

In the Spotlight: Tim Grove



Introducing Tim Grove, historian and award-winning nonfiction author for middle-grade readers.

How did you find your way into becoming a kidlit author?

As a public historian for over twenty-five years, I have written various materials for my target age group (ages ten through fourteen), from exhibition labels at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum and family guides for the National Lewis and Clark Bicentennial Exhibition to a newspaper series and supplement. Abrams published a colleague's book and was looking for more book ideas. I was developing an exhibition that

included an artifact with an amazing adventure story that few people knew about. It was the type of book I wanted to read as a young person, so I successfully pitched it. That book, *FIRST FLIGHT AROUND THE WORLD*, ended up a YALSA nonfiction finalist! As I interacted with teachers and librarians, I soon learned of the need for more middle-grade history nonfiction. I grew to enjoy the publishing process and to appreciate the opportunity to reach a wide audience. Basically, I got hooked. And now, book ideas keep coming.

Why do you enjoy sharing historical events and people in American history with young readers?

As a trained historian, I'm passionate about history and helping my readers understand not only content but process. How do historians arrive at their conclusions? In the field we call it historical thinking—critical thinking, multiple perspectives, context, weighing sources. Kids need to learn the process. For me, history is so fascinating because it's about real people making tough decisions. Where we are today is built on what happened in the past. We in the history field are well aware of the perceptions of history with some people. But it's never boring if you approach it the right way. And I think the right way is to give kids access to the primary sources and to infuse stories with those sources.

When you are doing research, how do you narrow down your finds to that which you believe young readers will find interesting?

History nonfiction bears the specific challenge of requiring historical sources to give voice to the characters. I look for topics with abundant source material, with descriptive language, that can help me to give color to my story. Some

subjects just don't have the sources to back them up. And of course, a good story will include tension, memorable characters, a strong narrative arc, and other elements of fiction. I try to write narrative nonfiction. Finding juicy quotes for characters is often a challenge and sometimes the vocabulary is too advanced or the sentence structure is archaic. History is complicated and sometimes we try to simplify it too much. Kids can understand complexity and by providing a richer historical context and multiple perspectives, hopefully I can foster a greater appreciation for the past.

What are you working on now and why are you enjoying it?

I'm focused on another pivotal moment in American history: the battle of Yorktown. Had the battle not occurred, the United States would most likely not exist. Obviously battles bring intrinsic tension, which helps add drama. I look for stories within the story that are rarely told. For example, in this case, the French perspective is very important. The overall narrative includes spies and secret plans, a traitor, and even Alexander Hamilton makes an appearance! And I've found a key character who will help add a powerful secondary story line. As I did with my forthcoming book, *STAR-SPANGLED*, I'll feature very different characters whose lives intersect at a key point in American history. While I enjoy every phase of book development, I really enjoy research, the time of possibility. It is fun to gather the pieces of the puzzle, identify those that will work best, and then figure out how they go together to create the big picture—one with impact.

Do you think you will ever try fiction?

As a historian I'm a little daunted at the thought of writing fiction. I'm so used to citing sources. However, due to a lack of source materials, I have an idea for a future project that just might need to become fiction to accomplish my goal. **H**

Tim's first book for ages ten through fourteen was a YALSA nonfiction finalist. His third kidlit book, which tells the story of "The Star-Spangled Banner" and the Battle of Baltimore, came out this spring with a starred Kirkus review. His fourth kidlit book is slated for publication in 2021. timgrove.net Photo courtesy Tim Grove