Jennifer **Donnelly** and Christopher Paul **Curtis**

Past, Present, Story:

A Conversation

From the Editors: In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between Jennifer Donnelly and Christopher Paul Curtis, award-winning authors who have given readers some of the most memorable voices in YA historical fiction. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and their willingness to engage with challenging, important questions of history and fiction.

As to process, we generated and sent a series of questions to both Jennifer and Christopher. We compiled their initial responses into a single document and then sent the compiled version back and forth to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We hope our readers benefit from the care and insight reflected in the resulting piece.

How do you define history?

Jennifer: As an unending dialogue between the past and present. I love that definition and wish I'd thought it up myself, but I stole it from *What Is History?*, a book by the British historian E. H. Carr (1961). I think it's brilliant because it presents history as a living, breathing, noisy creature, instead of a dry, dead thing pulled out of a grave. Carr's definition tells us that the case isn't closed. That our understanding of a time, and of its people and its events—whether earthshaking or everyday—isn't fixed, but rather evolves. And it suggests that every one of us is engaged in the dialogue. The forces of history—whether political like a world war or personal like a family legacy of poverty or wealth, addiction, ambition, insanity, or genius—shape us. They make us who we are. They sometimes save us, sometimes doom us.

Christopher: I like Jennifer's definition better than E. H. Carr's! History is both a legacy and a road map; it's something we can choose to ignore or something we can draw strength and knowledge from. Most of all, history is a series of lessons.

There is often a sense of nostalgia associated with how things used to be. Are you critical or celebratory of the past you describe in your works?

Jennifer: Yes, there is a sense of nostalgia about the past, and I'm guilty of putting on the rose-colored glasses, though I hate to admit it. Remember the Ken Burns documentary on the Civil War? Remember the letter from the Union officer Sullivan Ballou to his wife? It was breathtaking. People wrote letters then. They put their hearts into them. When I think of the beauty and emotion in Ballou's writing, I long with all my heart for the days before Twitter.

But then I think about Ballou's death. Part of his right leg was torn off by a cannonball at Bull Run. The rest of it was amputated by a battlefield surgeon. No antibiotics, probably no anesthesia. The Union army retreated, leaving Ballou behind. He died a week later. Pain, infection, fever, delirium—I can't imagine how badly he suffered.

And then I think about Ballou's world. The

war he fought was waged, in large part, to free enslaved African Americans—men, women, and children for whom violence, rape, hunger, and humiliation were a part of everyday life. And the rose-colored glasses crack.

Christopher: To paraphrase an old Gladys Knight song, "Everybody's talking about the good old days, the good old days, the good old days . . . ." But it all depends on whose good old days we're talking about. We have to keep in mind that nostalgia and remembrances of the past are relative and often very personal.

I'm certain that Atlanta, Georgia, in the 1840s was a real humdinger of a time if you happened to be a landed, wealthy, White male. An African American woman would beg to differ. Vociferously. And there's no doubt that if a survey were taken of many of today's dictators, strongmen, and warlords, they could talk your ear off about what a great time this is to be alive. The masses outside the gates would take another view.

The other side of the coin is that parts of the past that are a tragedy to many are a time of celebration for others. On 9/11, there were countless people who fell in love, or experienced great pleasure at the birth of a child, or whose hearts reached unimagined levels of joy upon a letter or phone call or chance meeting of someone thought long lost.

There are no good old days that universally touch everyone's life. Pronouncements of the good old days are just as specious as claiming one generation or the other is the greatest ever.

Jennifer: I think I'm more critical than celebratory of the past I describe in my books. But then, I'm critical of the present, too. In my novel *A Northern Light*, both the fictional main character, Mattie, and Grace Brown, a real person, suffer from the lack of options and opportunity afforded women in America in 1906. Mattie struggles to get an education. Grace—pregnant and unwed—is murdered by the father of her unborn child. I'm extremely glad I live at a time and in a place—and that my daughter does—when girls have access to education and contraception, but feeling lucky and grateful isn't enough. Girls and women in other parts of the world are still afforded fewer educational and professional opportunities than boys and men. Worse still, some endure oppression and live under the threat of constant violence.

