

**Q&A with Mary Quattlebaum, author of
SPARKS FLY HIGH: The Legend of Dancing Point
(Melanie Kroupa Books / Farrar, Straus and Giroux /
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Q: You grew up in Virginia. How did this experience inspire SPARKS FLY HIGH?

A: Being one of the thirteen original colonies of the United States, Virginia is steeped in colonial history. In fact, in 2007 the state celebrates the 400th year of its founding at Jamestown.

As a kid, I loved (and still do!) visiting historic homes and towns. You can see and hear things that make the people of the past seem very real. At a reconstructed Native American village in Jamestown, you can help scrape a hide to make buckskin or at Monticello in Charlottesville view the “copying machine” invented by Thomas Jefferson. At Wakefield, George Washington’s birthplace in Westmoreland County, I once was pecked by a turkey--the same type of turkey that little George may have toddled after. Talk about feeling (literally) the presence of history!

When I first came across the story of Colonel Lightfoot and the dancing devil, I loved its energy and the fact that it had been told orally for generations in parts of Virginia. But I was also intrigued by the glimpse the tale gave into colonial American culture. For example, modesty was highly esteemed then. You didn’t brag about your accomplishments. And dancing was such an important form of entertainment that grace and skill in that area were greatly admired.

Q: How did you come across the story? Why did you retell it as a picture book?

A: I discovered the tale about 18 years ago in a book of Williamsburg ghost stories and loved the idea of opponents fighting not with fists but with fancy footwork. The story really started to come alive, though, when research turned up a two additional written versions of the tale, including one dating to 1878, and I began getting glimpses of the man behind the legend—Colonel Philip Lightfoot, a wealthy colonial gentleman. The Virginia Historical Society kindly sent me a copy of his portrait and I saw his town home in Colonial Williamsburg. My family and I had quite an adventure (involving a faulty GPS device and a field of startled horses) as we searched for (and finally found) Lightfoot’s grave in Charles City County, Virginia, where we also got to see, jutting into the James River, the spit of land called Dancing Point, the actual site of the folktale.

Why a picture book?

There are so few Colonial American folktales available for kids that I wanted to use an oral storytelling voice in its telling, sort of like a grandma telling a story that had been told to her as a kid. And a picture book—with wonderful illustrations by Leonid Gore-- seemed the perfect form to convey the liveliness of 18th century dance, the drama of the legendary contest, and all those

cool details—what people wore, how they traveled, how they entertained—that give a sense of the times.

Q: This is a regional folktale with universal appeal. What is it about the characters that is so compelling? What might young readers learn from their behavior?

A: Overweening pride seems to be a problem the world over, as evidenced by all those versions of Cinderella wherein the lowly maiden triumphs over her boastful stepsisters. What intrigued me about the Dancing Point legend, though, is that it does not end in punishment. The vainglorious character is able to redeem himself. The Colonel Lightfoot character sees his own faults reflected in the devilish villain, changes his bragging ways, and continues dancing, happily and much more modestly, for the rest of his days. For readers young and old, that ending holds folk wisdom and hope: we can all learn to recognize our faults and change our behavior.

Q: You have a strong personal interest in Colonial American history. What sparked this interest?

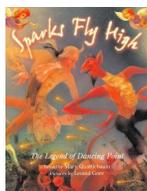
A: When I was in fourth grade, my family visited Colonial Williamsburg, a reconstructed 18th century town in Virginia. It was like stepping back in time. I saw how wigs were curled, shoes cobbled, hams smoked, and letters written with quills. Wow, did I want to work there one day! As a college student, I attended the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg and upon graduation happily donned a colonial costume, hefted a pitcher, and realized my childhood ambition: I became a tavern wench (aka waitress). It was a great way to learn about the colonial way of life and to get an inside look at how history is interpreted.

Q: Did you take any liberties with the myth? Why did you choose to shape it as you did?

A: The three published versions of this tale were all rather brief, truncated, and written for adults. While drawing largely from the oldest source, I still wanted to create a story that would appeal to kids. So I further fleshed out characters, cast the devil as a particularly oily fellow, and created dialogue.

Q: How might young readers be encouraged to discover the history around them?

A: So often kids have the view of history as “being made” by famous people and of being located in the distant past and at “historic spots” with roped-off rooms, chamber pots, and admission fees. Actually, history is all around us. Kids might search out answers to questions such as, Who lived in our house before us? How did my grandparents or great-grandparents meet? What legends, old tales, or unusual spots are connected with my neighborhood? In this way, kids might come across a family character or true story as amazing as any fictional tale.



SPARKS FLY HIGH: The Legend of Dancing Point

Retold by Mary Quattlebaum, Pictures by Leonid Gore

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