

No Ordinary American Girl

A Peek into the Creation of Civil Rights Girl, Melody Ellison

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Just five chapters into *No Ordinary Sound*, nine-year-old Melody Ellison makes a determined stand against racial discrimination in her hometown of Detroit. Her sister had been denied employment at a bank because of the color of her skin. Upon hearing Vonnie's account of the frustrating experience, and the hurt in her voice, Melody vowed to take her own money out of the bank in protest. Dressed in her Sunday best, Melody approached a teller and asked to close her account. With her insides quivering, she calmly stated, "This bank discriminates against black people. I don't want to keep my money here anymore." Melody collected her ten one-dollar bills in a small envelope and walked out.¹

Melody's economic boycott was far more than a gesture. It was a concrete, girl-sized approach to the issue of employment discrimination. This is just one of the many ways Melody demonstrates how children were active participants in the mid-century struggle for equality and freedom. Growing up in Detroit in 1963 amidst the lively music and car culture, Melody is an unlikely civil rights hero. She is surrounded by courageous and determined leaders of the Black community. She knows and is loved by Black business-owners, church-goers, laborers working double shifts, and a college-age activist sister, among many others. The realization that sometimes people needed a reminder that things were not fair and Black Americans had to fight for equal treatment comes to her with time. The economic action was part of her personal development, her growth. This boycott was just one tactic. She marched, raised her voice, worked hard, walked the picket line, beautified her neighborhood, and much more. Through it all, Melody found her own voice and path forward. Her example provides young readers with an authentic and relatable character, someone inspired to help impact change. Her seemingly

¹ Denise Lewis Patrick, *No Ordinary Sound: A Melody Classic Volume 1* (Middleton, WI: American Girl, 2016), 53.

ordinary character represents one of many children growing up in the civil rights era. Children like her understood the Black American experience to be complex, and they took up the fight for fairness, equality, and justice no matter where they lived.

Melody Ellison is not a real girl—she is the fifteenth historical character developed as part of the iconic American Girl book and doll line. She’s only the third African American in the historical line, and her story represents the most important social movement of the twentieth century. Her hometown of Detroit, or anywhere beyond the deep South, might seem to some an unlikely setting for young readers to learn about the civil rights movement, as it is primarily viewed as a southern story in the larger narrative America tells itself.² In broadening popular understanding of the movement, Melody’s story honors every ordinary citizen who took a stand during the era. Her stories help young readers empathize and better understand the struggles Black Americans faced then, and since.

I am fortunate to have worked as a historian on the Melody character as well as on six other American Girl characters released between 2000 and 2017. Each comes with carefully researched stories and finely crafted toy products that young girls identify with, learn from, and care about. Melody, which turned out to be the last American Girl character project that I saw to completion, was an especially rewarding one. Given my long experience, it is my hope that this rare peek into Melody’s creation will highlight the care and attention that goes into the development of the iconic dolls and book series. More than that, the overview provides insights into the company’s approach to what is in the end, a highly visible, commercial representation of our nation’s past. I am no longer employed at American Girl but continue to work in public history. I am mindful that corporations center themselves upon turning a profit, but believe I labored on the heart and soul of the toy and publishing company—the educational books. This inside view of the Melody project offers useful insights for those engaging with audiences via exhibits, programming, and community projects.

Character Development

Consumers and fans of the books and doll and toy products are often surprised to learn that from its earliest days Pleasant Company has maintained an in-house team of historians and researchers. Character development projects typically have lasted several years. This process has not been undertaken lightly, especially as founder Pleasant Rowland sought to represent the great diversity of peoples that made up the United States of America. Once the era and larger themes associated with a new character have been identified, editors, historical researchers, and others dig deep

² Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988); Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990); Steven Kasher, *The Civil Rights Movement: A Photographic History, 1954–68* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1996).

to understand the historical context. Teams have made extensive use of the nearby University of Wisconsin libraries, toured exhibits, watched documentaries, and spoken with experts in academia, museums, and beyond.³

