

Because You Asked . . .

Questions & Answers About
The Kite That Bridged Two Nations
and Author Alexis O'Neill



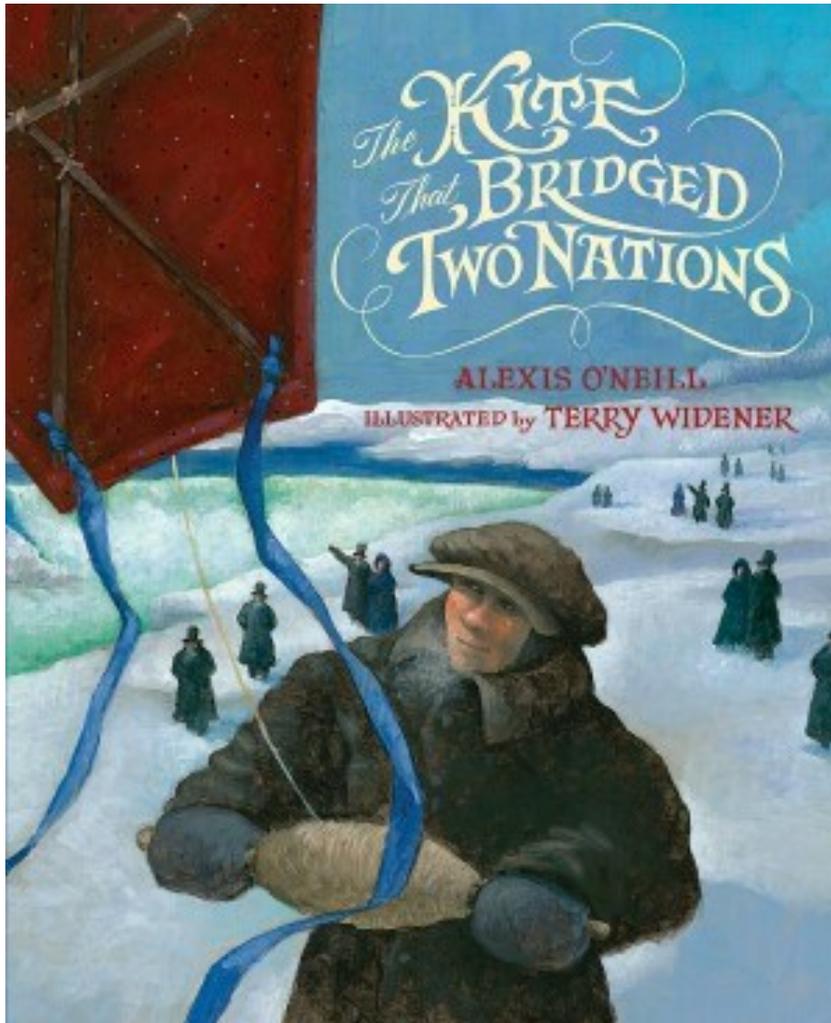
How did you get the idea for writing the *Kite* book?

Actually, the idea for the story was suggested to me out of the blue by an editor I had never met, from a publishing house I had never worked with. But it turned out that we had both read *The Great Bridge* by David McCullough about the building of the Brooklyn Bridge by engineer John Augustus Roebling. In it there's a short anecdote about how a boy's kite string began the first suspension bridge over the Niagara River in 1848. The editor asked if I'd be willing to write a picture book about the kite contest. And I replied with the four words a writer should say when someone asks this: "Why yes, of course!" Ironically, this editor ended up rejecting my story, but the next editor I sent it to bought it.

Why did you decide to tell this story from the point of view of the boy, Homan Walsh?

I decided early on not to tell this as straight nonfiction because I wanted to explore what it might have *felt* like to be in that dramatic contest. I tried many voices before settling on Homan's point of view. I tried the story from the point of view of the kite. The falls. The ferry.

