Moving through fear: A conversation with Susan Campbell Bartoletti

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Prior to its release in August 2010, Susan Campbell Bartoletti’s newest book, *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.: The Birth of an American Terrorist Group* (2010), received an incredibly positive response in the form of starred reviews from *School Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Publisher’s Weekly*, *Horn Book*, and *Kirkus Reviews*. Through her impeccable research and ability to weave a compelling story out of the place “where darkness and light smack up against each other” (Bartoletti & Zusak, 2008), she has made it possible for children and young adults to access and understand the horror of the Third Reich in *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler’s Shadow* (2005), famine in *Black Potatoes: The Story of the Great Irish Famine* (2001), and child labor in *Kids on Strike!* (1999) and *Growing Up in Coal Country* (1996). Richie Partington (2010), in his “Richie’s Pick” review of *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.*, writes “It is, of course, through reading a book like this—and understanding the “Why?”—that we gain the insight necessary to help stop the flames of hatred and fear from spreading in whatever direction they next travel.”

We had the occasion to talk with Susan shortly after she turned in the manuscript for *They Called Themselves the K.K.K.*, and she graced us with her delightful sense of humor and answered questions about her writing process and body of work—a perfect fit with this issue’s theme: literature that promotes healing, compassion, and activism. You can find out more about Susan at her website, http://www.scbartoletti.com.

**ON BEING CALLED TO WRITE A STORY**

**Johnson**: You mentioned that you do not belong to a writing group and that you don’t like to talk about your books at talks or appearances while you are in the process of writing. Can you tell us more about that?

**Bartoletti**: I don’t belong to a structured writing group, but I do have friends whom I’ll ask to read chapters or parts of chapters. Otherwise, I rarely talk about upcoming books because when I’m in the throes of the writing, it takes away the power. The more I talk about a book, the less compelled I feel to tell the story or to make meaning out of the research and to put it on paper. At that stage, I also don’t want other people to make meaning for me, before I’ve figured it out. Sometimes people can’t resist telling you what they think. In the early stages of writing, I need the room to make my own discoveries. But now that I’m in the “handing
They Called Themselves the K.K.K.: The Birth of an American Terrorist Group is a nonfiction book that explores a violent time in our nation’s history, the twelve-year period that followed the Civil War, known as Reconstruction. This period was a time of great tension and of great risk. It was also a time of great opportunity. By opportunity, I mean that we had a second chance to live up to our nation’s creed of equality and the right to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. We had a second chance to make our actions live up to the words of our forefathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. For this book, I pored over 2300 Slave Narratives, more than 8,000 pages of Congressional testimony collected during the Ku Klux Klan trials of 1871, as well as contemporaneous newspapers, diaries, and letters. One of the hardest things is deciding what information to include—or exclude—in order to construct a reasoned narrative of the past. Here, the word “reasoned” is important; a historian uses her faculties of reason in order to draw conclusions. To construct this reasoned narrative, I wanted divergent voices—voices from all sides and walks of life—to be heard: Klan supporters and non-supporters; Klansmen and victims; Republicans and Democrats; planters, farmers, and poor whites; the educated and uneducated; preachers and teachers; blacks and whites; male and female; and adults and children and teenagers, where their testimony could be found. I found many of these voices in the Congressional testimony, also known as the KKK Reports. I also found the voices in the Slave Narratives. Some historians question the reliability of the Slave Narratives, considering that they were collected more than 70 years after emancipation, but I have discovered that despite a poor or limited memory for some details, the interviewees remember some things with amazing clarity—like the day they learned they were free. I have been able to match up the congressional subcommittee reports and the oral histories. For me, one of the hardest thing is deciding which information to include and which to leave out, due to space limitations. Each time I found one person whose story I wanted to tell, all I had to do was turn the page, and there was another. But it’s my job as a historian and a writer to make reasoned decisions about evidence.

—Susan Campbell Bartoletti on her research for They Called Themselves the K.K.K. (2010)
follow those stories out? I emailed my editor and said, "How about if we consider changing the contract so that it'll be a book on the subject of Hitler Youth?" She had to get approval. It wasn't an easy position for her. But fortunately, everybody got on board. That's where I think you’re called, because I followed my heart. You have to write what you feel passionately about because otherwise the writing is false. Constantin Stanislavski, the famous Russian actor and theater director, called it emotional dishonesty if you try to portray a role or an emotion that you have never felt. If I tried to make myself passionate about something that I had no real interest in, it would be false. That said, I can tell you I have a wide range of interests, and can find myself interested even in the groceries that somebody is buying in front of me ... I try to figure out what meals they’re going to make or I’ll become judgmental about some of the items. [all laugh]

**ON HOPE AND TAKING A STAND**

**Fabbi:** You’ve spoken about the elements of story and what makes a good story. I get the feeling that you really enjoy the denouement, or the falling action part of the classical form. Are you drawn to writing about topics and issues that you know will maximize that falling action before there’s resolution?