Each of the historical characters encountered problems specific to their historical setting as well as those familiar to girls today. Although the somewhat formulaic six-book structure may have seemed tiresome to some readers, the book series allowed girls to see young individuals going to school, celebrating holidays, and making decisions for themselves. They identified with the characters. The structure allowed girls to compare and contrast, to consider the past, and to think about how things have or have not changed in the time since. For example, Revolutionary War-era Felicity Merriman, the fourth American Girl character, yearned to be independent, just as her best friend's family took up the Loyalist cause. Born into slavery, Addy Walker saw her father and brother sold away. Her family was torn apart during the Civil War, like the nation itself. A later character, Caroline Abbott, saw her father, a ship builder on Lake Ontario, taken captive just as the War of 1812 got underway. The nod to the problem of impressment of sailors helped even the youngest readers easily grasp an otherwise impersonal issue. Stories made the historical issues more relatable and impactful.

Research teams considered local as well as temporal context. In addition to consulting local histories, teams searched for diaries, oral histories, and personal accounts of those growing up in a character's region. Authors and researchers worked hard to re-create the look and description of the character's world by gathering up historical photographs and visual representations of the locations and landscapes. These images were combined with views, impressions, and experiences gathered during research trips. Authors not only walked the streets of each community where they set their stories. They rode horses and bumped along in horse drawn wagons, even sailed on replica sloops. Teams toured historic churches in Philadelphia similar to those Addy may have seen and learned to bake bread in hornos in the warm southwest much like those Josefina Montoya (whose story is set in 1820s New Mexico) might have known.

In addition to traditional historical research, teams analyzed material culture of the time to help create the dolls themselves and their clothes, furniture, and other accompanying products. The look and feel of each character and her products were carefully researched and assembled. Soft-good designers studied silhouettes, visited costume collections, and sought out period-appropriate fabric swatches, always with a careful eye to what children were wearing. Product designers visiting house and living history museums paid close attention to furnishings, from pioneer cabins to Victorian-era clutter and décor. The fine details and design of an era would come

³ This development process evolved throughout the company's history. While no single document or step-by-step manual guided the creations, book development and research historians compiled binders full of story ideas and research materials about a variety of eras, settings, and peoples. With more than 10,000 books, the corporate library inspired teams throughout the company, from editorial book production to marketing and product designers.

to be represented in everything from doll-size trunks and beds to desks and dining room tables. As these were to be sold as accessories for dolls, designers had to balance accuracy in terms of time period and fidelity to storyline with creating products that would be attractive to customers.

Advisory Boards

Rowland did not shy away from challenges. Like museum curators looking to tell uncomfortable but necessary histories, she recognized the significant responsibility of accurately representing diverse cultures and ethnic groups as American Girl characters. The work force at Pleasant Company was overwhelmingly white. In establishing a full advisory board for Addy Walker, released in 1993, the company created an important precedent. Set in 1864, three long years into the Civil War, Addy's story begins on a North Carolina plantation. Though written for eight- to ten-year-old audiences, Addy's stories discussed several of the difficulties faced by enslaved girls. Young readers likely squirmed when an overseer forced Addy to eat a worm she missed while checking rows of tobacco plants. Even worse, Addy saw her father and brother sold off by the plantation owner. When Addy and her Momma made their plans to escape North, readers encountered the heart-wrenching revelation that they had to leave her baby sister, Esther, behind. After stealing their freedom, Addy and her Momma established new lives in Philadelphia. Just as her Uncle Solomon warned her, life in the northern city was not without difficulty. They encountered discrimination and endured separation from family members before eventually reassembling their family in freedom after war's end.

Addy's advisory board was convened to help the company create an accurate and sensitive portrayal of these experiences. Board members included scholars, librarians, museum professionals, and historians, such as Wilma King, who specifically focus on women and slavery. A leading curator and later director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH), Spencer Crew, participated, as did Lonnie Bunch, another NMAH curator and now the director of the Smithsonian Institution. Panel members were tasked with offering insights, suggesting resources and repositories, and providing honest and unvarnished assessments of the ongoing development of the doll and character that became Addy Walker. The experts were invited to provide feedback on everything from broad arching themes to the minutiae of the story. The group gathered in person to offer insights and discuss the project, and provided written assessments of everything from the story treatments and specific drafts to the doll's hair. Addy's board wrestled with issues the company needed support with, and equally important, set an important example for many of the characters that followed.

