

Diane Stanley

Extended Biography



I was born in Abilene, Texas on December 27, 1943. My father, Burt Stanley, was a navy pilot, one of the World War II flying aces and a recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross. He was stationed at Pearl Harbor, but was at sea on the aircraft carrier *Lexington* when the Naval Base was bombed. My mother, Fay Grissom Stanley, actually witnessed the attack. When the non-combatants were evacuated from the island, she stayed on and joined the Women's Air Raid Defense.

My early childhood was spent in New York City, living in a brownstone in the West Village which served as the setting for my mother's first mystery novel, *Murder Leaves a Ring*, published in 1950 and dedicated to me. Years later, shortly before she died, my mother wrote a children's book, *The Last Princess*, which I illustrated. We dedicated it to each other.

The summer before I was to start fifth grade, we moved to La Jolla, California, very different from Abilene or New York. I spent my free time at the nearby beach, or flying homemade kites, roller skating, riding my bike, taking hikes in the hills, or walking my toy poodle (Puccini Barcoulus Ferocious Atrocious Gregarious Stanley I—Poochie for short). La Jolla was a wonderful place to grow up.

I graduated from Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. I remember having a terrible time choosing a major because I wanted to take classes in everything. At last I settled on an interdepartmental major in the social sciences (history, political science, and sociology). This struggle should have told me that I was a generalist, not a specialist, and that I ought to look for a career that combined a variety of talents and interests – such as writing and illustrating children's books about history, for example.

The second semester of my senior year I took figure drawing, my first formal art class. It was a revelation. I loved every minute I spent in the drawing studio. I also began to suspect that I might have some talent where art was concerned. When my teacher took me aside at the end of the semester to say he thought so too, it was a turning point in my life.

I began to think about a career in art, something that might call for precise, detailed drawing. I decided to become a medical illustrator. In order to be accepted into one of the graduate programs in that field, I needed to take a lot more art, plus a number of pre-med classes such as organic chemistry and embryology. Towards this goal, I spent a year at the University of Texas and another at the Edinburgh College of Art in Edinburgh, Scotland. While in Scotland, I spent my Christmas break traveling in Russia, which was very much behind the Iron Curtain in those days. I became fascinated by Russian history and literature. This later inspired me to write the first in my series of biographies for children on a Russian theme, *Peter the Great*.

After my year in Scotland, I was accepted into the department of medical illustration at the Johns Hopkins University College of Medicine, one of only two students who were accepted that year. When the other student was drafted (this was during the Vietnam War), I was literally in a "class by myself." I spent two years at Hopkins, looking through microscopes and dissecting the cadaver along with the

medical students, as well as sketching in the operating room and dissecting monkey hands for my thesis. I received my Master's Degree in 1970.

Then I got married and became a mother. Suddenly everything changed. Though I continued to work as a freelance medical illustrator, my heart began to move in a different direction. As I spent hour after hour, cuddling with my kids on the couch, turning the pages of a book, I kept thinking: *This is what I'd really like to do. This is important.* Children's books combined art, writing, and design, all things I loved to do. More important, they opened the minds of young readers and helped bring families together. I wanted to be a part of something like that.

I spent hours digging through the stacks in the children's room at the library, getting to know the field, learning who the best writers and artists were, and who was publishing what. Since those were the days of pre-separated art, I taught myself the technique by reading articles in books. (For more about pre-separation, go to About/Notes on the Art Media on this website.) Soon, in whatever little snatches of time I could muster from full-time mothering and free-lance medical illustration, I was building a portfolio of children's book illustrations.

It took about a year. When I was ready, I made an appointment with John Keller at Little, Brown and Company; he'd liked some woodcuts I'd sent him and said that if I was ever in Boston, he'd be glad to look at my portfolio.

I was incredibly nervous. When he asked me, "Have you been to Houghton Mifflin yet?" I started to feel hopeful. When he said I needn't bother because he'd like to offer me a contract, I was absolutely over the moon. *The Farmer in the Dell*, with my pictures, was published in 1978.

For a while I worked only as an artist, illustrating public domain folk and fairy tales as well as books by authors like Jane Yolen and Verna Aardema. Then I came up with a story of my own, about a bunch of talkative mice. With *The Conversation Club*, published in 1983, I officially became an author. From then on, I wrote all the

books I illustrated. I even began writing picture books for such talented artists as Elise Primavera, Dennis Nolan, and G. Brian Karas.

With my biography of Peter the Great, I became a nonfiction author. There are now twelve books in the series. Starting with my second biography, *Shaka, King of the Zulus*, my husband, Peter Vennema, began helping me with the research. He would do the preliminary library work, selecting the most important books on the subject, after which both of us would read them all. Though I was the one who did the actual writing and illustrating, his input was invaluable. He could act as a first, very informed editor of what I had written, before my actual editor even set eyes the manuscript. On a number of my biographies, because of his tremendous help, he is listed as co-author.

Beginning with *Charles Dickens*, I took the research to a new level. We traveled to England where we visited every Dickens museum, every house still standing in which he had once lived, and everything else Dickens-related we could find. I bought piles of books and took about thirty-five rolls of film. All this proved to be so helpful, especially in making the illustrations more accurate, that we have since traveled to Egypt for *Cleopatra*, to Italy (twice) for *Leonardo da Vinci* and *Michelangelo*, to France for *Joan of Arc*, and to Salzburg, Vienna, and Prague to research *Mozart: The Wonder Child*.

In 1999, my first novel for young readers, *A Time Apart*, was published. It was an ALA Notable book and was one of *Booklist's* Top Ten First Novels. The experience of writing longer fiction was exhilarating to me. I felt—as I had long before in that first drawing class—that this was where I belonged. Other novels soon followed: *The Mysterious Matter of I. M. Fine*, *The Mysterious Case of the Allbright Academy*, *Bella at Midnight*, *Saving Sky*, and waiting in the wings is *The Silver Bowl*, the first book in a fantasy trilogy.

It's as if I entered the field of children's books through the art door but ended up in the writing room. I'm very comfortable there.

Over the years I've traveled widely, around the country and around the world, speaking at schools, in-service programs and conferences for teachers and librarians. But I try not to be on the road too much; I need time at home with my family and time to write my books.

Home, for almost twenty-five years, was Houston, Texas. But by 2003, with the children grown and living their own independent lives (Cat is an assistant professor of art history at the University of New Mexico; Tamara is an assistant public defender in Grass Valley, California, and John is living in New York and working in film and television production), Peter and I struck out on one last adventure. We said a tearful goodbye to our wonderful friends in Houston and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico. We now live 8,000 feet up in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains.

When I'm not traveling, skiing, hiking, gardening, or sitting out on the *portal* watching the hummingbirds, I can usually be found in my studio, working away, feeling extremely grateful that I have such a wonderful job!