

Coretta Scott King Award 2002
Author Honor Acceptance Speech

Talkin' about Bessie

The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman

written by Nikki Grimes

illustrated by E.B. Lewis

Orchard Books / Scholastic, 2002



These awards have done wonders for my diet. Once I got over the shock of having won, and realized I'd be standing before you today, the first thing I thought was, "What will I wear?" That was followed closely by, "I have got to lose some weight!" And I did. Funny what a little motivation can do!

Okay! Now that I've got that out of my system, I can get serious.

Talkin' About Bessie is the story of a girl from the cotton fields of Texas who showed the world that a Black woman's place could very well be in the cockpit of a plane. I cannot imagine a more appealing story. Yet, it's one I almost missed telling.

In 1994, when Melanie Kroupa, then an editor at Orchard Books, broached the subject of my writing a picture-book biography, I scoffed. I felt the McKissacks pretty much had that genre sewn up, as far as African American authors were concerned. But I agreed to peruse the history books for a personality who might catch my attention.

Enter, Bessie Coleman.

After my introduction to the early days of flight, the exhilarating world of barnstorming, and Bessie's brave excursion into it, I grabbed my literary spade and started digging into her life. What I found was a woman of complexity, strength, passion, and imagination. I felt driven to tell her story — warts and all. Why warts and all? Because young readers need to know that the successful pursuit of a dream doesn't depend on moral perfection — which none of us can fully achieve. What is required is diligence, hard work, and unwavering faith — traits which Bessie personified.

Completed in 1994, *Talkin' About Bessie* had an unusually long gestation. Suffice it to say, the road to publication was plagued by a good many things. But Will Shakespeare had it right: All's well that ends well.

My thanks go to Orchard and Scholastic for giving me such a handsome book; to Susan Cohen of Writers House; to Melanie Kroupa, my first partner in crime on this project; to Amy Griffin and Ellen Dreyer, who saw this baby through its second trimester; and to my editor Ken Geist, whose enthusiasm gave me hope that my long-awaited literary offspring would be well received.

Special heartfelt thanks to my friend, E.B. Lewis who could not possible have served this book better.

Finally, I thank the CSK Committee for so warmly and gloriously welcoming *Talkin' About Bessie* into the world.