

*(July 2017 – Chicago, Illinois) – Author Bibi Belford answers questions on her latest book *CROSSING THE LINE*:*

1. Tell us about yourself. Where do you live, and what inspired you to be a writer?



BIBI BELFORD

Hey there, I'm Bibi Belford, author of *CANNED AND CRUSHED* ([link](#)) and *CROSSING THE LINE* ([link](#)). I used to live in the suburbs with raspberries in my backyard, where it's so dark you can't see your hand in front of your face at night and so quiet you can hear owls in the woods. Now I live in the Chicago loop where the city lights shine all night and it's always noisy and busy. I love riding the bus and the L-train and being able to walk to museums and parks and restaurants, mostly restaurants! I try to write every day, but I also love to quilt, sew, read, garden, volunteer in schools, and go to the beach.

Books inspired me. If there were therapy groups for people addicted to books, I would need a lifetime membership. Book reading is one of my earliest memories, but since my family couldn't afford to buy books, the public library became my bookstore and playground. In the good old days, kids couldn't check out books until they learned to sign their name. I practiced and practiced, and I remember my hand trembling from both fear and anticipation when the librarian set that card in front of me. Since I loved books so much, I always wanted to write a book. After teaching for many years and raising four children, I finally got serious and decided to quit playing around and actually write that book I always talked about writing.

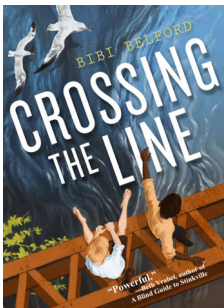
2. You write fiction for children and early teens. What was your childhood like?

My childhood was very strict, but because of the era, very free at the same time. After breakfast in the summer, we took off with our neighborhood buddies and roamed wherever we wanted to. During the school year, we rushed home, changed our clothes and disappeared for hours. We played baseball in the open fields, rode bikes on dirt roads with potholes, and invented all kinds of mysterious adventures that involved spying and treasure. We built our own ramps and sledding hills. We climbed trees and made forts with leftover lumber. When the six o'clock whistle blew, we hightailed it home for dinner.

My father was a college professor and my mom had a teaching degree, but stayed home to take care of us kids. We were not allowed to say we were bored or they put us to work. In today's terms my family would have been considered low socioeconomic. I had two pairs of shoes—my school shoes and my play shoes—which were last year's school shoes with holes in the toes and soles. We drank powdered orange juice, called Tang and ate Spam. We helped pick fruits and vegetables and "put them up" which is nice way to say we ate our own canned produce because it was cheaper than food from the grocery store. We didn't own a TV until I was ten so we spent our family time playing games and listening to classical music.

Almost all the gifts I got were used, but lovingly reconditioned by my mom or dad. One year they gave my brothers and me a huge chalkboard by painting the wall of the basement black. And one time I got a kid-sized microscope for my birthday, including slides of little one-celled animals, all because I said I was thinking of being a doctor when I grew up. Weird! My favorite gift was an old two-wheel bike that my dad painted pink and white. I insisted on parking it next to my bed for at least a month after I got it, so if I woke up in the night I could be sure it wasn't a dream.

3. Give a brief description of your book, *CROSSING THE LINE*.



CROSSING THE LINE
BIBI BELFORD

Billy's family has fallen on hard times, what with his da hospitalized after the Great War and his ma barely scraping by. But it's no hardship for him when there's not enough money to pay the tuition for Nativity of Our Lord, the private Catholic school everyone in his neighborhood attends. Billy's not big on education.

When he transfers to James Ward, a Chicago public school, he finds out there's a big difference at public school: the kids aren't all Irish—in fact, they aren't even all white. It isn't long before Billy's found a new best friend in Foster, another fifth grader who also doesn't have any money, loves baseball, and just happens to be black.

Billy is pretty sure skin color doesn't matter. Not when he and Foster are just horsing around, playing baseball, working on the docks of the canal, and building a raft at their secret hideout near Bridgeport's Bubbly Creek. But in the Red Summer of 1919, it does matter.