The group insisted that the story of slavery be taken head on. The decision has upset more than a few customers over the years. Letters arrived lamenting that the one Black doll was an enslaved person. Some parents described difficult, tear-filled conversations with their children provoked by the books. Although Addy began life

in slavery, she was not defined by it in the end. Her story arc ended in freedom with her family, though changed, together again. The powerful emotions that Addy's story inspires speak to the continuing relevance of slavery and its aftermath in shaping America's history up to today.⁴

A significant number of new characters debuted between Addy and Melody's release. Two deeply researched characters, Josefina and Kaya (a Nez Perce girl from 1764), also created with the help of advisory boards, joined the American Girls Collection in 1997 and 2002. In 1998, Rowland sold Pleasant Company to Mattel, agreeing to stay on for two years before retiring in July 2000. Her commitment to inclusivity set an important example, and more diverse characters followed in the years to come. Rebecca Rubin, a Jewish American character living in 1914 in New York City, debuted in 2009, and a Cécile Rey, a free girl of color from antebellum New Orleans arrived in 2011. The company remained committed to producing characters with substantive histories, grounded in historical research and supported by dedicated advisory panels. Teams encountered structural changes, but the commitment to creating authentic characters that mattered continued during the post-Pleasant era.

The process of creating these characters underscored the importance of engaging with an advisory board. When our team set out to create a new doll set in the civil rights era, we built upon the precedent of working with scholarly and community advisors in order to ground the story in current scholarship and lived experience. This critical element supported our goal of creating the most impactful and authentic character possible.

Civil Rights Era

The civil rights era is well-represented in children's literature. Countless fiction and nonfiction books line the shelves of America's libraries, and significant additions, even major award-winning titles, appear regularly.⁵ The expansive canon introduces young readers to important leaders, hopeful moments, and aspects of life in the Jim Crow South. Even so, many retread a familiar tale starring a common cast of characters, usually well-known heroes such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks. Although critically important, they receive the lion's share of the attention. Even so, few of the books begin to capture the complicated nature of their lives and contributions. Each of them was reviled in their day, their methods considered suspect. Their stories have been stripped of the radicalism and their critiques of

4 In addition to the six book themes and framework that allowed readers to compare and contrast their own lives to characters' experiences, the short essays ("Looking Backs") provided additional historical context.

5 Cynthia Levinson, *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March* (Atlanta: Peachtree Publishers, 2012); Shane W. Evans, *We March* (New York: Square Fish, 2016); Toni Morrison, *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004); Lynda Blackmon Lowery, *Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom: My Story of the 1965 Selma Voting Rights March* (New York: Dial Books, 2015).

American society are watered down.⁶ Perhaps worse, continued focus on exceptional individuals suggests progress and change depended upon heroes.

A more inspiring truth is that common Americans, young and old, also drove the freedom struggle forward.⁷ Solely focusing on well-known heroes ignores citizens nationwide who braved violent counter-protesters, boycotted businesses, and received little or no attention for their individual activism. Broadening the story and centering on the impact of these people suggests that activism continues, and change remains possible. Even more importantly, a celebratory look back also risks overlooking the stark reality of the present. The struggles remain part of an ongoing arc towards freedom, and much work remains to be done from Florida to Minnesota to California and everywhere in between.

