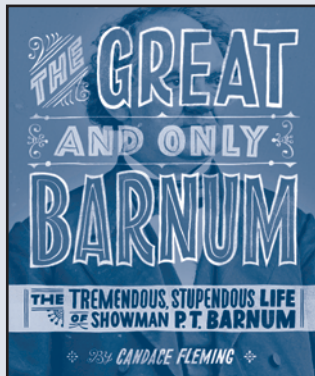


# Biographies

## BEHIND THE SCENES

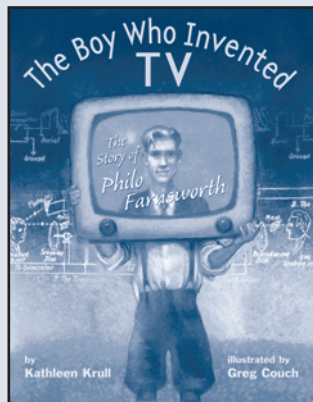
Look inside for conversations on biography  
with award-winning authors

**CANDACE FLEMING**  
and **KATHLEEN KRULL**!



“The best  
biographies are  
those that peek into  
the heart and soul  
of their subject.”

—CANDACE FLEMING



“It’s inspiring to  
read about people  
who overcome  
obstacles that seem  
insurmountable.”

—KATHLEEN KRULL



## In the Classroom

*There is no better way to connect students with history than by reading the life stories of intriguing people. They will delight in discovering how ordinary people can accomplish extraordinary things.*

- Share with students that the word *biography* literally means “life writing” and comes from the roots *bio* and *graphia*. Have them try their hand at writing a biography by choosing a person of interest to research and write about. Students can work independently or with a partner. Have plenty of biographies in your classroom to use as models when the students begin their own.
- Create a separate space in your classroom library devoted to biographies. Keep it stocked with a wide range of texts that will appeal to your class, and be sure to include books written at varying reading levels so that all students may enjoy this genre.
- Build biography into every unit of the curriculum. For example, if students are learning about The Holocaust, have them read about Anne Frank. If students are studying Black history, have them read about Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, Jr.



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# A Conversation with CANDACE FLEMING

## Q: Why do you write biographies?

**A:** I write biographies so I can be nosy and dig around in people's lives. Seriously. On my desk I keep a note card on which I've scrawled a quote from John F. Kennedy. It reads, "All history is gossip." Of course, if I had my druthers, I'd rewrite that quote to read, "All history is gossip as long as it's been substantiated and cited." Still, I think there's a lot of truth to the idea of history as gossip. After all, that's precisely what I'm digging for when I'm researching a biographical subject—childhood memories, reminisces of the neighbors, revealing diary entries. In short, I'm searching for the human stuff—the things that formed them and made them who they were.

## Q: What makes a biography strong?

**A:** The best biographies are those that peek into the heart and soul of their subject. They delve deep beneath the surface of "fact" to find the real human story. Let me give you an example.

Here is a fact: Phineas Taylor Barnum was born on July 5, 1810.

Here is the true story that lies just below the fact: In 1810, a baby boy was born to the Barnum family. Just the day before, the baby's hometown of Bethel, Connecticut, had celebrated the country's birthday with parades, picnics, and fireworks. But on the fifth of July, Irena Barnum gave birth to her first son. Her husband,

Philo Barnum, named the boy after his prank-playing grandfather, Phineas Taylor. While the baby would eventually grow up to be known the world over as P. T. Barnum, when he was a baby his family simply called him Tale. Tale never regretted not being a firecracker baby. "I would have enjoyed being born on the Fourth of July," he later wrote, "but maybe my tardiness was for the best. Competition between Barnum and Independence Day would have been too much. As it was, I made my appearance after peace and quiet had been restored and the audience had returned to its seat."

The difference between the two is profound. Facts are nouns; stories are verbs. Together, they make history soar. They make a story. And stories

are what connect readers to the subject on a human level. The subject becomes flesh and blood, as full of complexities and contradictions as you and I. That's what good biography does—it brings its subject back to life through telling details, lively quotes, and humorous anecdotes. And in doing so—in revealing that human story beneath the facts—it not only leads its readers toward an understanding of Barnum and his time, but an understanding of themselves as well.

