

• Meet the Author •

Claire A. Nivola

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



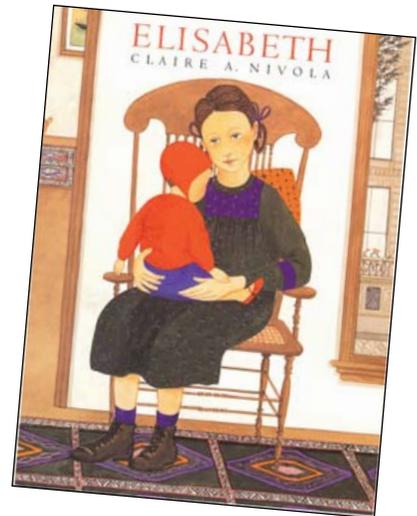
Photo from www.newtonmarascofoundation.org

Claire A. Nivola was born in New York City in 1947 to European parents who fled fascism and antisemitism in 1939 and settled in America. (A portion of her mother's story appears in her book *Elisabeth*.) Ms. Nivola attended school in Manhattan but spent the happiest part of her childhood "in the country," on the old farm at the far end of Long Island purchased by her parents when she was a year old. Although she never had any formal training in art, she worked from early childhood in her father's studio, painting and sculpting by his side. Ms. Nivola illustrated her first children's book immediately following graduation from Radcliffe College in 1969. When her children were born in 1983 (a son) and 1986 (a daughter), she devoted herself to motherhood full time, taking great pleasure in reading to them the books she had loved as a child as well as discovering new ones. In 1994, by happy

chance, she was asked to illustrate a book for Frances Foster, an editor she had worked with some 20 years earlier! Frances Foster now had her own imprint at Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Their collaboration has borne fruit: *Elisabeth* (1997), illustrations for Elizabeth Spires' *The Mouse of Amherst* (1999), *The Forest* (2002), and *Planting the Trees of Kenya* (2008). Ms. Nivola has also illustrated picture books for Houghton Mifflin Co. in Boston and for Candlewick Press in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She lives with her husband in Newton, MA.

Wangari Maathai is both a fascinating and unusual character for a children's picture book; amazingly, there have been two picture book biographies of her recently. How did you come upon the idea to write a book about her?

CN: I heard an hour-long interview with Wangari Maathai on National Public Radio (WBUR's "The Connection," June 2005) and the way she told the story of how she began her tree planting movement struck me as a perfect parable of our shared environmental crisis. It was simple and clear enough for any child to grasp, and Wangari offered a direct, energetic response that spoke of hope.



How did you use Wangari Maathai's autobiography, *Unbowed* (2006) as a resource for your book? What other sources were invaluable to you in your research? Can you share some of the interesting aspects of your research journey?

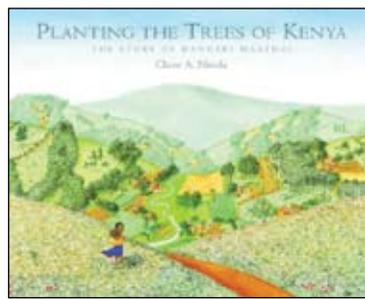
CN: *Unbowed* was published just a little too late for me to use it in my research, although it helped to confirm the story I had pieced together from that first interview I heard on WBUR in June 2005 and a second National Public Radio report on Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement ("Living on Earth," July 2005). I also read Wangari's how-to book, *The Green Belt Movement: Sharing the Approach and the Experience* (Lantern Books, 2003). Aside from googling Wangari's name on the Internet,

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these were my main sources for gaining an understanding of her life and work. Wangari's own version of her story was what interested me most; I wanted the book to be true to her experience, perceptions, and convictions.

After spending a month traveling in Kenya, I have a particular fondness for that beautiful country. Did you also spend time in Kenya? As an illustrator, what were the most rewarding and challenging aspects of illustrating this book?

CN: Regrettably, I have never had the opportunity to visit Kenya. I had to try to familiarize myself with the landscape and people through photographs. The non-fiction section of a children's library is always a rich resource. I also found a book on Isaak Dinesen in Africa (she lived in the highlands region of Kenya where Wangari's story takes place) and it had marvelous photos, then and now, which gave me a real sense of the setting. The challenge in illustrating any non-fiction book is having to learn what everything looks like (or in the case of history, looked like). What is the vegetation, what color is the soil, what animals live there, what are the houses like, what tools do people use, what are the people like, how do they dress, what shoes do they wear, what do they eat, how do they wear their hair? This is the challenge, but once one begins to imagine that entire unfamiliar world and feel somewhat at home in it, it also becomes the reward.



In what ways do you anticipate that your book will inspire American young people to care about the “green” movement we find ourselves in today?

CN: Not long after *Planting the Trees of Kenya* came out, I read it to a third grade class in a school in Boston. One girl raised her hand at the end and said, “Why were the women cutting down the trees they needed in order to live?” If that question can be expanded just a fraction to “Why are all of us harming the planet we need in order to live?” my book will have served its main purpose. I am hoping it will encourage children to ask themselves what they are doing and what they can do differently—Wangari's message that once we see we are part of the problem we can become part of the solution. The environmental crisis we are in is dire. I'm not an optimist, but I do believe that for young people to absorb the severity of the problem they can't be beaten into a state of despair. They must feel there is room for change and that they can help effect that change.

As I look at the fiction and nonfiction books you have illustrated, or both written and illustrated, in your career, you seem to

have a strong love of history. What is it that draws you to write and/or paint historical tales?

CN: In illustration work, as in the acting profession, one is easily typecast. The fact that I have illustrated a story set in the War of 1812 (*The Flag Maker*, Houghton Mifflin, 2004), a Civil War story (*The Silent Witness*, Houghton Mifflin, 2005), and a book due out in 2010 set in the late nineteenth Century (*Emma's Poem*, Houghton Mifflin) has more to do with typecasting than with my innate interest in history. I had written my mother's story of her doll in *Elisabeth* and this led editors to think I was adept at mother/daughter stories (*The Flag Maker*), grandmother/granddaughter stories (*The Friday Nights of Nana*, Candlewick Press, 2001), doll stories (*The Silent Witness*), and historical pieces (*Emma's Poem*). I have no complaints. History interests me; after all, my college major was 'History and Literature'. And certainly researching images from the past can be full of discoveries.

How is your illustration process similar or different when you are illustrating a manuscript you've written yourself, as with *Planting the Trees of Kenya*, compared to a manuscript another author has written?

CN: The process is really the same since, even when I write the text, I start with the written words and conjure up the images only later. This is the way I work; I am sure others work differently. The real differ-

ence for me is between fiction and non-fiction. With non-fiction there is more research to be done; I must familiarize myself with how things really are in a certain part of the world or at a certain time in history. With non-fiction I also need to be grounded in the look of things, but I can steal a scarf from here or a bowl off my own shelf. I have slipped my children's toys or clothes, or the furniture or rug from my room into many of my illustrations. Of course, for both fiction and non-fiction

I must put all the components together with the help of my imagination--but my leash is longer with fiction. "Poetic license!"

How can readers learn more about you and your books?

CN: I have no Web site. The fact is I'm a technophobe! Finding my books in a bookstore or library is probably the best way to learn about my work. If a child is burning with questions, he or she can write

me directly, with paper, an envelope, and a stamp, and I will write back.

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Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist. She is the author of eleven picture books, most recently *No T. Rex in the Library!* (McElderry, 2010) and many professional books and articles. Visit www.tonibuzzeo.com or e-mail Toni at tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com.



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