

INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS CROWE

Question:

Tell us about your new book, *Just as Good: How Larry Doby Changed America's Game*?

Answer:

Larry Doby was the first African American player in Major League Baseball's American League, signing with the Indians just a few weeks after Jackie Robinson started the 1947 season with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Unlike Robinson who had a full season in the minor leagues to get accustomed to playing with white players in front of white fans, Doby had no preparation for entering the all-white Major Leagues. He played his last game for the Newark Eagles in the Negro Leagues on July 4, 1947, and joined the Indians for a game against the Chicago White Sox in Comiskey Park on July 5. It was a difficult transition, and Doby had one of the worst seasons of his career. Unfortunately, his lack of success reinforced the lie that racist MLB team owners perpetuated: Jackie Robinson was a fluke; there were no other MLB-quality players in the Negro Leagues.

1948 would be different. Doby batted .301, hit 16 homeruns, and led the Indians to the World Series. His homerun in the crucial Game 4 against the Boston Braves won the game and propelled the Indians to win the Series. They haven't won one since.

Question:

Is this your first picture book?

Answer:

Yes, my first children's book and my first book with Candlewick Press. *Just as Good: How Larry Doby Changed America's Game* began as a nonfiction project along the lines of Pam Ryan's *When Marian Sang*. After several revisions, it changed into a middle grade biography, and after several revisions

of that, it turned into a children's book narrated by a fictional young Cleveland Indians fan named Homer.

Question:

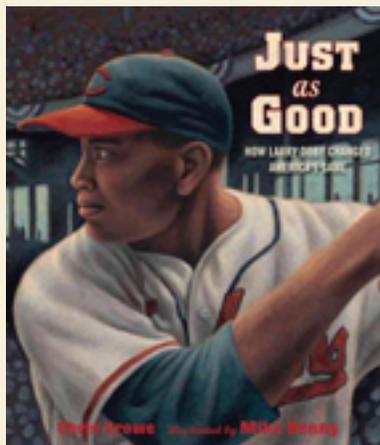
What gave you the idea to write a book about Larry Doby?

Answer:

My interest in Doby goes beyond his significance to the Indians and to MLB. I first came across him when I was researching my books about Emmett Till. Emmett was a big White Sox fan. In reading the background of the White Sox in the 1950s, I learned that Cleveland had traded Doby to the Sox at the end of the 1955 season, and that set me off on a new track: I wanted to find out who this guy was and why he mattered.

Question:

How was baseball related to the Civil Rights movement?



Answer:

The connection between baseball and civil rights history was a big part of what attracted me to this story. Doby's success with the Indians exposed the MLB owners' great lie about African American ball players and started the real migration of African American players from the Negro Leagues to the Major Leagues. The integration of Major League Baseball was one of the first--and very public--acts of integration, and I'm convinced, along with Branch Rickey (the man who signed Jackie Robinson), that it paved the way for racial integration in the United States; Rickey said, "Integration in baseball started public integration on trains, in Pullmans, in dining cars, in restaurants in the South, long before the issue of public accommodation became news."

Question:

Your books often tell stories about people from history, particularly those who aren't as well known. Why is that?

Answer:

Most writers are looking for the 'hole on the bookshelf,' the place where a book should be but isn't because it hasn't yet been written. I like finding and retelling forgotten or overlooked stories, especially when those stories have some significant historical connection. Writing books about those topics effectively fills that hole on the bookshelf—it also provides me with engaging learning experiences.

Question:

How do you find new historical figures you want to write about?

Answer:

Lots of the discovery is serendipitous, and some of it is just paying attention to things I read, places I go, and people I meet. For ex-

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ample, I recently finished a historical novel about a 14-year-old boy named William Mariner, a kid who served as the captain's clerk on a British privateer in 1805 and 1806. He ended up marooned in the Tonga Islands and ended up introducing reading and writing to that culture. I stumbled onto his story totally by accident when I talked to a Tongan sculptor about a statue he was working on in his studio.

Question:

Which do you enjoy more: researching or writing?

Answer:

I enjoy them both, but research is much easier and more interesting than writing.

Question:

When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

Answer:

The summer between 6th and 7th grade: I was doing lots of reading—old science fiction and most of the Sherlock Holmes stories by Conan Doyle—and it occurred to me that it would be interesting to be the person on the other side of the book, to be the writer, not the reader. Of course, I had no idea what that would entail, but I did pound out a few pages on my dad's old Underwood typewriter that summer.

Question:

What's different about the fantasy of being a professional writer versus the reality? What surprised you?

Answer:

The fantasy of being a novelist is pretty wonderful: riches, fame, and a life of ease. So far, I've not encountered any of that. Writing is lonely, hard work done entirely in private. It takes lots of self discipline to sit down and write, even when you don't feel like it.

I've been surprised by how capricious and subjective publishing is. No one knows for sure if any particular book will be a best-seller or a flop. I've also been surprised that writing and publishing have not gotten any

easier with time; having published one book has little effect on writing the next book. It's a continuous learning process that, for me at least, never gets any easier.

Question:

What authors have influenced your writing?

Answer:

Utah is home to many terrific writers: Ann Cannon, Dean Hughes, Louise Plummer, Michael O. Tunnell, and Carol Lynch Williams are good friends who have also been wonderful mentors for me as I've learned about writing. The younger Utah authors inspire me with their work, creativity, and success. Two authors whose work I admired/envied early on were James Herriot and Jean Shepherd.

Question:

What advice do you have for aspiring professional writers?

Answer:

Richard Peck likes to say something like "You can't become a writer if you're not a reader." I agree with him on that. It's essential for aspiring writers to read widely, not just in their favorite genre but all kinds of books. A successful writer must also have the self discipline required to write. I've learned, again and again, that the real work of writing is in revision, and in order to revise well, I have to rely on smart, trusted readers who will tell me the truth about a manuscript. Good writers have to embrace



Chris Crowe, a professor of English at Brigham Young University, has published award-winning fiction and nonfiction for teenagers, poetry, essays, books, and many articles for academic and popular magazines. He married his high school sweetheart, Elizabeth, and they are the parents of four children and grandparents of two beautiful granddaughters. They live in Provo, Utah.