## Q: What inspired you to write about P. T. Barnum?

**A:** While doing research for my biography *The Lincolns*, I came across this marvelous little tidbit: In late February 1860, Abraham Lincoln—about to give an important political speech at Cooper Union in New York City—took a stroll down Broadway. At the corner of Broadway and Ann Street he stopped to marvel at P. T. Barnum's famous American Museum. It must have been a jaw-dropping sight to this country lawyer from small-town Illinois. The outside walls of the place were decorated with huge, brightly colored plaques featuring ostriches, elephants, and gorillas. The roof fluttered with dozens of colorful flags. And on a second-story wraparound balcony, a brass band played loudly and badly. It's purpose? To get people to pay the museum admission price just to escape from the music.



Photo © 2009 Library of Congress.

Did Lincoln go in? I wondered. Did he spend an afternoon wandering through the museum? I began searching the historical record, but came up empty-handed. If Lincoln had visited Barnum's museum, he hadn't left any evidence behind. What my research did uncover, however, was something even more incredible—a magical world of mermaids and mastodon skeletons created by a blustering, braggart of a man. I was intrigued. Beguiled. Curious. I had to know more. The result? *The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of P. T. Barnum*.

**Q: What is your process for researching and writing a biography?**

**A:** I start by asking questions—lots of questions. One question inevitably leads to another. For example, when I began researching P. T. Barnum's life, I asked myself, what in Barnum's personality made him such a showman? This question led to the next: Was he show-off as a child? Which led to the next question: What kind of childhood did he have? And then: Did he have friends? Did he have a best friend? Who? What did they do together? Did they ever get in trouble? What kind of trouble? You can see why asking questions and being nosy leads to years of research. I can't help myself. I always want to know more.

I search for the answers to my questions in a variety of places—books, magazine articles, newspapers, and Internet sites. I also visit special collections, university libraries, historical societies, and museum archives. I talk with experts and scholars. And I always, always travel to the places my biographical subjects lived. Nothing brings me closer to them than to wander through the important places in their lives. I love to just sort of feel the air, and imagine them writing at their desk or digging in their garden. Eventually—with enough research—they begin to come alive for me. When they do, I know it's time to write.

When writing, I try my best to be engaging. I include telling details, funny anecdotes, and pithy quotes. In fact, I use many of the elements found in fiction. But while fiction writers can use their imaginations, the historical record limits me. I can't make up anything. This is what makes the writing of nonfiction an often exhilarating, sometimes frustrating, but always satisfying experience.

**Q: What tips can you offer to young researchers/biographers?**

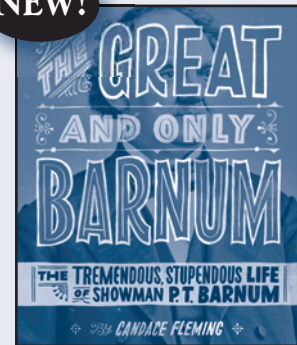
- A:**
1. Chose someone who fascinates you, bewitches or beguiles you. You're going to be spending a lot of time getting to know this person.
  2. Ask questions—lots and lots of questions. Start by making a list of the things you are most curious about. You know, those small, personal details that make up a person's life. What was their favorite food? Did they sleep on their back? What did they carry in their pocket? Did they believe in God? Once you get started, I guarantee, you won't be able to stop.
  3. Don't be afraid to go beyond books, magazines, and the Internet when doing your research. Write to experts, authors, and historical societies. You'll be amazed at how willing they are to help.
  4. Don't believe everything you read. The rule of thumb is if you can find the information in three different places, it's probably accurate. If you can't find it in three different places, however, don't despair. You can still use a good story if you cite your source, as well as explain to your reader any factual conflict you may have encountered.
  5. Put your passion for your subject into your writing. This is the best way to tell an engaging story. Your enthusiasm will enliven your writing and enthrall your reader.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Candace Fleming** is the prolific author of many critically acclaimed, bestselling books for children. She lives in Mt. Prospect, Illinois. For more information about the author, visit her Web site at [www.candacefleming.com](http://www.candacefleming.com)