But, why set a 1960s American Girl civil rights character in Detroit? The Motor City reflected a beacon of hope in the mid-1900s, especially to Black Americans. Every year, sleek new automobiles rolled off the city's assembly lines. Music fans worldwide looked to Motown for the hottest hits. Detroit was a significant site of Black cultural production, and home to the largest branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A well-established Black community boasted strong churches and political organizations. This was due in large part to a significant Black middle class, buoyed by the many employment opportunities in the auto industry and related businesses and active in politics. Yet, Blacks from the South migrating up to Detroit during the preceding decades did not find a northern promised land. The Jim Crow North lacked the many signs and separate accommodations of the South, but the forms of discrimination were ugly and every bit as pernicious. Blacks in the urban North and West were often pinned into crowded inner cities, living in substandard housing and attending largely segregated schools. Deeply entrenched forms of discrimination were exacerbated by unemployment, deindustrialization, and other economic factors. For all that the city had to celebrate mid-century, the reality was more dire for its sizable Black population. Melody and her family encountered these and plenty more issues in her book series.

By locating Melody outside the South, her storyline countered retellings of familiar, and often heroic, southern civil rights narratives. The movement beyond the best-known southern locations, such as Montgomery and Birmingham, is

6 Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014); Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance, a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Random House, 2010); Peniel Joseph, *The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); Martin Luther King Jr. and Cornell West, *The Radical King* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014).

7 Sheyann Webb and Rachel West Nelson, *Selma, Lord, Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997); Ellen S. Levine, *Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories* (London: Puffin Books, 2000); Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

rarely touched upon in children’s literature and entertainment. Racial injustice beyond the South, for that matter, remains largely obscured. Racism is often portrayed as a product of a backward South, rather than an ill nation. It would have been easy for the Melody project team to settle upon a well-worn southern tale, one highlighting great sacrifice, even violence. The story would have been powerful and compelling. Yet, by focusing on a civil rights struggle in Detroit, American Girl readers were offered a lesser-known, but potentially more complex story, and one with more relevance to the present and our America today.

Official Development Project

As soon as the new “civil rights era girl” character concept was approved, the research and editorial staff at American Girl dove deep into the rich literature about Detroit. We built up a noteworthy research library of primary and secondary sources.⁸ We assembled a visual record of city life in the 1950–60s. We began making notes about specialists and Detroiters who might advise and assist as the project picked up pace. Early overviews and thematic treatments were drafted, revised, and presented. Approvals by brand leaders, senior leadership, and executives continued as the work proceeded.

A critical step in the character development process involves finding the right author. This individual does more than anyone to breathe life and depth into what starts as an era, location, and a few characteristics or thematic underpinnings. Securing an accomplished children’s author with significant time available to write six books on a demanding schedule can be complicated. Finding one comfortable working in close collaboration with an experienced editorial team while incorporating product suggestions adds to the challenge. When the editorial leadership presented the general character idea to Denise Lewis Patrick, she was already well-acquainted with the challenging road ahead. A few years earlier Patrick authored three books for American Girl about Cécile Rey, a free girl of color in 1853 New Orleans. Similarly, the editor’s familiarity with Patrick’s style provided reassurance not only that she was a talented storyteller, but also that she would bring her full life and personality to the task. She infused the books with her personal experiences of growing up in the 1960–70s in Natchitoches, Louisiana. Patrick drew from her childhood, memories of her grandparents, and her experience of raising a family. It was no small task to accurately represent one of the most important social movements of modern history, and Patrick welcomed the input of many collaborators dedicated to making the character as authentic and relevant as possible.

8 The extensive collection included Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001); and Suzanne E. Smith, *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Public historians who collaborate know the value of assembling talented teams of advisors. Establishing the Melody project's panel of experts was an organic process whereby myself and the editorial team created a list of potential members and began networking. One of our highest profile prospects, Lonnie Bunch, at the time was leading the creation of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture. He initially accepted the invitation to join the advisory board, and voiced appreciation of the unusual selection of the urban North for the character's setting. Later, however, Bunch graciously declined, citing his necessary "laser focus" on the museum's pending opening. Another historian we approached and secured early was Tom Sugrue, a leading scholar on the movement beyond the South and on Detroit specifically.⁹ A native of the city, Sugrue recognized the importance of a broader view of the movement, and understood the reach of the American Girl brand; he recalled reading the Kaya books to his own daughter years earlier. We also asked Rebecca de Schweinitz, whose book on youth and the civil rights movement caught our eye.¹⁰ Her close attention to young people's contributions to the movement nationwide proved invaluable. Juanita Moore, president and CEO of Detroit's Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, understood the significance of setting a Black American Girl character in the city. Her museum connections and local network proved immediately helpful when she introduced the team to local legend JoAnn Watson.

