

August 19, 2020 Interview with Tonya Bolden
Author of *Maritcha: A Nineteenth Century American Girl*

Mary Ann Cappiello: Hi, I'm Mary Ann Cappiello.

Xenia Hadjioannou: And I'm Xenia Hadjioannou.

Mary Ann Cappiello: We're here with author Tonya Bolden to explore her process of writing her 2005 biography *Maritcha: A Nineteenth Century American Girl*. Thanks for being here with us, Tonya.

Tonya Bolden: You're welcome, and I thank you.

Mary Ann Cappiello: To get started, we'll begin with a general question and then we'll move into some more specific questions. How did you find Maritcha's story? What made you want to pursue it?

Tonya Bolden: I found Maritcha's story at the Schaumburg Center for Research and Black Culture in Harlem. I was there one day researching - for the life of me I can't remember what. But anyway, one of the Schaumburg's curators Diana Latchatanere told me about a family's archive. She singled out Maritcha Lyons' unfinished memoir. And she just was very casual about, and she said something like, "I think you might find it of interest." So, I checked it out, and boy, was it of interest to me!

Maritcha was born in 1848, more than 100 years before me. She was a native New Yorker like me. Also, after the 1860s, when the family moved to Providence, Rhode Island, she became the first Black student at Providence High's girls school. At Providence High School, she got the cold shoulder. I mean, initially the white girls didn't even want to sit next to her. So fast forward 100 years later, roughly, when I entered an overwhelmingly white school in Manhattan. Now I don't recall that students refused to sit next to me, but it was kinda clear - it was very clear - that some teachers, some students and some parents weren't too comfortable with Black people. So, I pursued Maritcha's story because I felt such a kinship.

And there's also one more point. There weren't a lot of books for young people about free Black people during the days of slavery.

Xenia Hadjioannou: Thank you. So now we're going to move on to ask you questions about your research process, as you were researching and writing Maritcha's story. As you write in your introduction, there are a lot of gaps in Maritcha's story. We are wondering if you can talk about how did you fill in the gaps?

Tonya Bolden: I used common sense and research. For example, in her memoir, Maritcha didn't talk about, you know, play, and what games and things she played as a kid. But I figured that you know she was a normal kid and like all kids - all over the world and throughout time - play. So, what I did was, I did research on what the popular games and types of play were in her day. And in the narrative, I didn't say she played XYZ for a fact, but I use phrases like may have. And also, in the list that her father made

about things in the home that were destroyed or stolen during the Draft Riot, on the list were dolls, so I knew that she and her sisters and her brother, you know, played like other kids.

Another example, she mentioned in the memoir that she had a disability, and she mentioned the treatment for it, but she didn't say what the disability was. So, I sent the treatment to a doctor friend of mine and based on her feedback I wrote that Maritcha may have had scoliosis, curvature of the spine.

And, I think, you know, it's important for our young people to know that when it comes to history, there's a lot we don't know, that we can't know, because things, things are lost, you know, because of fires because of floods, because we human beings throw things away.

Xenia Hadjioannou: Are there other sources that you used to fill the gaps in the story?

Tonya Bolden: Yeah, I read a bunch of books about my hometown, New York City. One about Five Points, which was the neighborhood where she was born, which became widely known after the film *Gangs of New York*. Also, I read a book on the New York City Draft Riots. I read *Gotham*, you know, to, to get rooted and grounded in old New York City.

Mary Ann Cappiello: What role did non-written sources like paintings and maps and photographs play both in your research as well as then in the telling of Maritcha's story for your readers?

Tonya Bolden: Well, maps, photographs, and other visuals - I mean, they enable me to time travel, to put myself on the scene, to feel and sense Maritcha's world. And I knew that including them in the book would allow readers to time travel and feel and sense her world, too.

Xenia Hadjioannou: What was your biggest challenge in researching Maritcha's story?

Tonya Bolden: The biggest challenge was processing her memoir. As mentioned, it was unfinished. So, it wasn't a book, but a manuscript. Some things were "x"ed out, as I recall, and I think there are typos, too. And in reading and rereading and rereading them, I had to sift out the boring parts, and zero in on the best bits, the interesting, exciting dramatic things.

Other challenges included figuring out when her family lived where. So, I had the addresses, okay? But I didn't know, you know, the dates of when they moved from place to place. So, I made a trip to the Municipal Archives in Manhattan and through property related documents, I learned when her family moved from X address to Y address. There's also a matter of how Maritcha and her mom and siblings got first to New London, Connecticut, then to Salem, Massachusetts. This is when they fled New York City during the riot. Her dad stayed behind to protect their home. So, for this I reached out, for example, to an archivist at the New London County Historical Society, to figure out the route and train, you know, how they traveled, that they probably traveled.

Mary Ann Cappiello: What surprised you most during your research for this book?

Tonya Bolden: One of the things that surprised me and really made me really chuckle is that Maritcha was ashamed of a great uncle who was in show business. He was James Hewlett, a pioneering black Shakespearean actor, who was part of what we think is the first Black theatre company in America, the African Grove Theater in New York City's Greenwich Village, and he later traveled and performed you know abroad. But because he was rather unsavory kind of guy, I think he had a led a rather unsavory life, he was like a bit of a wild man, Maritcha was not very proud to have this history maker in her family tree.