4. Why did you write **CROSSING THE LINE?**

When I was riding my bike along Lake Michigan, I saw a memorial stone with a tribute on it to Eugene Williams. The date showed he died when he was sixteen and I was curious. I started researching and read about the awful tragedy that happened on July 27, 1919 when Eugene William drowned because someone threw a rock at his raft when it floated too close to the beach known as a “whites only beach”. I grew up in Illinois but I’d never heard of Eugene or any of the details of the worst race riots in Chicago. At the same time as I was researching what happened in Chicago almost one hundred years ago, violence was erupting all over the country because of deaths caused by racial discrimination happening today. Winston Churchill said, “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

I decided to write a book about two boys, Billy and Foster, who become friends despite their race differences and build a raft that crosses over the line separating the “whites only beach” from the beach where blacks were allowed to go. The story is set in 1919 when, in American history, public places in the South were officially separated by race, often called segregation. In Chicago segregation wasn’t as clearly defined, but certain areas were still designated for use by either whites or blacks.

Just like Billy (the book’s Irish-American character), I was raised to believe all people were created equal, but both Billy and I had to learn about white privilege and how damaging it is to people of color. I wrote **CROSSING THE LINE** for all those students I’ve taught that face discrimination and prejudice in their daily lives, something I’ve never had to experience. The fact that they’ve allowed me to be their teacher and treated me with respect, despite racist atrocities of the past and present, humbles me. My students and my four kids are the best things that ever happened to me, and they inspire me everyday. My goal is to write books that bring kids joy and create stories that motivate readers to be everyday heroes.

5. Billy, the main character in **CROSSING THE LINE, is focused on baseball and especially the Chicago White Sox. What about baseball or the White Sox interests you?**



WRITING ABOUT
CHICAGO **BASEBALL**

Ah. Baseball. I have such vivid memories of standing in an vacant field behind my house, with the baseline freshly mown and the katydids chirping, waiting to make that high fly catch, but having it soar over my head instead and then chasing it through the weeds while Bobby, the only sixth grader on the block, ran around the cardboard bases. Those were the days. And always, homemade popsicles or lemonade after the game ended, usually in a disagreement or a thunderstorm. Now, I’m a big White Sox fan. Of course, I don’t really have a choice unless I want my family to disown me. I live on the Southside of Chicago and we go to lots of games during the season. I have five white sox shirts and two hats.

My favorite players are Frank Thomas, Paul Konerko, Jim Thome, A.J. Pierzynski, Ozzie Guillen, Harold Baines, and this year, I like the three Garcias—Leury, Avisail, and Willy. My husband’s favorite player of all time is Nellie Fox from 1949.

6. The setting of **CROSSING THE LINE adds much to the texture of the story. Can you tell us about why you chose to set the story there, in Chicago’s Bridgeport neighborhood?**

More than 189,800 African-Americans moved to Chicago between 1916-1930, during the Great Migration, to take advantage of the offer of better opportunities. Over 22% of those came from Mississippi. A large percentage came to work in The Union Stockyards and factories near Chicago’s southwest side, in a neighborhood called Bridgeport.

It made sense to set the story in the Bridgeport neighborhood, where many conflicts started when men came home from World War I and found competition for their low-paying jobs as bricklayers and stockyard workers. Bridgeport was the home of many Irish immigrants, relocating there since the Great Famine of 1845, and meeting socially at Schaller’s Pump and Nativity of Our Lord. My grandparents came from Ireland and settled in Detroit, with my grandfather working as a butcher, so I understand the Irish-American struggle to survive and deal with anti-Irish-immigrant discrimination. I also wanted to set the story near a creek so the boys could build a raft and Bridgeport was located close to the Chicago River and its tributaries.

7. The idea of people living in the shelter of each other is an important theme in the book. What about that idea moved you?

(continued from question on previous page) “It is in the shelter of each other that people live,” is an Irish proverb, and so true. As a teacher I worked as part of a team that sheltered me, both emotionally and practically. Our team collaborated and co-created and knew we could depend on each other for emotional support or to provide resources we lacked. Research shows that people often won’t leave a job, even for more money, if they feel sheltered by their co-workers. The world isn’t always an easy place to navigate, but having a network of friends and family to be there for you makes it a better place. My hope is that reading CROSSING THE LINE will inspire people to knock down the walls of prejudice and be shelters for each other instead.