JoAnn Watson played a critical role on the advisory panel. Born in Detroit and raised in its churches and schools, some of Watson's memories inspired story threads and she provided a young girl's perspective on the era. She became an ordained minister and served as past president of the Michigan NAACP. Watson also introduced us to another longtime Detroit resident, Gloria House. A poet and former professor of African American Studies, House served as a field secretary with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the heart of the deep South, Lowndes County, Alabama. Her personal experience of traveling from her northern home and college life to working amongst the most impoverished and disenfranchised blacks of rural Alabama—where outsiders were reviled, and in constant danger—lent immediacy and authenticity to the portrayal of Melody's college-age sister. The final and most revered member of the advisory board was Julian Bond, a founding member of SNCC and former member of Georgia's Senate and House of Representatives. Bond's involvement lent the project additional credibility. His credentials and experience unsurpassed, Bond's charm, wit, and gracious collaborative spirit united the board and American Girl staff. His sense of

⁹ In addition to *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, Sugrue's work on the subject includes, among other books and articles, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008).

¹⁰ Rebecca de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America's Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

humor shone through, especially when he professed to have no idea why or what a doll company wanted to do with him. Like Bond, every member of the board brought generations worth of family and personal experiences to bear on the project.

Establishing the advisory group was an important step. But as any public historian knows, building rapport and trust takes time. The team first collaborated by phone, giving each expert advisor the opportunity to introduce themselves, discuss their background, and share their hopes for the character. Some members expressed wariness, perhaps a little apprehension about how a toy and publishing company would handle the challenges ahead. In our initial discussions, we explained the character development process, how initial designs would be shared, input sought, and challenging decisions worked through. We sought to clearly define their role as the advisory panel. Building trust was critical in the earliest stages of the development process as the American Girl teams requested the panel's feedback in shaping the character and invited critique. The employees and experts balanced this with the realization that in the end, the story and product would be a commercial representation of an era. Everyone understood that the brand's far reach and visibility meant that we had an opportunity to share a deeply powerful and relevant history to a wide audience.

Character Development Meetings

The board's first in-person meeting took place in 2014 at Detroit's Wright Museum. A large contingent of representatives from research, editorial, product development, and brand marketing divisions gathered with the advisory panel for a day-long session. Seated around a massive table, the group introduced themselves and welcomed each participant before laying out the expectations for the day's collaborative work. The series author, Denise Lewis Patrick, walked the advisory panel through a thematic overview of the stories. Patrick explained how she envisioned Melody at this early stage. The fully fictional character was largely undeveloped, a blank slate. The author's eyes lit up and her voice crackled with excitement as she described Melody's potential personality, the make-up of her family, and some possible settings around the city. Patrick called out some of her inspirations, drawing from her own life experiences and those of her relatives, along with examples from the historical record in Detroit and beyond. Her grasp upon the material and energy were evident, yet the board was encouraged to collaborate, corroborate, and/or, fact-check. Conversation and notetaking continued throughout the morning.

Individual board members chimed in about their own experience and perspective. Both Watson and Sugrue spoke of growing up in Detroit, while others brought southern childhood memories into the mix. Individuals reminisced about what it was like to be a young person eager to change the world. They spoke compellingly of reading about the burgeoning movement in the South in *Jet* magazine and other publications. Several remarked on the dramatic effect photographs had on them,

especially seeing the brutalized body of Emmett Till in photographs of his open casket. Compelled to make a difference, they reminisced about picketing businesses, raising their voices in protest, and actively confronting racism in the urban North and South. These were sustained actions drawn out across years, not just a single momentous march or speech. Watson recalled how church choirs worked, what they wore, and when they practiced. Having grown up in Detroit, Watson shared how she and friends performed on their school playgrounds pretending to be the latest and greatest Motown singing group. Playful anecdotes like this livened up the discussions and added real-life examples for the author to add into the mix, to lend heart to the fictional character's life. Similarly, memories of block parties and celebrations inspired discussions around service projects and community. Parents' barbecue-day rituals were spelled out in great detail, some of which made their way into the text. Special recipes were explained, and memories of treats brought smiles and nods. Notable Detroit settings, including specific parks, theaters, and record shops came to life through the local memories and expertise of the panel members. The collaborative spirit of the discussions and the flow of new ideas and energy was inspiring as Melody's personality and character came into focus.

