



Author Spotlight with

Deborah Kops

Why did you want to tell the story of the molasses flood?

It was such a bizarre disaster! I was sure kids would want to read about it. On January 15, 1919, a very large metal tank containing more than two million gallons of molasses burst apart in Boston's North End. The molasses escaped in a giant wave, which flooded the neighborhood. Can you imagine your neighborhood awash in thick, dark, sticky molasses? The flood was also a terrible tragedy, though. Twenty-one people died, and homes and businesses were destroyed, too.

There was also another reason I wanted to write about the flood. It happened during such an interesting time in American history. World War I had just ended, and American soldiers were coming home from Europe. But this country was not exactly a peaceful place. In Boston, a church and a police station were bombed a few years before the molasses flood. And just days before the tank burst, a group of anarchists threatened more violence. At least one historian has called this period America's first age of terror.

How did you conduct the research for this book?

I read newspaper accounts from the period, and Stephen Puleo's book about the flood, *Dark Tide*. I also spent time walking the old historic streets of the North End, and found the site where the molasses tank stood. But the most interesting and time-consuming research involved going through all 25,000 pages of the court transcript from the molasses flood hearings. The transcript contained the stories of the many people who were affected by the flood. One man, for example, was working in the train yard near the molasses tank when it burst. He said he felt like he was being pushed by a big gust of wind—right into the Charles River. I was able to read the transcript in the very same courthouse in downtown Boston where the hearings had taken place, more than ninety years ago. I loved that.

As you wrote the book, did you find yourself drawn to a specific character more than any others?

I thought a lot about poor Antonio DiStasio, who was only nine years old when he was swept off his feet by the giant wave of molasses. And I liked Elizabeth O'Brien, who had a sense of humor. She was doing her wash when the tank burst. She, too, was knocked off her feet. When she got up, soaking wet, she said she went looking for sympathy from her sister, with whom she shared her apartment. But her sister, and part of their apartment, were missing. (The front of the building had collapsed.)

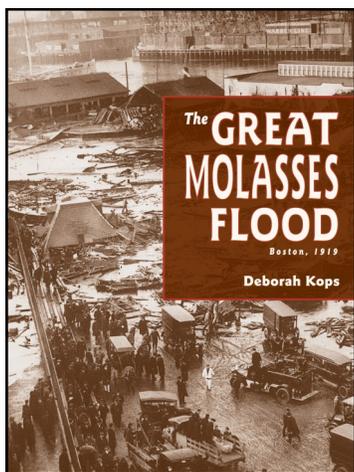
You've written several nonfiction books for children and young adults. How do you choose your subjects?

I'm drawn to quirky ones, like the molasses flood. And like many writers of nonfiction, I pick subjects I want to learn more about myself, which is why I wrote a series of books on birds of prey.

What's the most challenging aspect of writing nonfiction?

The long wait before it's finally time to write the book. I really enjoy doing research. But to keep my writing chops, I need to write. So I like working on two books—one that I'm researching and another that I'm writing.

By Deborah Kops



January 15, 1919, was an unseasonably warm day in Boston, Massachusetts, and a day that would go down in history. One minute it was business as usual on the waterfront and the next—KABOOM! A large tank holding molasses exploded, sending shards of metal hundreds of feet away, collapsing buildings, and coating the harborfront community with a thick layer of sticky-sweet sludge.

This account of the 1919 molasses tank explosion tries to uncover why the tank exploded and who was to blame. Primary sources and archival photographs show the extent of the damage and emphasize personal stories. Sidebars offer information on Prohibition, World War I, equal rights, and other issues of the time.

978-1-58089-348-0, HC, \$18.95

Ages 9-12