8. What was the most challenging part of writing this book?

Even though I’ve worked in a diverse school district for my entire public school teaching career, I’m not a person of color and I always worry I don’t have a right to tell a story with characters of color. At first I wasn’t sensitive to this issue. I didn’t understand that I could still have white privilege if I wasn’t a racist and since I grew up poor. But to tackle this challenging topic of racial tensions and people of color (PoC) in historical fiction, I read books, articles and blogs to educate myself and even took a class structured to help writers tackle issues of diversity, race and/or inclusion in their stories.

My editor was very patient with all my early draft mistakes and the final version of the book reflects my new understanding and her astute perception. One of the editor’s best pieces of advice during the process of editing CROSSING THE LINE was for me to consult with sensitivity readers—people who read “unapproved” drafts to make sure the content is culturally appropriate for today’s audience. Of course, no book can please every reader or every opinion, but making sure to get feedback from insiders to the culture I was writing about—especially since some of the characters were from a different heritage than mine—was a challenging and important step of the editing process for the final version of the book. Some things were cut from the book after I received the feedback. For example, originally, Odell, Foster’s older brother, sang a song the family might have sung when picking cotton in the South. One of the sensitivity readers explained that no one who lived in the South in those days would sing a song that reminded them of cotton picking, which many times resulted in being mistreated. I took out the song. Another sensitivity reader felt the father in the story wasn’t reacting strongly enough to what had happened, so I rewrote the scene.

It was hard to hear the criticism from sensitivity readers during the final stage of the book-writing process, but it also made me happy I could fix my mistakes in order to respect people and not offend. Researching and asking people to do sensitivity reads helps to eliminate stereotypes and offensive issues, but it is a poor substitute for being from the culture I’m writing about. I applaud the current trend that encourages diverse writers to take up the torch and write books so kids can see themselves as powerful protagonist of many different cultures in their own stories. As you can see from this chart we have a long way to go to increase children’s opportunity to read books by diverse writers and about diverse characters.

Children’s Books By and About People of Color and First/Native Nations Received by the CCBC*--US Publishers Only 2015-									
Year	Number of Books Received at CCBC from US Pubs (est)	African / African Americans		American Indians / First Nations		Asian Pacifics / Asian Pacific Americans		Latinos	
		By	About	By	About	By	About	By	About
2016	3,200	90	265	8	35	194	224	94	157
2015	3,200	105	243	9	28	156	107	56	78

Data from: <https://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp> (statistics last updated 15 Feb. 2017)

*(Note: The chart shows that of estimated number of books received in 2015-2016 from US Publishers:
-on average, about 1 out of every 10 books were by diverse writers (for the groups represented in the chart),
-on average less than 2 out of every 10 books were about diverse characters.)*

9. How did you come up with the title, “Crossing the Line”?

During my research I came across a political cartoon from 1919 that showed a rope across the swimming area. On one side stood African-American swimmers and on the other stood white swimmers. The caption read, “*The color line has reached the north*”.

I wondered what it would take to cross the line, and that’s how the title came to be.

(see historical illustration on following page)

The shocking historical illustration that inspired the title of the book “CROSSING THE LINE”:



Source: Cartoon by John T. McCutcheon, *Chicago Tribune*, July 28, 1919

10. As the author, what is your favorite passage in the book and why?

Narrator Billy says this when he’s invited by Foster to visit the fort for the first time:

“They offer me some of their fish and we pull flakes of flesh right off the stick. It’s good. So good. The fire is hungry, too. It prowls around the wood pieces, tasting, savoring, devouring, then lifting its flaming tongues toward the sky. My face is warm and I get a little longing for my da to share this feeling of happiness with me. The woods are quiet but for the fire snapping its teeth and licking its lips. Emmett and Odell and Foster tell stories about fishing in Jackson, Mississippi. Roasting corn on the cob and eating until the whites of their eyes turn yellow. I think it’s the first time I ever had such a wonderful end to my day and I start to sing, real soft: *Too ra loo ra loo ral. Too ra loo ra loo lie. Too ra loo ra loo ral. Hush now don’t you cry.*”

I love this passage because Billy and Foster are still innocent, just becoming friends, and I can easily see the group of boys enjoying a campfire in the chilly Chicago spring.