One of the most exciting parts of the first board meeting involved translating the look and feel of the era into a doll-size world. The product development team involved specialists in doll, costume, and hard-good designs, totaling together upwards of fifty years' worth of experience. The group shared months of design research on a half dozen foam core panels. Buzz and excitement grew in the room as the team set out their inspiration boards. They were filled with colorful references torn from newspapers and magazines as well as museum collections and personal snapshots. The thematic panels covering everything from clothing and hairstyles to locations and material culture allowed the group to set the right tone. The discussion ranged from personal experiences with Afros, earrings, and bold prints to children's Sunday best and pajamas. The design group and expert reviewers worked their way through the imagery and established a solid mix of options, a broad sense of what was considered appropriate versus aspirational. It was exciting to see Melody become more real.

Despite the excitement, the team knew challenges lay ahead that required a fine balance between believability and aspiration in story and product. How do you begin to select face molds, eye colors, and attributes of the character's hair? How could the character make the biggest impact possible? The group developed a plan for working through specific steps and approvals.

The important topics of skin and hair were taken up mid-way through the day of meetings. The designers brought forth a dozen or so dolls with varying skin tones, face molds, and hair options for the group to consider. The team worked to educate advisors on what was possible from a design and production standpoint. They discussed "hair play" and how repeated brushing affected different styles and textures of doll hair, and how packaging, and even shipping, impacted choices. The group explored the benefits of each approach. The team laid out best case

scenarios for hair options from suppliers while advisors asked clarifying questions. Far from simple, the project team and advisors sought to balance the reality of doll design with purpose and sensitivity. After a general consensus was reached, the product design team agreed to bring a narrower set of choices for final comments and approval later in the fall. The central role and importance of the advisory panel was on full display all day. The group explored critical themes and emphasized new details to add even more impact. The long day of fruitful discussions and meetings ended with a team dinner, a chance to celebrate progress.

In-depth Research and Book Development

As with each character project, place-based and experiential research plays an important role in accurately portraying a community. The 2014 Detroit research trip included neighborhood tours and museum visits. Colleagues toured the Henry Ford Museum, receiving a behind-the-scenes archives visit with an emphasis on collections related to children, 1960s clothing, and the civil rights movement. Team members also viewed collections at the Detroit Historical Society and toured the Motown Museum and Wright Museum, among other local attractions. With the help of a local cab, the team travelled throughout Detroit's downtown, the east and west sides, and all around beautiful Belle Isle. Part location scouting drives, part experiential, the tour around the city with JoAnn Watson provided an in-depth look at the setting that would become the backdrop for Melody's story. Research trips provided the author, editor, historian, and others with a foundational understanding of the setting and common points of reference.

Work continued behind-the-scenes for months. Patrick, the author, along with the series editor, Teri Robida, shaped Melody's personality, experiences, and story arc. Every aspect of the book series was carefully considered and plotted. Multiple drafts of each story were reviewed by board members along the way. Suggested edits, both big and small, were shared with the author who worked to incorporate insights, avoid landmines, and infuse Melody with agency and heart. The creative and time-consuming collaboration guided not only the portrayal of Melody, but also of her family and the extended cast of characters through their own journeys.

