

An Interview with *Liberty Girl* Author Robert A. Black

I understand this book is based on your grandmother's experiences during World War One. Is that right?

Yes, it is. Her father was a banker, and when the US entered the war, he was recruited to work for the Emergency Fleet Corporation, which was the government agency responsible for building cargo ships for the war effort. That meant the family – my grandmother and great-grandparents – had to move from their home in Indianapolis to Baltimore, where the Emergency Fleet Corporation was based. People didn't move around as much back then, so it was a very big deal.

How did you find out about it?

My grandmother had been working on an autobiography, and when she passed away in 1996, my father made copies of her manuscript for the family. She'd written about one hundred pages, getting up to around 1930 – she used to joke that she would have written more, but nothing interesting happened to her after that. There are about four or five pages in the manuscript where she writes about the war and her family's move to Baltimore. I'd never known that about her before, and it fascinated me – and when I read about her friendship with Maggie, the African-American girl who cleaned the apartment house, I just knew there was a story for me to tell. I could see from the way my grandmother wrote about Maggie that they had been very special to each other. In many ways, I was trying to write a story that captured the essence of their friendship.

So there really was a Maggie?

Oh, yes. I even have a photo of her.

How many of the other things in the book really happened?

Most everything about Eleanor's family and what happened to them is real. She really did have an Uncle Alvin who was in the Medical Corps, her Great-Grandpa Blizzard really did write a family history (I even have a copy of it), and he really did pass away while she was in Baltimore, as did her Grandpa Syerup. These are all people in my family history too, after all, so I had all the facts I needed about them.

As for the rest, you could say that the facts are all true, but the story is fiction. My grandmother's autobiography mentions things like the Liberty Bond rally and the ship launchings and going to a performance of *Maytime*, but she didn't really go into many details about what happened at them. The details are all my own invention.

The friendship between Eleanor and Maggie had to cross a pretty large racial divide. How important was that part of the story to you?

It's essential. In my grandmother's words, "Negroes were considered and treated as second-class citizens, but there was nothing second-class about Maggie – another valuable lesson that I have always kept in mind." I very much wanted to explore what made Maggie the kind of person she was, and to do that, I had to delve into what life would have been like for her. What were the forces around her that would have oppressed her, and what would have helped her respond to them? Those were questions I wanted to answer. And at the same time, the prejudice Maggie faced as an African-American gave me the perfect counterpart to the prejudice Eleanor faces for being part German.

Did your grandmother really face a lot of prejudice for being part German?

Well, she *was* part German, but it was never a problem for her. Sadly, though, it was a problem for a lot of perfectly ordinary American citizens. There was a great deal of concern that people who had emigrated from Germany would rebel against the government if we entered the war on the Allies' side. The former US ambassador to Germany, James W. Gerard, even claimed that the German foreign minister had once boasted to him about it. It touched off a lot of paranoia about anyone and anything German, to the point where people could fall under suspicion for eating sauerkraut or owning a German shepherd dog.

That sounds a little like what's happening to people of Middle Eastern origin in some places today.

You noticed that, did you? It just happened that I was researching this story in the months right after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. It felt pretty eerie sometimes when I'd read about things that happened in 1918 and then turned on the news to see the same kinds of things starting to happen again. It definitely influenced the way the book unfolded. You wouldn't expect someone of Eleanor's ethnic background to be discriminated against in today's America, and the same goes for many of the kids who will be reading about her. I wanted Eleanor's trials to give those readers at least a small sense of what it's like to be on the receiving end of prejudice.

You seem to have done a lot of research about Maggie’s favorite bandleader, Jim Europe. Why did you give him so much attention?

James Reese Europe was one of those lucky finds of the writing process. I actually stumbled onto him through his friend and collaborator, Noble Sissle, who was a native of Indianapolis and had performed in Baltimore. I thought he could give me some common ground between Eleanor and Maggie. From there, I found out all about Jim Europe and the “Harlem Hellfighters” of the 369th Infantry Regiment. They’re a fascinating story all by themselves, and their story is one a lot of people don’t know about. I thought they deserved a little more attention.

In the same way, I chose to have Eleanor meet Vice President Marshall at the Liberty Bond rally, when I could have had her meet John Philip Sousa instead. Marshall was a funny and intelligent man, but because he was only the vice president, history has pretty much forgotten about him. Lots of people know who Sousa was, but I don’t think nearly enough people know who Marshall was.

The book also features the Spanish influenza pandemic. With all the fears people have about “bird flu” today, do you think we can learn anything from what happened in 1918?

Well, yes and no. I think there’s a lot to learn about just how dangerous and deadly influenza can be. In the United States, we don’t really think of the flu as being that serious a disease, but in 1918 it killed millions. Schools and businesses were being closed, and even churches on a couple of Sundays. Hospitals and undertakers were being overwhelmed. It was a major catastrophe. If nothing else, what happened in 1918 teaches us that we’ve got to take a virus like that seriously if another one ever comes along.

On the other hand, we can also look at 1918 and see how much a lot of things have improved since then. In 1918, nobody even knew what the influenza virus was, let alone how to fight it. These days, we don’t have millions of men crowded together in army camps or battlefield trenches, and we have much better public sanitation – or at least we do in the developed world. So while we do need to take the threat of influenza seriously, we can also take some comfort in the fact that we have a lot of advantages now that they didn’t have in the past.