And then I began thinking about Homan. He had a reputation of being the best kite flier in Niagara Falls. Kite fliers are an amazing breed of people – dedicated, curious, joyful, experimental, smart – and I wanted to express that. But the only recorded interview with Homan, done in 1898, was very flat. It was done a year before he died, so he was recalling an event that had happened 51 years prior. It was his only claim to fame, so his story had a rehearsed quality to it and actually included inaccuracies . . .



I wanted to get to the *emotion* of kite flying, the *emotion* of seeming to lose all, then finally succeeding, the *emotion* of what it feels like to be a solitary figure in a struggle with awesome wonders of nature, Niagara Falls and the Niagara River Gorge. That's why I chose to do this story as historical fiction, so I could get to all of that and help a reader connect to what Homan might have felt during this historic contest.

How did you do the research for this book?

Other than one interview published at the end of his life with an account of the contest, little was written about Homan Walsh, so I had to go sideways to fill in the blanks. I used census data to find out where he lived and with whom and what kind of jobs he held. A passport application gave information on his height and eye color. Graveyard headstones confirmed birth and death dates. Reports in newspapers of the time attested to his perseverance in his extraordinary kite-flying feat. And reports from a bridge commissioner corroborated other accounts of Homan's success and the prize that he was awarded. Secondary sources filled in essential information about the bridge engineer, the weather, terrain, and the times.

Did you do many revisions of this story before your final version?

Yes, yes, yes! And I loved how with each revision, my story became better and better. I got rid of words, replaced verbs, changed the order of sentences, cut scenes that weren't working. Most of all, I played with point of view, deciding whose eyes I'd be behind as I told the story. I listened to feedback from other writers. I even received great advice from some fifth graders who suggested I chop a piece out. (I did.)

Why did you decide to have such a detailed Author's Note at the end of the book?

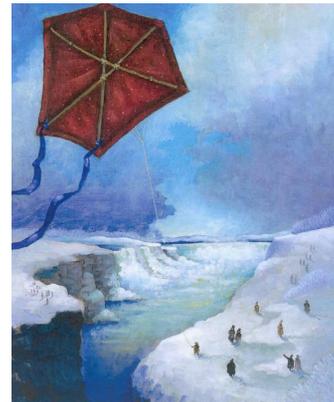
Readers often accept historical fiction as fact. So to help readers separate fact from fiction in the *Kite* book, I added sections called What We Know and What We Don't Know to make this clear. I also added The Rest of the Story, a timeline, and a list of some primary and secondary sources that I used in my research. The more readers are aware that nonfiction is what's verifiable, then they can begin to separate fact from fiction in other works. They'll know to ask, "Is there proof that this person really said or did that? Is the source of that information reliable?"

Did you write a lot when you were a kid?

No. I never kept a diary faithfully or a notebook of ideas. But, in sixth grade, I began to enjoy writing assignments when my teacher would read students' reports and stories out loud to the class that he thought were good. I loved it when he read mine and my classmates would tell me that they liked what I had written. It suddenly dawned on me that I was writing for an audience — my classmates. From that point on, I tried to write well enough to get my teachers to want to read my works out loud. And it worked almost every time.

What research tips do you have for young writers and illustrators?

Begin with what I call The Big Sweep: check out general sources like Wikipedia and write down key words and dates. Document your sources as you find them — no matter how slight they are (copy and paste the URLs into your notes). When a book or article has a bibliography of sources at the end, make a copy of that list and check out the most promising ones. When you find a photograph, illustration, or graph, be sure to document where you found it. Keep whatever information you gather in an accessible location (I have dedicated folders on my computer and a project box that I keep in my office for materials and books I collect.) You never know what will be useful later as you shape your work!



*Whenever wind lifted off the river
and sent the trees to dancing
I'd itch to fly a kite.*

*I'd race to the great Niagara,
plumes of mist rising from plunging waters
wind licking at my face.*

*A boy like me knew, just knew
which day would be perfect for flying kites.
But my merchant father never understood
a boy like me . . .*

To arrange for school visits, workshops or other appearances, contact:

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