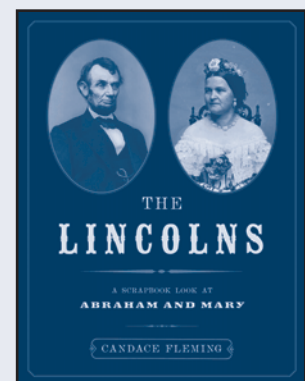
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# A Conversation with KATHLEEN KRULL

## Q: Why do you write biographies?

A: Is it okay to confess to being just plain nosy? Few things sizzle more than the details of someone else's life. Biographies appeal to the nosiness in all of us and encourage curiosity—"inquiring minds do want to know."

Let's try to get this answer on a higher plane: Biographies are stories—dramatic, enthralling, inspirational, some of the best stories ever—and they're true. Reading biographies is one of the best ways of making history seem real. So I'm trying to inspire awe and wonder at our history, to help readers understand how our crazy time is illuminated by the past, to help them discover how bizarre the truth is, how time after time it outperforms fiction.

And rising to an even higher plane: I believe that we read biographies to find out who we are. So, if I can help young readers in this search, I feel privileged. Very often, when you ask famous achievers—celebrities, scientists, politicians, sports stars—what most influenced their direction, they will mention a biography they read when they were young. Biographies give us a safe way of trying on another persona. We read about other people so we can discover all the ways we are and aren't like them—this tells us something about our own identity, our goals, our possibilities in life.

## Q: What makes a biography strong?

A: A dramatic journey with twists and turns and shocks and awe. Most of all, a life brimming with big, vexing problems. It's inspiring to read about people who overcome obstacles that seem insurmountable. How did they do it, who helped, who hindered, what took so long, what can we learn from the struggle? Why did a bright fellow like L. Frank Baum not achieve financial success until his mid-forties (in my biography *The Road to Oz*)? How could Ted Geisel be the aimless doodler everyone worried about, voted "Least Likely to Succeed," and go on to doodle his way to immortality as Dr. Seuss (in *The Boy on Fairfield Street*)? How could Philo Farnsworth, an American teen living on a farm in 1920, with no connections and no money, go on to create something that changed our world (in *The Boy Who Invented TV*)? Philo's story had extra added drama because his invention was so spectacular, and I highlight this with a "Life Before Philo" section for readers who can't even imagine existence without TV.

## Q: What inspired you to write about Philo Farnsworth?

A: I've been collecting notes about Philo for a long time. He's just the kind of person I like to write about—fascinating but little-known, especially to young readers. I knew there would be a dramatic journey to relate. Historians have neglected him

until recently—2002, when a critical mass of three biographies for adults appeared, and I knew I would have enough material to work with. When my super-smart editor, Janet Schulman, suggested a book on Philo, I jumped on the opportunity.

## Q: What is your process for researching and writing a biography?

A: I think of myself as a large (5 foot, 2 inch) flashlight, illuminating any avenue of information I can find. Most often, that road takes me to the library, of which I am a heavy user. For real research, detailed information that's been digested by scholars and carefully edited—you need books. The Internet—not so much. I also have learned not to rely completely on diaries and autobiographies, because many people tend to, um, lie about their lives for various reasons.



Instead, I seek what the best scholars have done with this material. I see my role as taking the valuable work of scholars and distilling it into a form that I hope will make children love, or at least like, history.

I take a mountain of notes on what is most interesting, and then revise, tinker, revise, edit, whittle, and then revise some more. If there is a key to what I do, it's that I don't use most of my information. As Voltaire said, "The best way to be boring is to leave nothing out." I like little ironies, like Philo's noble goals for TV—up to and including bringing about world peace—and his disappointment with the programming (he wouldn't even let his children watch).

I list my sources and suggested reading at the end, as I think one of the goals of a biography is to direct readers outward to learn more. With Philo, I'm thinking at least some readers will want to know a lot more about the science behind how TV works, so I included some Web sites to get started.