And that's why history—not its floozy cousin nostalgia—is so important. Especially in the lives of young people. Yes, it can and does show us the very worst we are capable of, but it also proves to us that we can change. That we can do better. Because it gives us the stories of others who've faced violence, poverty, cruelty, and oppression, and who've triumphed over it. Names like Mahatma Gandhi, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Abraham Lincoln, Rosa Parks, and Cesar Chavez immediately come to mind, but the nameless do, too—the match girls of East London who struck against dangerous working conditions in 1888 and won, inspiring other unskilled and exploited laborers to do the same, or the newsboys of 1899's New York City, who bent Hearst and Pulitzer to their will. More than anything, history shows us the possible.

Christopher: One of the things that I as a writer try to do is always be aware that when I'm writing about a particular time, it is fatal for me to overreach. I can't try to represent an entire era, or a certain year, or even a particular, overarching moment. All I'm capable of doing is offering a snapshot of the lives of a small, select group of people at a very specific moment in time. But in so doing, I also hope I'm offering glimpses of what the larger picture is and what effect great and momentous events have on the lives of those who happen to be around when they occur.

Since I've gone old school once, I might as well keep going. To quote an old Carly Simon song, for some people, "These are the good old days." They're also the times of greatest sorrow and tragedy in other people's lives. The writer in me simply points the camera and shoots.

What are the challenges of researching and sharing the stories of fictional characters living in "real" worlds? Do you seek a certain truth in the telling?

Jennifer: I do seek a certain truth. I wear two hats when I'm writing historical fiction—the historian's and the novelist's. My characters' difficulties arise

largely because of the worlds in which they live. As an historian, I need to recreate a bygone world that's accurate, real, and believable, so that I can then come in as a novelist and start taking some liberties.

Christopher: Truth is as essential in writing fiction as it is in writing nonfiction. Maybe even more so, since there are things that happen in real life that would be disbelievingly snorted off the pages of a novel. Good readers are cursed with noses much like bloodhounds; their nostrils will involuntarily flare in indignation if an author tries to bury an untrue moment under the best cat litter available or 40 feet beneath the surface of a frozen lake. That means the author who seeks to represent something true (and if that's not what you're trying to do, why are you writing?) is faced with the challenge of carefully making certain the atmosphere and ambience of the story ring true to the reader. The only way to do this is to scrupulously research the period about which you're writing.

Jennifer: The challenges are huge. An author can't recreate a bygone world unless she can see it first. To achieve that, I do a lot of research, and I'm rather rigorous about it. For my novel *Revolution*, I spent years reading everything from large historical surveys like Schama's *Citizens* (1991) and Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History* (1837) to eyewitness accounts of Danton's death, last letters of the condemned, menus, rosters of the guillotined, inscriptions on headstones, lyrics of political songs, speeches, and plays. I haunted archives, museums, and graveyards in Paris. I looked at clothing, dishes, banners, paintings, furniture, palaces, carriages, jewelry, toys, maps. It's very important to me to be accurate, to get all the names, places, and dates right, to present—as much as one can—historical truth.

Christopher: My research most often involves trying to get a feel for the way language was used during a particular era. When my story is set in relatively recent times (let's say the 1920s to the 1960s), I have an advantage. I can go to the library or online and listen to recordings, be they movies, music, or the spoken word in myriad forms, and I can actually hear what I need to do to adjust my ear in order to recreate speech from that time.

Older historical periods are both more problematic and easier to deal with. While none of us can definitively say what George Washington sounded like, we can all speculate. And once I recreate how George's voice sounded, as long as I don't give him any anachronistic vocabulary or usages, I can rest assured that there will be no indignant critic claiming, "That's not the way he sounded at all!" They might say it, but I dare them to prove it.