**Bartoletti:** I’ve never thought about it that way. I do know this: in both fiction and nonfiction, I need to know the story’s climax before I can write. I am drawn to dark subjects in history, but I am also interested in showing that the lives of the victimized and exploited are greater than the violence and injustice that they suffered and that many did not suffer passively. Many were also active agents in their desire to improve their lives or to access and transform the political systems in their lives. As we grow up, we’re often told that when something bad happens, something good will happen, or when a door is closed a window is opened. Well, you know what? Sometimes, out of something bad, something else bad happens! Sometimes when a door is closed, the window is nailed shut! Sometimes trouble comes in fours and fives, not threes! Think of the Irish Famine. Think of the Third Reich. Think of the violence of the Ku Klux Klan and its legacy. Okay, I admit I am exaggerating here—I am actually a very hopeful person—but what I’m trying to say is this: in understanding the reality, in understanding the truth of this, therein lies the hope.

One of my favorite authors, Katherine Paterson, once said, "While truth is seldom comfortable, it is, finally, the greatest comfort."

**Fabbi:** There is hope in knowing the truth. Sometimes you just want someone to be honest with you.

**Bartoletti:** Yes. At the end of *Hitler Youth: Growing Up in Hitler's Shadow*, I pose a question to the readers: "What are you willing to do to prevent such shadow from falling over you and others?" I got an email from an adult who questioned my decision to put such responsibility on the shoulders of young people. This person said that she thought that was a heavy burden because young people need to know that there are plenty of adults out there working very hard to make sure that this doesn’t happen. To some extent, I agree with her. There are some adults out there working very hard, but that doesn’t mean that adults will ensure this doesn’t happen. Think of the issues that led—and can lead—to genocide: bullying, stereotyping, prejudice, arrogance, intellectual superiority. Adults can’t guarantee or prevent these experiences on the playground or in school halls and cafeterias. Young people need the tools to confront these things, so that they know what to do, how to stand up. We know genocide means a killing of a race or species, but in his book *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde offers an additional definition: a killing of the genius or spirit. That’s the effect that these issues—bullying, prejudice, stereotyping—can have on our young people.

**Fabbi:** I think that by placing that responsibility, you’re also trying to instill the idea that a minority can make a difference—that one individual can make a difference. If everyone is going one way, or it feels like everyone is going one way, and you really feel that it’s not the right way, even if you are a young person, you can stand up for that.

**Bartoletti:** As the character Helmuth Hübener says in *The Boy Who Dared*, "I don’t want to remember a time I could have done something but didn’t." We all have those memories where we say, “Well, I wish I had taken a stand on this.” We also have those moments when we did take a stand. Both of these moments serve to help us figure out who and what we are.

**ON FAITH, MEANING-MAKING, AND HUMANITY**

**Johnson:** In several of your books, *Hitler Youth*, *The Boy Who Dared*, and also *Black Potatoes*, religion is a theme in some way or another.
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Bartoletti: The religion was organic to the material; it grew out of my research and out of the people I interviewed or read about. I couldn’t write these books honestly without including their faith. Also, considering how dark these subjects are, I found myself reading all I could about survivorship. Many psychologists agree that most survivors share certain traits, and one of those traits is a strong faith. So perhaps that’s why you can find religion as a theme in my books.

Johnson: When you think about the way that you want your audience to read your books, do you ever consider the religious factor in terms of the way meaning is made?

Bartoletti: No. I write from where I am and I allow the themes to grow organically from the material. Once I release a book to the universe, it no longer belongs to me. It belongs to the reader, and it’s up to the reader then to make meaning. I think that readers are making different meaning, their own meaning, out of my work. I have no control over that, nor do I want to control how my book is read. If you met the people I interviewed, if you read the stories that I read from the primary sources, you would feel as I do that a book even like Hitler Youth does not belong to me, it belongs to the people who opened up their homes and their hearts and their living rooms and their private papers. This book belongs to them, whether those people are living or not.

Johnson: I appreciated the fact that in The Boy Who Dared, Helmuth’s Mormonism was not portrayed as being particularly good or particularly bad. Sometimes there’s that tendency to take the perspective that this person was Mormon, so they were weird, or they were perfect. Helmuth’s religion was part of who he was, but not focused on extensively, and I know you address this in your Author’s Note in The Boy Who Dared. Could you talk about how you researched Mormonism?