**Q: What is the most surprising thing you've discovered while doing research for a biography?**

**A:** My research constantly jolts me—one of the perks of the job. Just about everything about Philo was surprising. How could a three-year-old draw diagrams of a train's motor? How did he have so many responsibilities at eight—even being considered the "man" in the family

when his father was away? Why, when he finally made some money from raising and selling lambs, did he buy a violin instead of a bicycle? I'll never cease being astonished at how a fourteen-year-old could be out plowing the potato fields, look behind him at the rows of dirt, and then surge into thinking of how to create television using electricity. And his idealism—he wasn't a self-absorbed nerd, he genuinely wanted to help humanity and thought his machine was the way to do it.

**Q: What tips can you offer to young researchers/biographers?**

**A:** For those who teach young biographers, I recommend a book by Dr. Laura Robb called *Nonfiction Writing from the Inside Out: Writing Lessons Inspired by Conversations With Leading Authors* (Scholastic, 2004)—a great guide to the basics of all types of expository writing, including biographies. For the students themselves, a useful guide is *Write Your Own Biography* by Natalie Rosinsky (Compass Point Books, 2008).

I have a section on my Web site called "10 Tips for Students in Writing Biographies" ([www.kathleenkrull.com/bio10tips.html](http://www.kathleenkrull.com/bio10tips.html)). My favorite tips would be #6 (use only the best information you find, not all of it) and #8 (revise, revise, revise). And of course #10: have fun! And if you can't have fun, take comfort that you're learning skills that will be helpful the rest of your life.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Kathleen Krull is the author of many award-winning biographies for children and for older readers. She also collected and arranged sixty-two of America's best-loved, most singable folks songs in I Hear America Singing! She lives with her husband in San Diego. For more information about the author, visit her Web site at [www.kathleenkrull.com](http://www.kathleenkrull.com)*

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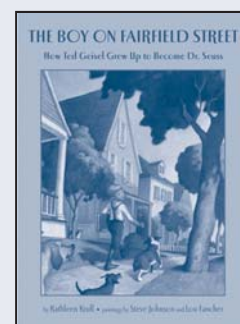


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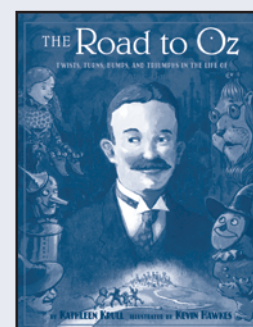


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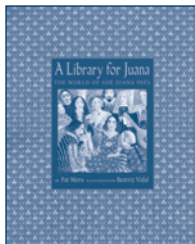
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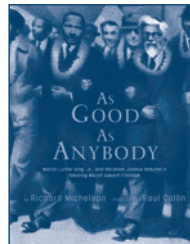
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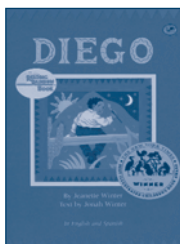
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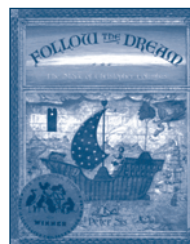
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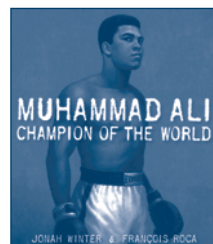
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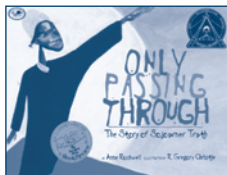
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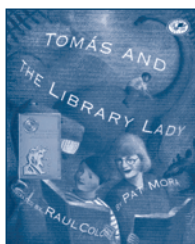
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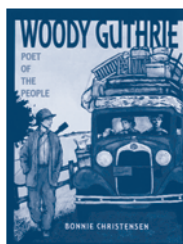
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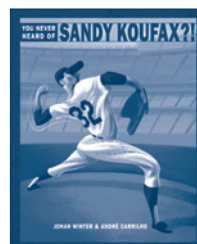
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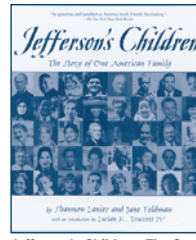
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