Jennifer: It's also important to me to convey emotional truth. That requires a bit of unscholarly research. In my research for *Revolution*, I walked Paris looking for the ghosts. I sat in the gardens of the Palais Royal at twilight, squinted my eyes, and saw Desmoulins jump up on a table and urge all of Paris to arms. I talked to butchers and bakers, because the type lives on—ruddy-cheeked and lusty, or covered in flour—from the 18th century to our time. I watched Parisians, noting their gestures, inflections, and stances. I spent time at the Cathedral of St. Denis, gazing at the tiny dried heart of a nine-year-old king. I walked through the catacombs, among the remains of the dead. Robespierre is thought to be down there. As well as Madam Elizabeth, Louis XVI's sister. So I heard some lively conversations. What I'm hoping to do with my unscholarly research is to know the souls of the people I'm writing about and then to get those souls down on paper.

It has been argued that history is politicized, that later generations receive a version of events recorded by those in positions of power and privilege. This version might forward or silence particular voices, asking us to wonder, whose history is our history? Do you grapple with this tension in your writing?

Christopher: The argument that history is not politicized and not self-servingly written by the victors was lost centuries ago. We're back to the concept that writing, nonfiction as well as fiction, is merely a snapshot of a particular time taken by a particular person from a particular perspective.

Jennifer: Robespierre (1792) said "History is fiction," and he was probably being his petulant self when he did, but I see his point. One person's impression of an event is not necessarily another's. And who gets to decide which account becomes the official one? It's important for younger readers to see that there's rarely a single textbook explanation of why something happened. History is the story of human beings, and like its subject, it's messy, complicated, and full of contradictions and conflict.

Christopher: Fiction's role, then, is so important, since it doesn't set out to declare a set of immutable facts. It instead allows readers to come at events from an angle different than the official one. My wish is that my readers will glean the possibilities of other answers, other questions, and other truths.

Jennifer: I grapple with this tension in my work—at least I hope I do—and so do my characters. In *Revolution*, a fictional history teacher, Ms. Hammond, and one of her students, Arden Tode, have this exchange:

> *"Some historians called the massacres a spontaneous outburst of violence, a shameful aberration fueled by fear and hysteria. Others said the butchery was planned, that it was orchestrated by those in power in order to rid Paris of counter-revolutionaries," [Ms. Hammond] said.*
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> *"Well, which is it?" Arden Tode asked.*
>
> *"One or the other. Both. Neither."*
>
> *"Are you, like, trying to be funny?"*
>
> *"What I'm trying to do, Ms. Tode, is show you that the answer depends on where you stand. Marie Antoinette undoubtedly saw the massacres in a different light than a factory worker who'd watched his child die of hunger and who expected to be killed any second himself by a Prussian soldier. To the former, it was a depraved act of butchery. To the other, perhaps a necessary evil."*
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> *"Um, can I put that on the final?"*
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> *Ms. Hammond sighed. "History is a Rorshach test, people," she said. "What you see when you look at it tells you as much about yourself as it does about the past."*

What inspired you to write about the specific time periods/events that serve as the settings for your works?

Christopher: It's always difficult for me to determine where the inspiration to write about a particular event came from. If I'm going to invest a year or two in writing about a specific time, one prerequisite is that I must have some lingering questions about what happened historically. Another, as earlier discussed, is that I want to take a look at the event from a nonstandard perspective.

Jennifer: For *A Northern Light*, it was Grace Brown's letters. Grace was a young farm girl who left her home to work in a factory in a nearby town. She met a young man there named Chester Gillette. He was a nephew of the factory's owner. A romance blossomed between them. One thing led to another, and Grace became pregnant. Chester didn't want to marry her; he felt he could do better. So instead, he murdered her. Before the murder, Grace wrote Chester letters begging him to do the right thing by her. These letters are extremely moving. I defy anyone to read them and remain dry-eyed—especially Grace's last letter, in which she writes how she wishes she could tell her mother what's going on, but she can't because she knows it would break her mother's heart. I heard Grace's voice in her letters, and I was very upset by what had happened to her. Her words stirred up huge emotion, and I had to get that emotion out the only way I knew how—by writing a story.