Xenia Hadjioannou: And now we're moving on to a couple of questions about the writing decisions that you made. For the reader, you do a really good job in setting the context in America generally and in New York City specifically. You provide the reader with a larger context for the Black middle and upper class of New York City.

We're wondering how do you know when you've hit the right balance of background information and biography and how do you determine when your reader needs to know more about the larger context?

Tonya Bolden: Now, I think, when it comes to context, I think it's really sort of like a gut instinct. So, for example, I knew that like adults, many children were not familiar or even aware that there was a Black middle and upper middle class during the days of slavery, and you know after the Civil War, so I knew I had to drive that point home that such people existed by mentioning some of them. For example, Maritcha's godfather James McCune Smith, the first person of African descent in America to earn a medical degree. There's also people like the wealthy entrepreneur Thomas Downing.

Hitting the right balance, I usually don't in the first draft. Very often the first draft, I give way too much information because I'm all caught up in all the research I've done, and striking the balance comes in the rewriting and the rewriting. What I have to do is step away, set aside the manuscript for some time, and when I go back in, I can, I can usually see where there's too much information and I see where I need to make cuts. And in the end, if there's still too much, my editor will let me know.

Mary Ann Cappiello: How did your ideas about writing Maritcha's story change over time? Were there earlier drafts of the story that adopted a very different structure?

Tonya Bolden: Well, I haven't been able to find the first draft, but I had the second draft and from that I see that my ideas about telling her story didn't change all that much overtime. At least, not from the second draft forward. You know what changed was language phrasing, getting rid of too much information.

For example, in the second draft, I had a lot of information about family, friends, the Remonds, then in Salem, Massachusetts. A fascinating family, but my fascination with them resulted in too much of a tangent in the manuscript and I had to trim.

Xenia Hadjioannou: What details or events did you choose not to include in the final story?

Tonya Bolden: Wooh! That's really impossible for me to remember 15 years later, but I know that I left out a lot about her adult life. That's something I summed up in the author's note because I wanted to just focus the book on her childhood.

Originally, I had included in the narrative the fact that her grandmother, who at one point made a big effort to support two young white men she knew when they opened their little store. There was a Mr. Lord and Mr. Taylor, and their store was the genesis of the department store chain Lord and Taylor. And I thought, oh, this is neat. This is good. And then I said, you know, maybe my readers won't care about this.

Mary Ann Cappiello: So, could you talk to us a little more about the role that your editor plays throughout the process? You've given us some sense of that. But what do you seek out in your editor, generally speaking, with your manuscripts? And again, if you have any other memories with *Maritcha* specifically.

Tonya Bolden: Well, a good editor keeps writers from going down a rabbit hole. A good editor will flag places in the manuscript where more information or some explanation is needed because, you know, this goes back to context. Sometimes we writers can be so close to the material that we don't realize that we may have left readers scratching their heads about something. And a great editor is one who is able to do specific edits, in keeping with the voice of the narrative.

And I really can't remember with *Maritcha* and my editor Howard Reeves, like I said, he flagged too much information on the Remond family, and sometimes asked me to fill in a little more detail, like when Maritcha was doing X, how old was she at this point, you know. Because sometimes we have the information in our head, and we didn't realize that we didn't put it on paper.

Xenia Hadjioannou: So, before we wrap up the interview, we were wondering if there's anything you would like people to know about *Maritcha* that we haven't mentioned yet in the interview and about your process of writing her story.

Tonya Bolden: Well, someone once said there are two kind of writers. There are plotters, you know, who do outlines and then they are "pantsers," writers who fly by the seat of our pants. Another way to put that is writers who write their way in and I'm the latter. You know, I don't work well with outlines. I can't really do outlines. So, I just go in and start writing. It's a little scary. Because I don't always know where I'm going. But I get there, and I think probably with a lot of young people, there are some who can do - you know who are great with doing outlines first and thinking the whole thing through. And there are others who may just need to write their way in. And that's how it is for me with every book.

Mary Ann Cappiello: I think that's really important for young people to hear, because our role as educators is to model all sorts of ways to, you know, to prewrite, to generate your ideas, to think about the organizational structures that you're going to use, but ultimately, it's about what works for each individual

writer, and developing that capacity to know oneself that is so important, and so essential, particularly as you navigate different types of writing.

Tonya Bolden: Right. And it's, it's, I mean, when I was in school and you had to do a paper and include an outline, I used to do the paper and then do the outline. Basically, whenever I've written up a proposal for a book to pitch to an editor, the final book is very different from my proposal. Because when you're proposing something, you haven't plunged into the research. With Frederick Douglass, when I proposed that book, I was going to start the book when he was up in age and that ended up not being the case. Because I think the material, the research, once you are really immersed in it, it tells you what to do. You find those aha moments and you say, oh, this is where I need to start. I've had one book where in the first draft, it was chapter one, then in the next draft it became chapter three.

Mary Ann Cappiello: Thank you, that that makes sense to us. And we've certainly taught students who absolutely write the piece and then fake the outline afterwards. (laughter). Thank you so much for taking your time to tell us a little bit of the backstory of the process for writing *Maritcha: A Nineteenth Century American Girl*. We so appreciate it, and look forward to talking to you again.

Xenia Hadjioannou: Thank you, Tonya.

Tonya Bolden: Yes, and I thank you, Mary Ann. Thank you, Xenia.