

Author Spotlight with Tracey Fern



As an author you have the freedom to write about whatever you want. With so many interesting people and subjects out there, how do you choose your topics?

Choosing a topic is one of the most fun and most challenging parts of my job. The fun part is that I can delve into areas that have always interested me: history, science and engineering, art, the American West, and many other areas. That freedom to explore and learn is wonderful! The challenging part is that there are a lot of areas that interest me, and narrowing a topic, especially when I'm working on a picture book, is essential. What I really look for is an “ah ha!” moment,—a moment when I learn something about a person or event that strikes a profound emotional chord in me. I look for stories that speak to me, and trust that those same stories will speak to others, too. Often, as in the case of *Pippo the Fool*, I feel an emotional chord with topics that involve a person who follows his or her dream, no matter the obstacles. Sometimes the emotional chord can be one of understanding or humor or sympathy—it’s hard to define, but I know it when I feel it! That feeling means that I’ve found my topic.

What kind of research did you do to bring *Pippo the Fool* to life? How did you learn about Pippo's personality and characteristics?

I love doing research! Typically I try to read as many primary sources as I can. That was challenging with *Pippo* because there are very few sources dating back to the early 1400s. There is almost nothing that exists today that was written by Pippo himself, and very little that was written by others about him during his lifetime. The best source that I could find was a biography written in the 1480s by a man who claimed to know Pippo (*The Life of Brunelleschi* by Antonio di Tucci Manetti). That book characterized Pippo as a difficult, demanding, eccentric genius. That was just the spark I needed to bring Pippo to life!



What were the challenges in bringing *Pippo the Fool* to life?

It was a challenge for me to understand the physical construction of the dome. Brunelleschi really was a genius, and his design and construction of the dome was difficult for a layperson like me to understand and then explain simply. Another challenge was doing enough research to try to bring the setting and time period to life with telling details. Finally, it's always a challenge in a picture book to distill a complicated, rich personality like Brunelleschi's down to its essence. I hope I've done that.



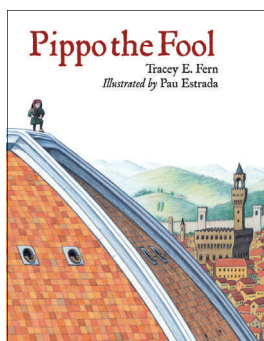
What do you do when you aren't writing?

I spend a lot of time reading, especially narrative nonfiction and mysteries, and of course, children's and young adult books. I have several large gardens. I like to bake. I love spending time walking my dog. And of course, a lot of my day is spent with my two daughters and my husband.

What is the most fun thing that you've ever done? What is the scariest?

It's hard to pick just one fun and one scary thing! I think one of the scariest things I ever did was ride down a volcano in Hawaii on a bicycle at more than thirty miles per hour! My husband has bicycled across the United States twice, and that trip down the volcano was *his* idea of fun. I can barely bicycle around the block, so it was truly terrifying for me. One of the most fun things I've ever done is visit a litter of newborn puppies to pick out one for our family. Eight soft, squirming, sweet pups—what could be more fun than that?

Books by Tracey Fern



ISBN: 978-1-57091-655-7 • HC • \$15.95
Ages 5–8

Was Pippo the Fool really Pippo the Genius?

The Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence was a marvel of art, architecture, and engineering. But it lacked a finishing ornament, a crown—a dome! This book tells the story of architect Filippo Brunelleschi and the construction of his masterpiece.