



Author Spotlight with Carolyn DeCristofano

Given the subject matter of your first three books, it's clear you have a real love for science, specifically physical science. What piqued your interest in the subject?

I studied science in school a lot because I thought I wanted to become a doctor, and I usually enjoyed it, although I found some classes rather boring. An example of enjoying science reveals my inner geek: in junior high, right after finishing up a final in my Introduction to Physical Science, I announced, "That was fun! I wish we could do that again!" My popularity rating, which already was not all that high, plummeted, I'm sure. Good thing it was the end of the school year so most people would forget. I guess I made up for that the next year, when my science teacher came across a note I wrote to a friend in which I wrote, "Science is SOOOO boring!"

My real passion for science was piqued after I graduated from college and started working as an educator at a science center. I wandered into this job, for lack of any other particular application of my college degree, which was in biomedical ethics, and because I had decided I wanted to teach. At the science center, a whole new world of science opened up to me.

I enjoyed the hands-on learning and field trips, and the topics we focused on. For example, we took students on trips to a place in the woods with giant boulders scattered all around. I grew up surrounded by woods like these, but I never knew that the boulders had been ripped from the landscape by the glacier that covered much of North America and deposited them in what would eventually become my backyard. Nor had I learned that boulder fields like this were a clue to where the glacier's leading edge had been for some time. Experiences like this taught me that everything we see has layers of story beneath the surface, and that science can help us hear that story. To me, this perspective gave science its zing.

You appreciate real science but what about science fiction? Do you enjoy reading or watching sci-fi?

As a kid, I followed my brother around through his hobbies, and he liked *Star Trek* and *Space 1999*, so I did, too. Today, I find some sci-fi enjoyable, but I wouldn't say I seek it out. Long ago, my husband introduced me to some classics, which I think are great and thought-provoking reads, works by Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and Frank Herbert, for example. I like science fiction that tells a broader social story, as in the *Dune* series, or plays at the edge of what is understood about science today. However, I don't find myself drawn to movies, maybe because many seem to have too much action and flash for my taste.

That said, in the late '90s, for a short time, I developed a minor obsession with sci-fi TV shows—*Star Trek* (all generations) and *Babylon 5*, for example.

In your book *A Black Hole is NOT a Hole*, you tackle some fascinating scientific concepts. What inspired you to write about such a complex subject for young readers?

Young readers! Well, maybe just young learners, in general. I work as a consulting educator, which brings me into classrooms. Talking with kids made me realize that they have a deep fascination with black holes and, more generally, science concepts that are on the edge of what most people find understandable. On the other hand, kids' comments revealed a lot of anxiety about black holes. I suspect this is due in part to the ways in which black holes are portrayed in media.

I think that black holes are interesting without scary music and an emphasis on the idea of disappearing into one, but a lot of shows and articles focus more on the drama than on the underlying science. I wanted to reach kids by respecting their minds and helping them better understand these fascinating objects, and the ways scientists explore them.

Also, I've already mentioned hanging out with my brother when I was little. He introduced me to the idea of nuclear fission when I may have been ridiculously young. (I think I could have been as young as 6 or 7, but maybe I was 8 or 9.) As an adult, it has always struck me that if my brother could make nuclear science understandable to me, then there are very few topics that should be considered too hard for kids of any age. The creative challenge of tackling this topic for younger audiences was appealing to me because it resonated with that belief.

Another inspiration for writing about black holes was my editor, Alyssa Mito Pusey. She suggested this topic based on an editorial conversation we were having about *Big Bang! The Tongue-Tickling Tale of a Speck That Became Spectacular* (also a Charlesbridge book). Often, I think Alyssa listens to me more carefully than I do (to myself), and the idea of the book is an example of what can come from that. She reflected back the fact that I had just said that a black hole is not a hole, and framed it as a possible next book. Without Alyssa, I probably would not have realized I had this story to tell.

You've mentioned that when you're not writing books or working on projects, you like to travel and explore other cultures. What's the most interesting trip you've taken to date?

It's hard to choose just one! Two stood out for me: My first trip to Europe stands out. I had to push myself beyond my personal comfort zone sometimes because I was new to travel and had to take the lead while speaking (my version of) Italian or while botching French. (I did okay in England!) This trip ended up becoming a journey in which I met relatives of my and my husband's family in Italy and England, tracking them down as we arrived in various towns. We felt like we had a precious opportunity to connect to people, not just blaze through crowded tourist spots. We at least began to get a sense of something important about the individuals in the places we were visiting and had a few glimpses of their countries and the U.S. through their eyes.

Another important journey was a trip to Scotland. We didn't know when we took off that it would prove a challenging, bittersweet experience. We were there during and after September 11, 2001. (We couldn't fly out.) We spent time in a remote area of Scotland, where there are some ancient sites, thousands of years old. In a way, the experience was hopeful because we were reminded of the enduring nature of humanity. It was heartwarming to receive outpourings of warmth, comfort, and consolation from the Scots. But of course our minds were also on home. It was strange to realize that we could not return, and it felt wrong not to be there.

How did you get your start as a writer?

In some ways, I have been a writer since I learned how to spell my name. From when I was 8 until about when I was about 16, I was a rather serious dabbler. I daydreamed about being a writer, joined a few contests, wrote on my own, showed short stories to a few people, but never took this side of myself seriously. I eased into professional writing by working in creative environments – museums, mostly – that produced materials for kids and teachers.

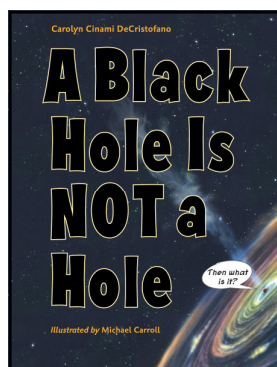
The event that made me think of myself as “A WRITER” was the chance to write *Leonardo’s ABC* for the Museum of Science in Boston. I was researching and developing classroom materials to go along with an exhibit on Leonardo da Vinci, which the museum was developing, when the museum decided it would be great to offer a children’s book in the gift shop. Because of my past experiences writing some materials for children and my familiarity with the topic, I was asked if I wanted to participate. You bet I did!

This was a perfect experience for someone like me because it was a very focused writing assignment. I knew it had to be an ABC book. It also had to feature items sketched in Leonardo’s notebooks, and these should connect to young readers’ everyday experiences. That channeled my attention in a productive way.

I also knew what I wanted to convey because I had been working on the educational materials. What we think of as Leonardo’s genius connects to something we all have within us – curiosity, the ability to be sharp observers, and the playfulness that we are all born with. I wanted young readers and the adults around them to see that they share more in common with a “genius” than they might otherwise give themselves credit for, and therefore be inspired to continue to be curious, observant, and playful.



by Carolyn DeCristofano




978-1-57091-783-7, HC, \$18.95
978-1-60734-073-7, E-book, \$9.99
Ages 9-12 • 80 pages

Find out what black holes are, what causes them, and how scientists first discovered them. Learn how astronomers find black holes, get to know our nearest black-hole neighbor, and take a journey that will literally s-t-r-e-t-c-h the mind.

Gorgeous space paintings supplement real telescopic images, and funny doodles and speech bubbles keep things light.

- ★ “[T]his book will snatch readers from their orbits and fling them into a lasting fascination with nature’s most attractive phenomena.”
—*Booklist*, starred review
- ★ “. . . readers will be glad they fell into this book.”
—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review
- ★ “Informative, fun, and so beautiful that even general readers will be drawn into it.”
—*School Library Journal*, starred review
- ★ “Fascinating . . . captivating . . . inviting . . . inspired . . .”
—*The Horn Book*, starred review

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