The inspiration for *Revolution* came from an article in *The New York Times* called "Geneticists' Latest Probe: The Heart of the Dauphin" (Daley, 1999). It showed a beautiful old glass urn. Something tiny and dark was suspended on a wire inside it—a child's heart, ancient and dried. It had been thought to belong to Louis-Charles, son of the French king Louis XVI, who was guillotined by revolutionaries. I was spellbound by the photo. The story explained how, after his father's death, Louis-Charles was taken from his mother and sister to be reeducated by the revolutionaries. He was abused and finally imprisoned, alone, in a cold cell. He was neglected and terrorized. He became ill. Lost his mind. And died. At the age of 10. I had not

known this and again was overwhelmed by strong emotion. I wanted to know how the revolutionaries, who wanted to give the world the very best things—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity—had denied these things to a defenseless child. Both books were born of a need to go back into the past, to the crimes and mistakes, and have something good come from them. If only on paper.

Christopher: Historical fiction for young readers provides the perfect platform from which to answer questions of history or launch a new look at the past, given the age of the narrator. After much trial and error, I've discovered that my sweet spot for a first-person narration is 10 years old to the earliest teen years. That age span seems to serve as a sort of resting spot in our march toward some modicum of human maturity. It's almost as though we take a breather in going from being a person who is learning to master our own thought and body processes to suffering through the time when the disease of adolescence kicks in and we lose all touch with reality and slip perilously close to being something not quite human. (Think your average eighth graders, people so loathsome and miserable that their parents don't like them, their friends don't like them, their siblings don't like them, and they don't even like themselves. In fact, the only person who sees anything the least bit redemptive in that group is the middle school teacher. Many, thankfully yet inexplicably, have actual affection for them. A third and final old-school song reference: different strokes for different folks.)

In my estimation, the 9–13 age period is the last time a young person is able to be not quite as egocentric and lost in the woods as most full-fledged teenagers are. This allows me to realistically (as much as that is possible) have my narrators focus more on what's going on around them and less on their inner angst.

Jennifer: In the end, we look to authors to put the story in history and deliver something truthful and meaningful to their readers. In my books, I hope to show readers the past and its role in shaping the present, but most of all, I hope to show them themselves and to challenge them to tell their own stories.

Why write about a past that has already transpired? Should readers today care about what came before?

Jennifer: Yes, readers should care. As Faulkner said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" (*Requiem for a Nun*, 1950, Act I, Scene iii). We are who we are, and do what we do, and live as we live because of the generations and events that came before us. And we need to understand those people, and those events, if we want to understand ourselves.

Christopher: Right. A great philosopher, whose name escapes me at the moment, once said something like, "You may be done with your past, but that doesn't mean your past is done with you." And that is so true. It all boils down to the fact that knowledge is strength, and the more we can learn from history, both personal and grand, the better prepared we are to face the ups and downs of living.

***Jennifer Donnelly** loves spending time in the company of old dead people. In fact, she often prefers it to talking with living ones. Her first young adult novel,* A Northern Light, *was awarded Britain's Carnegie Medal, the* Los Angeles Times *Book Prize for Young Adult Fiction, and a Michael L. Printz Honor. Her second,* Revolution, *was longlisted for the Carnegie Medal, awarded an Odyssey Honor by the American Library Association, and named Young Adult Book of the Year by the American Booksellers Association. Jennifer's first novel for middle-grade readers,* Deep Blue, *was a* New York Times *bestseller and is the first of four in the Waterfire Saga. The second and third titles,* Rogue Wave *and* Dark Tide, *will be published in 2015. Also coming in 2015 is* These Shallow Graves, *a YA murder mystery set in Gilded Age Manhattan. Jennifer has also written a picturebook for children,* Humble Pie, *and a series of historical novels for grown-ups, including* The Tea Rose, The Winter Rose, *and* The Wild Rose. *She lives in New York State's Hudson Valley with her family.*

***Christopher Paul Curtis** is the bestselling author of* Bud, Not Buddy, *which won the Newbery Medal and the Coretta Scott King Award, among other honors. His first novel,* The Watsons Go to Birmingham–1963, *was also singled out for many awards, among them a Newbery Honor and a Coretta Scott King Honor. Christopher grew up in Flint, Michigan. After high school, he began working*

on the assembly line at the Fisher Body Plant No. 1 while attending the Flint branch of the University of Michigan where he began writing essays and fiction. He is now a full-time writer.

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