Although Melody's story followed the traditional six book series flow—including an introductory "Meet Melody" section, school story, holiday scenes, etc.—the books were printed in two volumes, *No Ordinary Sound* and *Never Stop Singing*. Readers are introduced to Melody's lively, musical family at a post-church Sunday dinner. Melody can't wait to share the exciting news about being selected to sing a solo at her church's youth day program. The pending arrival of cousins from Birmingham set in motion a plot revolving around housing discrimination, common in northern cities.¹¹ Viewed through eyes of her cousin, Val, and her parents,

¹¹ Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: Liveright, 2017); Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, June 2014, 54–71.

readers come to understand how hard some Black residents—even those who could afford any home they wanted—worked to find suitable housing. Hopes of her own room and backyard to play in are squashed amidst redlining, racist tactics of realty companies, and bigotry. The unfairness of the situation inspired many characters to organize around a solution.

All the while, Melody finds strength in her family and church. She practices her solo with her grandma at the piano and finds inspiration when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. visits Detroit in June 1963. Melody joined her family and more than 125,000 others marching for jobs and freedom. King delivered an early variation of his “I Have a Dream” speech after the march, capping the nation’s largest civil rights demonstration to that point. Motown recorded the speech at the Detroit event, which was only eclipsed by the March on Washington two months later. Just days after the DC demonstration, a horrific tragedy left Melody speechless. The bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham killed four young girls about Melody’s age, a traumatic event for many Americans, especially for Black Americans in and outside of the South.

The author wove well-known civil rights events into her narrative but avoided having them overshadow Melody’s own story. But most of the actual events depicted also drew on personal experiences and memories of advisory board members. For example, JoAnn Watson shared her memories of going with her grandparents to the 1963 Walk to Freedom to hear Dr. King speak when she was ten years old. Her reflections helped inform the author’s writing, offering authentic and natural reactions and feelings of a child at the time. Similarly, Tom Sugrue’s childhood in Detroit involved neighborhood block parties and witnessing firsthand the impact of whites refusing to sell housing to Black residents. Some recalled seeing newspaper and magazine photographs of police dogs snarling and snapping at young protesters, or images of the Birmingham bombings aftermath, showing crumbled brick and stone and shattered stain glass windows. The personal and scholarly insights from all the panel members not only helped maintain accuracy, they also informed an undeniably critical characteristic in the story—Melody’s individual agency. The viewpoints underscored the national struggle, taking the character’s story arc well beyond a caricature.

Melody’s Long Activist Arc

As Patrick put words on the page and discussions amongst the board and project teams continued, it became clear Melody’s story had as much to say about the present as it did about the past. National news stories of racial profiling and police killings of unarmed Black men increasingly caught America’s attention. A resurgence of Black activism on college campuses and the coalescence of the Black Lives Matter movement put the project in perspective. Board member Gloria House spoke about being arrested for her activism and spending time in jail while in SNCC. The highly visible protest tactics, such as shutting down interstate

highways, spreading on social media echoed House and Bond's involvement in the youthful and progressive SNCC. Both of them, and others, emphasized how their parents supported the freedom struggle, but worried about their tactics and safety. There were generational differences and discussions about forms of activism around dinner tables then just as there are now. The development group knew the variety of perspectives provided depth to the character's story and her agency. The author and board ensured Melody's family—three generations worth—fought for what they believed in in ways that made sense to them. The tactics ranged from traditional and nonviolent to direct action and confrontational. Perhaps considered moderate by some, Melody's full story captures a diverse and progressive approach to seeking change. Set in 1963–64, her story unfolds a few years before calls for "Black Power" reverberated throughout America. Discussions about the effectiveness of various approaches continue to this day at dinner tables, in children's literature, and beyond.

Melody's stories remain remarkably relevant. Far too many of the injustices Melody and her family encountered continue to plague far too many Black Americans today. Characters in the book were racially profiled by police and trailed and accused of stealing at a neighborhood store. Family members faced housing and job discrimination. Melody attended underfunded schools with outdated textbooks. The racially motivated bombing in Birmingham forced Melody to reckon with senseless violence and with sheer hatred that others felt. She gained perspective and understanding of the discrimination her parents and grandparents faced while growing up, and in the case of her grandfather after serving their country during World War II, in both the South and North. Melody learned about voter registration efforts and unions in Detroit and Black-owned businesses in her neighborhood.

