

Q. Tell us about your background and why you decided to write this book?

R. I have a background as a sportswriter and I also teach in an elementary school. I thought it would be fun to write a sports book for kids, and when it comes to sports, the most important figure in American sports history is Jackie Robinson. I feel there are so many great lessons kids can learn from the Jackie Robinson story.

Q. What got you first interested in historical fiction?

R. In this instance, it was the Jackie Robinson story itself. It's got so many aspects that lend itself to a good story. There's a hero. There's tension. Good eventually wins out over evil. There's history about a time and place when America took a turn for the better.

Q. Where and when did you get the idea to write this story

R. I had seen similar historical fiction books that my own kids had read where the main character is a young person set in a particular time and place that is important in history. I started thinking about doing one about a sports figure and the choice was obvious - Jackie Robinson.

Q. What do you hope to accomplish with this book and your work?

R. To keep passing on the lessons of the Jackie Robinson story to future generations.

Q. *What was your inspiration for the idea of Bobby Kelly and his Irish American family in Brooklyn?*

R. *My wife, Kathleen Curry, comes from an Irish American family and there's so much about Irish culture and traditions that I thought would add to the book. The amazing thing about Brooklyn in 1947 was that it was a melting pot of so many different cultures. I could have made the main character Italian, Jewish, Polish, African-American, etc. I went with Irish because I love the culture and had an expert on hand - Kathleen - to help me. I based one of the characters, Skip, the Dodgers equipment manager, on my father-in-law, who grew up on the East Coast in a very proud Irish-American family. There is so much about his accent and the phrases he uses that ended up in the book. I also drew on experiences on family visits to the East Coast and Ireland. I have traveled to Ireland several times to visit areas where my wife's family is from. For example, the character of Father O'Keefe is based on an Irishman I met in a pub in a tiny rural townland just outside of Cappoquin in County Waterford.*

Q. *What was your inspiration for other characters in the book?*

R. *Some of the characters are based on real people - Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, Branch Rickey, etc. The other characters - Bobby Kelly, his family, his friends - are fictional. In writing the main character of Bobby Kelly, I had the advantage of teaching in an elementary school. Being around kids every day, you get a good sense of how they react to different things, perceive things and relate to other people.*

Q. Is this book based on a true story?

R. It's based on the true story of Jackie Robinson's amazing rookie season in 1947. Many of the characters in the book - Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, Branch Rickey, etc. - are real. The main character of Bobby Kelly is fictional, as are his friends and family. I wanted to show how a young person, Bobby is 12, would have experienced the incredible time and place that was Brooklyn in 1947.

Q. Tell us about the glossary of terms?

R. One of the things I enjoyed in writing the book was researching and using common terms and phrases people would have used on the East Coast in the 1940s. They are fun and colorful and add some spice to the story. Many of these might not be familiar to 21st Century kids, so we decided to make a glossary to help define the terms for them. The goal was to make the glossary as entertaining as the phrases.

Q. What's your favorite story or book? Did it influence you to become a writer?

R. When I was growing up, my favorite books were the Matt Christopher series - "Catcher With a Glass Arm," "Tough to Tackle" and many others. They're books where the main character is a young person in a sports setting. I was crazy about sports and was so excited to find out that I could read books about sports.

It also helped that the main characters were people I could relate to at that age.

Q. Tell us what it is about Robinson that inspires you?

R. He was a true American hero. He was someone who made our country a better place. He succeeded in the face of hatred and discrimination. He was strong and proud. I could go on and on.

Q. Is the ending meant to be tragic or hopeful?

R. The ending is meant to be hopeful. It's not exactly a spoiler to say that Jackie Robinson's rookie season - when the book takes place - ended up being a phenomenal success despite some problems along the way. The story has a happy ending. However, it was only one step on the way to America trying to achieve racial equality. It's a goal we still haven't achieved, so in some sense, the Jackie Robinson story continues.