11. What aspects of your own life helped inspire this book?

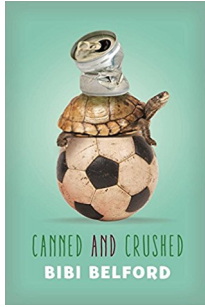
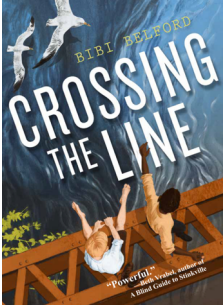
Billy and I share the same Irish heritage and love of the White Sox. Both of us played empty-lot baseball at recess and on hot summer days. When I was growing up I built forts in the vacant fields behind my house like Billy does at the creek, and I spent lots of time in Lake Michigan, balancing on inflatable rafts. Billy’s da comes home from the war with “shell-shock,” and one of my grandfathers came home from World War II with “shell-shock” and was institutionalized, and I never got to meet him. I’ve also been naïve like Billy, in not understanding how hate lies like rocks under the water, just waiting for a little drought to show up above the surface, even in today’s modern world.

12. What can readers hope to learn from this book?

Billy thinks he’s a friend to Foster until he realizes to be a friend means taking risks for them. As his da tells him, “sometimes you have to cross the line to stand up for what’s right.” If everybody starts doing what we can, with what we have, where we are, maybe we can make progress fighting the terrible injustices that go on everyday. I think it’s up to each of us to live honorably. I hold fast to what Foster’s daddy tells Billy. “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God.”

13. Compared to the historical context for *CROSSING THE LINE*, Your previous middle grade novel, *CANNED AND CRUSHED*, is a modern-day story. How would you compare your process for writing each type of story?

(Bibi Belford’s answer continues on following page...)



CROSSING THE LINE, CANNED AND CRUSHED
BOOKS WRITTEN BY BIBI BELFORD

(continued from previous page) CANNED AND CRUSHED is based on real life experiences I'd had with students so I could use my own memory, but CROSSING THE LINE is based on a real-life experience that happened before my time so I had to depend on the memory of others who wrote about it. Both books required a lot of research, but finding research about something that happened one hundred years ago is much more difficult than researching things I needed to know for CANNED AND CRUSHED, such as the complications from Kawasaki Disease or the coolest two-wheel bikes. Making sure that everything in a historical fiction novel is authentic is challenging. Did you know that the word "babysitter" wasn't used in the year 1919? Or that most people didn't own vacuum cleaners? I didn't know until my editor asked me to find out. Then of course, I had to fix my mistakes and rewrite.

In some ways I felt like Billy, the main character, was leading me as I wrote CROSSING THE LINE. I already knew the ending, and the stakes for him and his friends were extreme, so I didn't need to invent problems for him to conquer, they were already there. I just had to put them in the right order. In CANNED AND CRUSHED, since the whole story is created, raising the stakes for Sandro, the main character, required more conscious effort and I had to work harder on pacing and plot. My editor didn't think my first ending showed that Sandro learned from his mistakes, so I had to rewrite a new ending. My next novel, ANOTHER D FOR DEEDEE, coming in 2018, is also realistic fiction, and I worked hard on those same things.

If I had to summarize the answer to this question in one sentence, I'd say I felt like a storyteller for CROSSING THE LINE, and a creative writer for CANNED AND CRUSHED.

Thanks for taking the time to share with readers about writing your books. Bonus question—What other books have inspired you?

I love so many different authors. Kate DiCamillo—Tale of Despereaux. Katherine Paterson—The Great Gilly Hopkins. E.B. White—Charlotte's Web. Madeline L'Engle—A Wrinkle in Time. Christopher Paul Curtis—Bud, Not Buddy. J.K. Rowling—Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone. Jerry Spinelli—Maniac Magee. Sharon Creech—Walk Two Moons. Jacqueline Woodson—Brown Girl Dreaming. Pamela Muñoz Ryan—Esperanza Rising. Laurie Halse Anderson—Chains. Rita Williams-Garcia—One Crazy Summer. Louis Sachar—Holes. Linda Sue Park—A Long Walk to Water. Oh, dear. I could go on and on...



Featured in this Q & A

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Bibi Belford lives in Chicago, Illinois and is the author of books for middle grade readers: CROSSING THE LINE, CANNED AND CRUSHED, THE GIFT, and ANOTHER D FOR DEEDEE (coming 2018).

Visit Belford's author website at bibibelford.com.

PUBLISHER INFORMATION

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