

Author/Illustrator Spotlight

Andrea Zimmerman

By Grace Nall

Authors are often asked how they acquire a book idea. For many writers, it begins with a seed thought. SCBWI member, author and illustrator Andrea Zimmerman, who recently returned from a book tour at Washington D.C.'s National Cherry Blossom Festival and the Smithsonian Natural History Museum, shares her writing journey.

"I read an article online about Eliza and how she brought the cherry trees [to] Washington, D.C. and I thought it would make a good picture book," stated Zimmerman, author of *Eliza's Cherry Trees: Japan's Gift to America*. With her talented writing techniques, Zimmerman nurtured that idea and introduced it in the opening line of her book, which reads "Sometimes a person with a good idea can make a big difference." Zimmerman featured American writer, photographer and geographer Eliza Scidmore, who not only campaigned for Japan's cherry trees to beautify Washington, D.C.'s Tidal Basin in 1912, but also became the first woman to join the National Geographic Society's Board of Directors.

Zimmerman knew it would take years for the book idea to sprout, grow, and blossom into a spectacular vision.

"I did a lot of research, even at the Library of Congress in [Washington] D.C. I loved finding out more about Eliza," stated Zimmerman. "It had the feeling of solving a mystery. I wrote many versions and revisions of the story, sometimes based on feedback from editors."

The research, creativity, and time commitment takes many writers on a passionate historical writing journey to publication. Now, the book release. What happens then?

Timing is everything. News events may delay a book release or push it forward. Whether it is a stroke of luck, fate, or circumstance, an author can encounter variables that play a factor in the marketing of his/her book. What's an author to do? With Japan's recent tragedies involving a tsunami, an earthquake, and several aftershocks, Zimmerman faced the challenge of promoting the vision behind her book.



Zimmerman, center, with friends at a book signing in Alexandria, VA. Friend on the right is dressed as Eliza.

"Eliza loved Japan and the Japanese people, and she wanted to build bridges between America and Japan," stated Zimmerman. "I hope readers are reminded of the importance of international friendships and the joy that people can share through the appreciation of beautiful things like the cherry trees."

In fact, one of the messages of Eliza's vision of the Japanese cherry trees in Washington, D.C., according to Zimmerman, was as an "international symbol of peace and friendship."

The visions behind Zimmerman's book ideas continue to percolate. When asked which character from her books she could imagine herself to be, she chose Eliza because "she was such a doer ... had lots of energy, a positive attitude, curiosity and boldness." In fact, Zimmerman who has written mostly fiction books with her author and illustrator husband, David Clemesha, has one last piece of advice for authors whose ideas takes them into the non-fiction genre.

"If another genre appeals [to you], try it ... if you are excited about the project you are working on, forge forward. Writing is about exploring." You can visit Andrea at her website <http://www.andreaanddavid.com>