But Melody also took action. She made signs and marched in the Walk to Freedom. She exercised her economic influence by removing her money from a bank. Melody joined her local neighborhood block club and picketed a store known for racial discrimination. This economic boycott and picketing could have led to an arrest, or possibly violence. Additionally, Melody helped her friends organize a children's council in the local block club, and together they cleaned up a neglected neighborhood playground. She supported her siblings as they volunteered with Freedom Summer in 1964 and sought to advance themselves through education and the entertainment industry. She penned letters to influence city officials, motivated others to write, and learned to lead others in making change. Above all, Melody's stories illustrate meaningful ways that kids can and did make things better. Melody represents an authentic character, someone with a believable arc and impact. She recognizes that something is deeply unfair, learns along the way, and takes action. Melody shows agency and is persistent. She inspires friends to join the cause and leads by example. For young readers, and public historians, it is a great lead to follow.

Inviting young readers to consider issues all around them—in the papers and on social media—underscores that the movement is not just a thing of the past. And

although racial justice is an ongoing struggle, it does not negate the difference young girls and boys in Detroit, Milwaukee, Birmingham, and beyond made. The stories about being fair, making good choices, and helping others have the power to inspire American girls about their own ability to effect change. Melody's hopeful activism stretched across multiple books as she grew, learned, and grew more committed to fairness and equality. And it is with that hope, that goal in mind, that Melody Ellison from 1963 found her way into the world.

Melody's Debut

The Melody books hit the shelves and media circuit just before Martin Luther King Day and Black History Month in February 2016. The significant media attention given to the character underscored the need for stories like Melody's, and for the brand's power to inspire young readers to find their voice and work for positive change. Scores of new articles and online stories appeared, but media interest crested with a four-and-a-half-minute feature on CBS This Morning. The rare tour of American Girl facilities and photographs from the board meetings and deliberations gave viewers an unprecedented look at the character development process and attention to detail along the way.

In August 2016, just before the beginning of the school year, the company hosted a launch party in Detroit at the Charles H. Wright Museum. The celebration recognized the many individuals that contributed to the doll's development, especially the advisory board. Another special event that weekend included a book talk and author signing hosted at a local branch of the Detroit Public Library. Hundreds of girls and their families crowded into the library auditorium to hear about Melody's story, and how Patrick came to write about their city. She recounted the development process, why Melody mattered to her, and answered questions with honesty and respect. The company also announced a significant donation of \$175,000 in money, dolls, and books to the city library system. Books were sent to each of the twenty-two branch libraries throughout the metropolitan area to ensure that any child who wanted a book could have one for free. The gift recognized the importance of sharing Melody as broadly as possible in her adopted hometown.

Melody's full assortment of products rolled out in late August. Girls could now play and record their own music in a studio, loosely resembling Motown Record's famed Studio A. Inspired by Motown's claim to fame and Melody's brother's quest to become a star, the studio set featured a sound board on one side and a recording room with a microphone on the other side. Other products included a neighborhood block party set, reminiscent of how families city-wide organized parties and completed beautification projects to make Detroit a better place to live. The items represented a commitment to community and determination to take action. Melody's bedroom set included a music and civil rights poster reflecting her two primary interests. With the official launch, the results of the entire project team

and advisory panel's hard work appeared in the stories and product assortment, and could be purchased from a catalog, online, and in stores.

Melody Ellison exists as a commercial product, but she represents much more. The importance for all people, young and old or of any race, to see themselves represented in media and culture cannot be overstated. Even more importantly, it is critical groups are portrayed as whole and authentic characters, not caricatures. Melody knew this all too well. She used her voice to call attention to a lack of representation when her own Detroit public school textbooks—already outdated and castoff from better funded neighborhood schools—included few, if any references to Black Americans. Representation mattered in 1963 and it remains important today. Melody's story sought to represent a small slice, a sliver really, of the nation's long, Black freedom struggle. It did that and more. Melody's stories highlighted the critical role young people played advancing freedom and sought to inspire future generations. The development of Melody's stories and products aimed to uphold a commitment to authenticity and concern for representation, an important ideal in children's literature and toy making, and public history alike.

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