

• Meet the Author •

Linda Arms White

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit www.tonibuzzeo.com).

Linda Arms White began writing the day her youngest child started school. Since then, nine of her books have been published: fiction and nonfiction for children and adults. Her picture books, *Too Many Pumpkins*, *Comes A Wind*, and *I Could Do That!: Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote* have been recognized with many awards, including: ABA Pick of the List, Children's Choice Book, Junior Library Guild selection, ALA's Book Links Lasting Connections Book, Booklist Editor's Choice Book, and the Amelia Bloomer Project.

I Could Do That! won the prestigious Christopher Award for material that affirms the highest values of the human spirit. White, a popular speaker, addresses conferences, workshops, schools, and libraries. As co-owner of Children's Authors' Bootcamp www.wemakewriters.com, she travels the country helping writers of books for children improve their skills. She and her husband are the parents of four grown children, grandparents of four, and live in a rustic lodge they designed and built in the Colorado mountains.

How did you first learn about the fascinating and relatively unknown Esther McQuigg Morris?

LAW: I first heard of Esther Morris and the fact that Wyoming women were the first to get the right to vote when I was a student at Pineview Elementary School in Casper, Wyoming. Esther's story was part of our state history. Wyoming women had many firsts, and I've always been proud to be from the "Equality State."

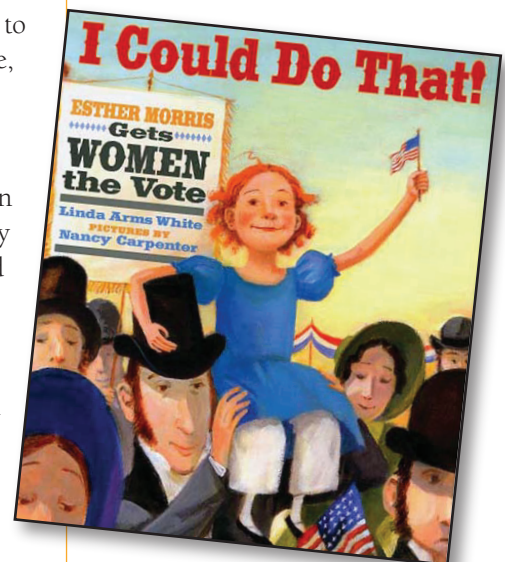
Please tell us more about your research journey and where it took you—metaphorically and physically.

LAW: I was researching another story set in Wyoming when I came across a little snippet that reminded me of Esther's story, and I immediately changed projects. Little is known about Esther and I've never done a project with so many contradictory known "facts" in print. It was difficult and often impossible to find the truth. In Esther's time, women's stories were seldom recorded. Also, courthouses built of wood and heated by wood fires often burned down along with all the records they housed. I searched books and the Internet for everything I could find.

I also made a trip to South Pass City where Esther's story took place. There I had to laugh when I saw three different markers near where

her home stood/had stood, added through the years as one group or another corrected, changed, or added thoughts to where her house really was and what Esther really did. However, standing there on the dirt street of this town with the dry Wyoming wind blowing, looking down to nearby Willow Creek really brought the story to life for me.

Your book is deeply satisfying both because of the intelligence and perseverance of your heroine, but also because of its wonderful organization. At what point did you come up with the organizing principle and satisfying refrain, "I could do that" that lends a pattern and purpose to the story?



LAW: Thank you for that. The “I could do that” refrain came about fairly early. As I searched for a bridge to connect the young child to the fact that Esther helped make it possible for women to vote, I knew I needed something meaningful to them. Women being able to vote just isn’t that pertinent to the everyday life of the four- to eight-year-old. In looking for that connection, I kept asking myself, why were Esther and Wyoming able to make this happen so quickly when others had tried for decades in the East without success?

Everything I read about Esther just rang with an indomitable spirit. Though she didn’t take no for an answer, she seemed to work in a quiet, dignified manner. That spirit lives on in the west today. And suddenly I could hear her, in the face of obstacles, saying “Well, I could do that!” Everyday, all day, children hear “you can’t do that . . . you’re too little, not old enough, not strong enough.” And suddenly, I had my connection.

What attracts you to historical fiction stories?

LAW: I think I am drawn first to a good story, but to some extent a strong, interesting, thoughtful, and witty character (whether woman, man, child, or burro) is needed to make a good story happen.

My interest in history and in story awakened about the same

time. When I was young, my family moved from Texas to Wyoming. Westerns were king back then—television, books, movies. We would ride across endless miles of vast, solitary land. Often we’d stop to look at tracks cut into rock by wagons traveling along the Oregon Trail. Soon I could envision families in covered wagons rocking across the land. And then, in the quiet of the back seat of our car, I was making up the stories of those brave families who left everything they had known for a new start.

If a story connects to my heart, I’m hooked. My *Too Many Pumpkins* is based on something my aunt said. *Too Many Turkeys* uses my Uncle Fred’s name. As a young man on a date, he once won a turkey in a raffle. He had to carry that turkey home in the trunk of his car while trying to impress his young friend. Now, of course, I’m obligated to write a book starring each of my family members.

What does *I Could Do That!* have to say to readers as we approach the 2008 presidential election?

LAW: I think it’s refreshing to have started with a slate of candidates that for the first time begins to more accurately reflect our country’s population. I know if Esther were alive today, she’d gather all the information she could on the candidates, heat a

pot of tea, and sit down to study the issues and the candidates. I don’t believe she would base her decision on any one issue, but rather on what she thought was best overall for the future of our country and our citizens, as our world grows ever smaller. We’d all be wise to do the same.

In a more global sense, what do you hope your young readers learn from the story of Esther Morris?

LAW: To have confidence in themselves when they know they are right—and especially when they see an injustice.

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

LAW: From my Web site at www.lindaarmswhite.com.



Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist and member of the Maine Association of School Libraries Executive Board. She is the author of seven picture books, most recently The Library Doors (UpstartBooks, 2008) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.