

• Meet the Author •

Cynthia Leitich Smith

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

Grades
K–2, 3–5



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Cynthia Leitich Smith is the bestselling and award-winning author of several books for young readers, including *Jingle Dancer*, *Indian Shoes*, *Rain Is Not My Indian Name* and, for teens, the Tantalize series. She's a self-described "mid-to-southwestern" who makes her home in Austin, Texas, with her husband, children's author Greg Leitich Smith and four feisty writer cats. You can find out more about her, the greater world of children's-YA writing, literature, and publishing at both www.cynthialeitich-smith.com and <http://cynthia-leitichsmith.blogspot.com>.

Can you tell us about how *Holler Loudly* grew out of your love of your Texas and Oklahoma homes?

CLS: As a young child, I remember making car trips with my mama and Grandma Melba from Kansas City to visit my great-granddad and extended relations near Lake Tenkiller. I have fond memories of being on his pontoon boat with a bunch of dogs and my barefoot cousins. We had the time of our lives scaring away the fish.

Since then, I've lived in Oklahoma and, more recently, have made my home in Central Texas. I love the southwest—the heat of the air on your skin and the peppers on your tongue, the even more glorious warmth of the people.

What drew you to the tall tale genre for this book and how did you work with its conventions to create a story uniquely your own?

CLS: For years, I'd struggled with *Holler's* story in a realistic framework. Then I heard editor Melanie Kroupa speak at Vermont College of Fine Arts about the tall tale tradition and realized that was the answer.

Holler had always been a loud boy, but really, a lot of children are loud. In storytelling, we start with a "What if?" and then consider the "So what?"

What if Holler was loud? I wondered. The "So what?" kept falling flat. What I needed was to make *Holler* a hero to remember. His loudness needed to be extraordinary, and so did the stakes. By pumping up the volume to superhero—AKA tall tale—proportion, he's able to save his fellow townsfolk and earn their appreciation.

Was there ever a real *Holler* in your life? If so, tell us about him or her.

CLS: Yes and no. I was never a loud child. Growing up, I was a rule follower, a good girl. But like *Holler*, I longed to share my thoughts—my stories—with others, which is probably why I grew up to be a writer.

The European American tradition of literature leans heavily on patterns of three, but in *Holler Loudly*, you blend a pattern of three repetitions into what is usually four distinct lines of text. Can you talk about how Native oral traditions influence your storytelling here?

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CLS: I'm a tribal member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, and Native literary traditions influence all of my books to varying degrees. As you say, the number three is a European storytelling mainstay that we're all familiar with. But four is a number more frequently used in Native storytelling. Think of four winds rather than, say, three pigs.

Barry Gott is the perfect illustrator for your wild tall tale. What did Barry bring to the story that wasn't already there in the text?

CLS: Barry's art was a revelation. I hadn't envisioned Holler in a historical setting, but once I saw his art, it just felt right. Likewise, he showed family portraits that traced the loudest Loudly babies for generations, added personality to even the minor characters (and statuary), and showed the real affection that the family and townsfolk have for one another—even if they're temporarily at wits' end.

My favorite addition, though, was to show Miz Poofy at the end, peeking out of the library. I'd had no idea that Miz Poofy was the librarian, but of course she is! I love that young readers finish the tale with Miz Poofy and Holler, sharing a smile.

I've read that you've had a lifelong love affair with public libraries. Please tell us about that and how it played out in this book.

CLS: As early as I can recall, my mama took me to the public library every Saturday morning. It was an activity

that fit well into our mac-and-cheese budget, and, for a rather shy only child, it opened up a world of fictional adventures and friends.

Reading led to, well, more reading but also writing. I'm convinced that my frequent visits to my public library (and once I became old enough, my school library, too) were critical to my going on to become the first person in my family to graduate from college, then continue onto law school, and finally, become a children's author.

Though the plot of *Holler Loudly* evolved over several years, the local library always played a key role in the story. At first, I'd envisioned a scenario in which the town library was full to bursting, the old theater was being torn down, and Holler was the one who suggested moving the books from one place to another. That version was too grown-up in its focus and motivations, but over time and many revisions, the elements finally fit together.

You have published many young adult novels as well as your picture books. How is that writing experience the same as and different from your picture book writing?

CLS: Story is story. A character has a goal, faces obstacles, and overcomes them or not until a moment of growth that allows them to move forward in a meaningful way.

Writing story-based picture books is wonderful training for a novelist. A picture book is an art unto itself—plenty of nov-

elists can't write them well. But it's also containable. You can sort of hold a whole picture book in the palm of your hand, and that intimacy can help one transfer lessons learned about story to other formats.

That said, my experience as a picture book writer proved to be a particular boon when I began writing YA graphic novels. I understood what it meant to craft a text that was essentially a gift to the illustrator.

How can readers learn more about you?

CLS: I have an author website at www.cynthialeitichsmith.com with biographical information and resources (including teacher guides) for all of my books.

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of fifteen picture books, most recently One Cool Friend (Dial, 2012) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.

