelous Mallards: The Making of 'Make Way for Ducklings*, illustrated by Becca Stadtlander.

Did you have any worries or fears in writing a story about McCloskey and his classic tale of the Mallard family? And, if you did, what did you do to squelch them?

Yes. I was a bit nervous about writing about someone who was a beloved icon in his genre. I didn't want to write anything that would tarnish people's personal memories and/or

their connections with him, and at the same time I wanted the story to be completely factual. So I contacted his daughter, Jane, to read the manuscript. She was kind enough to review it, make comments, and give it her approval. That was very meaningful to me. In addition, I had several scholars and authors who were experts on McCloskey read the book, too.

What's next for you? Any new picture book biographies we should know about?

My next book is my first picture book biography about a woman, entitled *The Fabulous Fannie Farmer: Kitchen Scientist and America's Cook*. Farmer's story came about from something I learned from my daughter for her Inventor's Day school project. For the project, she had to choose an inventor to dress like and speak about. She had discovered that Fannie Farmer invented modern measurements, and chose her as her inventor. That is when I first heard of Farmer, and I started researching her story. It actually took me a year to pin down my hook for the book, but I finally did. The book will be out in 2024.

What do you hope your readers will take away from your books?

I hope that they take away the importance of perseverance. I want readers to realize that making mistakes and being able to fail at something is part of any process—and that there's nothing wrong with it. In fact, in many ways, failing can contribute to a greater end result. I also hope that in the process of trying something new, if something doesn't turn out the way they want, they can try again until they do; or maybe it will turn out better, or give them another idea. People often say, "Everything happens for a reason!" The truth is if you look back over your life... every single time something didn't work out, it led to a choice that brought you here. Many of my books have these themes.

Can you share any advice for teachers/librarians working with and/or writing for kids?

If there's anything I've learned from being a librarian it's to respect what kids want to read and what their interests are. If they want books about trucks, I'm going to find them books about trucks, because that's how I'm going to help build that love of reading, by finding books that fill their interests right now. The same is true for writing for kids. I may like to write non-fiction, but I need to write nonfiction books in such a way that it's fun, engaging, and fascinating. If we give kids books that interest them, they will hopefully become lifelong readers. That's our goal as librarians, and writers. We want them to love stories and books, and we want them to always be curious and want to read the next thing.

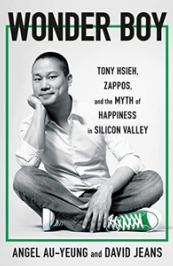
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