Bartoletti: I wanted to portray Helmuth Hübener as honestly as I could, based on my interviews with people who knew him and my research. Out of my research, I discovered a normal kid, a smart teenager who had two best friends who went to his church. He loved his grandparents, loved his mother, and resented his stepfather’s politics. He loved his faith, but disagreed with one of its tenets. He reminded me of some of the amazing young people I’ve had the pleasure of teaching. In addition to my research into Helmuth’s life, I read everything I could on the Mormon faith. I had deep conversations about faith with several members of the LDS church. It was an opportunity to learn something new, to reaffirm some things I already believed, to explore some differences, and to discover some commonalities. That’s the way I entered my research — through deep discussions, through research, and through a deep respect.

Johnson: Do you feel that your extensive experience as a nonfiction writer, maintaining that neutrality with your topics, was helpful in maintaining neutrality on Helmuth’s religious beliefs?

Bartoletti: I never even thought about it being neutral. I just know how much my experiences and what I believe have shaped me, and so it seemed natural that Helmuth’s experiences and beliefs would shape him. If I didn’t do all that deep research into the Mormon religion, if I didn’t talk with LDS members, I could not have gotten the best understanding I could of him. If it was something that I had done last, just so I could put it in, it would’ve felt that way. Again, the process was organic.

ON SUSTENANCE AND “SIDE GROWTH”

Johnson: You talk quite a bit about poetry, and I was wondering if —

Bartoletti: I am a closet poet?

Johnson: I was wondering if you had ever thought about contributing to, or writing a book of poetry?

Bartoletti: I would die happy! It’s one of my secret wishes. When I taught 8th grade, my students wrote a lot of poetry. Writing poetry covers everything in such a small space: voice, sound, rhythm, attention to language, narrative arc, concision, emotion, subtext, and more. And yet, I’m embarrassed to say, it’s the one creative writing workshop that I avoided in my doctoral program, because I didn’t think my poems were good enough.

Ted Kooser [13th Poet Laureate of the United States] tells us there are two types of poets: those who write poems so that academics can write 20-page papers and those who write poems to be understood. I subscribe to the Ted Kooser and Billy Collins [also a U.S. Poet Laureate] practice of poetry. I also live my life according to this mantra: What I need most, I resist most—and if I have a need, others must have a similar need. Every January, I invite a poet to lead a retreat for published writers of children’s books. So far, our poets have included Molly Peacock, Nancy Willard, Molly Fisk, Vivian Shipley, Sally Keith, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, and Kathleen Driskell. Our group is limited to 16
women (by general consensus it’s women-only and there are days when I feel conflicted about that, but not for long). Our retreaters have included Laurie Halse

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Anderson, Rebecca Stead, Elizabeth Partridge, Suzanne Fisher Staples, Gail Carson Levine, and other wonderful writers.

Out of that retreat, Lisa Rowe Fraustino had her first poem accepted by a major journal and then an entire chapbook (as Lisa Meunier). *Hitching to Istanbul*; Pat Brisson published a young-adult novel-in-verse, *The Best and Hardest Thing*; and Gail Carson Levine has a forthcoming book, *Forgive Me, I Meant to Do It*. Gail has told me that the retreat has gotten poetry under her fingertips so that as she types, she is more aware of rhythm and language in her prose. Thanks to the retreat, I was inspired to write a poetic picture book, *Naamah Sings All Through the Night* (working title), illustrated by Holly Meade. It will be published in 2011 by Candlewick. (And there we go with faith again: it’s a Noah’s Ark story, with a feminist twist since I never thought his wife got enough credit.)

**Fabbì**: In your correspondence with Markus Zusak (2008), you talk about your “side-growth” and what sustains you, and about how you have done improv comedy. Can you tell us about that experience?

**Bartoletti**: Here’s how it all started. I had zero stage experience, except for getting up in front of 8th graders. Now, if you can teach 8th graders—if you can get them to stay seated and quiet for 42 minutes—you can hold an audience. In 2006, a Chicago Second City actor, Chris Barnes, returned to the Scranton area to live, and he started an improv comedy class. When I read about it in the newspaper, I thought, “Interesting! Maybe I’ll pick up some information to put it in my file of things to think about doing someday.” When I got to the Cultural Center, they said, “Why don’t you audition?” And I said, “Oh, no no no no no . . . okay.” I auditioned—and I made the master class. The master class! (I always knew my 8th grade-students taught me a lot, but this!) Each week, I went to class sweating bullets, and then it came time for the first show. Again, my thought process went like this: “Oh, no no no no no . . . why not?” Oh, how I panicked before that show—and each subsequent show! But one of the many life lessons you learn in improv is to move through your fear. Isn’t that wonderful? Once, a friend said to me, “I don’t think you’re afraid of anything,” and I said, “Well, no, I’m afraid of plenty of things, but I move through it.” I think that’s what we do every time we sit down to write. We move through the fear of the blank page. Talk about faith!

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